Constructive Disruption:

Young people's engagement with data and policymaking

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Abstract

This thesis is set against the backdrop of the growing threats to citizens' fundamental human rights posed by the growing domination of digital media and communications by global corporations and the economic and social challenges, faced by governments in particular, which followed the collapse of confidence in global markets of 2007/8 and the resulting 'years of austerity'. It examines young people's social and cultural inequalities in an urban context in which central government has been encouraging local government to make greater use of digital technologies to inform policymaking.

It is framed by a reflexive, interactive research collaboration with Beatfreeks; a youth engagement company in Birmingham, UK which uses creative practices to empower young people to "challenge themselves and the world in which they find themselves" (www.beatfreeks.com). This methodological approach has enabled me to embed myself in the company and undertake a close ethnographically informed study of the ways of working of its founder, the young members of the team and the interactions between them and policymakers. These have included participating in the analysis of alternative non-digital forms of data obtained through their own surveys of young people's everyday lives and observing events at which the findings were shared with institutional influencers and policymakers.

Findings from my research show that through the use of creativity and emotion in these activities it is possible to capture their attention and cause them to engage in dialogue with the young people involved. They also reveal that the data practices within local government may lead to deficitizing normative narratives about young people's lives. I argue, however, that the gathering, analysis and creative communication of small-scale non-digital data by young people may enable a youth engagement organisation to disrupt the unequal power relationship between young people and policymakers.

Acknowledgements

My thesis journey began several years before I finally embarked on it seriously and so there have been many people along the way to whom I owe many thanks for their time, their advice and their generosity of spirit. I begin, however, at the end of this journey by thanking the key instigators of the collaborative research partnership that has given me the opportunity to pursue this thesis: Anisa Morridadi, the founder of Beatfreeks Collective and Dr. Annette Naudin and Prof. Rajinder Dudrah, from Birmingham City University who subsequently became my first Supervisors. I count myself extremely fortunate to have had the benefits of their advice, guidance and patience as well as that of Dr.Karen Patel who joined my supervisory team a little later. I could not have completed my thesis without their support and that of Julie Tims, from the Doctoral College/Research Office who has problem solved for me on several occasions. My sincere thanks also go to the many young people associated with Beatfreeks who have been so willing to be interviewed and share their thoughts with me whenever I have approached them. It has been a pleasure and a privilege. They have kept me young and I wish them every success in whatever career path they choose to take.

Being able to undertake this PhD after an already varied and fulfilling working life has been an immense privilege and I should like to express my gratitude to the AHRC and the Midlands 3 Cities Doctoral Training Partnership for the opportunities to meet and exchange ideas with other M3C researchers.

My thanks must also go to former colleagues from cities across Europe with whom I used to work on transnational EU projects and who gave me the courage to move from project management, writing funding bids and policy documents and enter the world of academia especially Helen Higson, Simon Guentner and Mikael Stigendal.

Finally, I could not have completed my thesis without the enduring support of my husband, Bill, who has undertaken the majority of the household chores for the duration of my research journey. His patience has been extraordinary and I can't thank him enough.

Foreword

I am someone who writes in longhand in order to think and reflect, and during the course of my PhD research, I have accumulated many handwritten notes – not always legible – to help me interpret and respond to what I have experienced. My research has fallen into two phases: before and during the course of the pandemic in the UK. My experiences of being labelled as 'vulnerable' and being effectively excluded from society during Covid-19 prompted me to revisit some of my findings. Thus, I wrote the poem which follows as a personal response to the challenges which face the young people whose lived experiences in a post-2008 and now Covid-19 restricted environment may not only be those of economic, social and cultural inequalities but also of digital inequality.

I thought again about young people's comments about feeling ignored or the opposite – singled out and misrepresented by authority figures such as teachers, police and other public officials.   I also reflected on the different power relationships which I had identified between policymakers, young people and youth engagement organisations such as my collaborative research partner, Beatfreeks. These have led to my paying closer attention to the performative power of data (Big, Small, digital, non-digital) as it has become increasingly implicated in the shaping and reshaping of relationships between state institutions and citizens, or more specifically in this instance, between local government and young people. For example, the data on which officials and politicians may base their decisions can lead to some young people being labelled as 'deprived, disadvantaged, hard to reach or NEETS'[1] in policy and public discourse. This may make them feel excluded and powerless and create or add to existing inequalities. In contrast, I have encountered young people who have found alternative ways to contest these negative normative policy narratives. By gathering and analysing their own data and using digital technologies combined with creativity to present them to local and regional influencers, they have found ways for their concerns to be heard and acted on by decision makers.

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[1] NEETS is an acronym for 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' and refers to a person who is no longer in the education system and who is unemployed and not in training for work.

In solidarity with young people

In the hope that they will survive the years of austerity and Covid-19 and that their voices and views will be acknowledged, accepted and acted upon by policymakers.

(Intended to be a live performance but delivered via the internet in June 2020.)

I certainly didn't expect to be sitting here in what I thought would be my Final Year

using digital technology in ways I never thought would be necessary for me.

I'm a people person really -

I like to talk with others in the same space as me – I mean physically not virtually.

(It's what I'm used to as a former teacher, performer...)

And it's what I love about working with Beatfreeks, my partner,

Whose members strive to empower the disadvantaged, deprived and hard-to-reach.

It's been a fruitful collaboration between our generations and individual situations,

Fuelled by passionate communication of hopes and frustrations

In a world where data-driven policies seem to drive their inequalities.

Thus, here I am trying to explain to faceless tiles on a PC screen

How young people who know what it means

to be ignored or misinterpreted by those in authority

Have decided to create their own data to re-story their story.

I'm an educated woman with what seems a lifetime of experience –

But I doubt that I know how to set myself up to challenge the powers

Of those who discuss, write reports and decide (based on their Data not ours)

 On what's best for any of us.

So I'm using my position as an honorary 'Freek'

To stand in their shoes and speak for them about their frustration

but also determination to regain their agency

And change the negative to positive in their reality.

So walk with me now on my journey as I imagine what it's like to be

Empowered through Beatfreeks collectively.

A young friend invites me to come to a Beatfreeks' Poetry Jam

Poetry Jam – me? .....But I go.

And I feel overwhelmed by the emotion and energy,

Support and empathy

Of those – mostly young women - around me.

And so I ask my friend:

"Who are these Beatfreeks? What do they do?"

She replies:

"They're a collective looking out for young people

Who struggle to be equal, included and heard by those who decide."

So then I ask:

"What's the key to young people gaining credibility, voice and visibility in today's society?"

And she answers:

"It's DATA. We need to share our own data with the powers-that-be!

So we've done our own surveys and made recommendations

On how to change the narrative from negative to positive.

And we're using our shared power and creativity

To make our mark through a Summit in the heart of our city

With a message that says:

> ***"We're no longer a PROBLEM to be solved***
>
> ***But an OPPORTUNITY to be taken***
>
> ***By those in authority***
>
> ***Not just to hear our thoughts and ideas***
>
> ***But to ensure that they're acted upon."***

 Is this too much to ask in this millennium? Jill Robinson, 2020

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Thesis summary

My thesis is an ethnographically informed study undertaken between 2017 and 2021 within the framework of an interactive collaborative partnership with Beatfreeks, a youth engagement company, based in the city of Birmingham, UK. It examines the contribution of policymakers' use of data and digital technologies to young people's social and cultural inequalities and explores the ways in which data derived from the lived experiences of young people themselves, together with emerging alternative forms of youth engagement, may be used to counter them.

Background to my thesis

My research is set against the backdrop of growing threats to citizens' fundamental human rights posed by the increasing domination of digital media and communications by global corporations and the political, economic and social challenges faced by government at all levels following the collapse of global markets in 2007/8. In the UK, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010 – 2015 returned to the neoliberal politics of Margaret Thatcher to tackle the crisis (Jessop, 2015). In so doing, it exacerbated existing systemic inequalities by reducing funding in many areas of the public sector, including local government (Gray and Barford, 2018) and led to increasing pressure at the local level to save costs through more targeted service provision. This has meant, for example, that resources for youth engagement work have been seriously diminished even though the needs and concerns of young people have continued to increase. At the same time young people seeking employment have found it more difficult to navigate their way through an increasingly precarious labour market and the tightening of welfare benefits. These changes may also have created new inequalities linked to individuals' gender, ethnicity, education or family circumstances.

Faced with the need to make cost savings in the deployment and management of resources, infrastructure planning and communication with citizens, public sector policymakers at city level have sought to learn from commercial Big Data practices and to incorporate them into their policymaking. They were encouraged by the examples of

national and international governmental bodies, to regard Big Data as a "major object of economic, political and social investment for governing subjects" (Ruppert et al., 2017:2). Assumptions amongst public institutions about the potential benefits of Big Data, however, have raised questions amongst scholars about its role in determining the rationale behind policy decisions and their impact upon citizens lives (Kennedy, 2018). My study, therefore, aims to contribute to knowledge in this area by focusing on the influence on young people's daily lives of how data is used by policymakers and alternative data collected by young people themselves.

Clarification of terms

As my study has involved a range of social actors from young people and youth engagement practitioners to urban policymakers and cultural commentators and intermediaries, I preface my introduction by clarifying my interpretation of three key terms used in my thesis. These are as follows:

Urban policymakers

I understand urban policymakers to be:

1) Citizens who have been democratically elected either at the local level in cities and can participate in decision making as members of the City Council or at the city-region level as Mayor.
2) Officers who are employed by either of the two tiers of urban government mentioned above. They range from staff who deal with enquiries from the public to senior officials who offer advice to elected members and formulate and implement policies.

Young people

Although a widely held definition of young people is currently those aged between 15 and 24, I suggest that economic, social and political shifts over the past decade may have led to this period of transition to adult status being extended beyond this age range. For example, EUROSTAT's definition of youth as those aged between 15 and 29 was already being used to define the limits of the cohort discussed in the EU's European Youth Report of 2015. I have used this age range and its associated attributes to define the term 'young people' for

the purposes of my study as my findings regarding their life chances may be relevant to policymakers and scholars in major cities in the EU as well as in the UK.

Data

Digital data and digital technologies have become so much part of the 'normal' in today's society that terms such as 'Big Data' and 'Small Data' have been largely replaced by the single word 'data'. I suggest that this poses challenges for researchers like myself whose investigations involve both digital data but also data acquired by non-digital means such as paper surveys or face-to-face interviews. Hence, I refer to 'data' as 'digital data' in my thesis and to non-digital data as 'analogue data' or what my partners in Beatfreeks refer to as 'humanised data'.

Thesis Aims

The main aims of my thesis are to contribute to knowledge on:

1. The influence of different forms of data on the everyday lives of young people;
2. The data practices of city politicians and officers and how they affect the social and cultural inequalities and power dynamics between them and young people;
3. The role of data in the activities of youth engagement organisations to empower and give agency to young people in an increasingly datafied society.

There is also, however, a need to add to knowledge on how youth engagement organisations are responding to young people's existing needs and concerns and to the changing political, social and economic environments in which they function today. Thus, by focusing on the interactions between Beatfreeks, young people and policymakers, my thesis aims to provide new insights into young people's lived experiences of a datafied society in a post-austerity urban environment and into the everyday data practices of officers and politicians involved in government at the local level. Based on my research, I also seek to show how the use of alternative forms of data and their creative presentation by young people in association with youth engagement organisations may disrupt this narrative and rebalance the power dynamics between them and policymakers.

Research Questions

The key questions which I aim to answer in my thesis are as follows:

1. How might the collection, creative use and communication of alternative forms of data enable young people to challenge negative policy interpretations of their everyday lives?

2. In what ways do the use of digital data and digital technologies in urban policymaking contribute to the social and cultural inequalities of young people?

3. What lessons can be learnt from a study (Case Study) of the work of Beatfreeks about the changing nature of youth engagement activities in a datafied society and their potential to rebalance the unequal power relationships between young people and policymakers?

My research location

I have situated my research in Birmingham for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is being undertaken within a collaborative partnership with Beatfreeks, a creative industries company working with young people in this city. Secondly, Birmingham is the largest city in the UK outside London with a population of 1.14 million residents[2], in which young people between the ages of 15 and 25 make up almost 25% of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Thirdly, individuals and families from just under 200 different countries have made Birmingham their home since the 1950s, making it a socially and ethnically 'super-diverse' city. Like other cosmopolitan cities in Europe it has historic and wide-ranging economic, social, cultural and educational differences within and between neighbourhoods in the centre and periphery, some of which continue to be amongst the most deprived in England.[3]

The levels of unemployment and poverty in some parts of the city can be explained by the city's transition from 'a city of a thousand trades' at the height of the Industrial Revolution through its success as a leading car manufacturer to a city facing mass unemployment. This

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[2] 2019 Mid-year population estimate from Birmingham Demographic Briefing – 2020/Population Estimates: www.birmingham.gov.uk/census

[3] According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation published in 2019 Birmingham is ranked as the 7th most deprived local authority in England.

followed the rapid decline of the British automotive industry and other traditional manufacturing industries in the 1970s and 80s. Evidence from a report commissioned by the Barrow Cadbury Trust in 2010 tells a detailed and difficult story of the adverse consequences for Birmingham and its inhabitants from 1990 to the recent recession post-2007/8. One of the key findings of the report is that, even before this recession, the prospects of the poorest workers in the city had worsened, pointing out that from 2001 to 2008, the average real wage of the lowest paid had fallen by 4.5% (Barrow Cadbury Report, 2010). The report also found that "the current recession and the previous one of the early 1990s have amplified the differences in unemployment between more and less deprived areas" (ibid. 2010:28). To these problems must be added the legacy of the 'right to buy' policy of the Thatcher government of the 1980s which depleted the public housing stock. It led to increased demand for accommodation in the private rental sector, pushing up costs and exacerbating poverty in already deprived neighbourhoods.

Birmingham City Council sought to revive its economy by attracting new science and technology and creative industries together with businesses in the growing financial and professional services sector. This involved the remodelling of urban infrastructure and the provision of cultural and leisure facilities aimed at attracting a highly educated and skilled workforce. The city epitomised the importance of image change to urban regeneration strategies (Hubbard, 1995 and 1996) through the use of 'prestige projects'. This did relatively little, however, to address issues concerned with social equity or the potential trickledown effect beyond the city centre and detracted from investment in other areas of the city, leaving them 'blighted' (Healey et al., 1992 quoted in the ERDF[4] Technical Assistance Study for Birmingham and the West Midlands region (Policy Studies Institute, 1997). These regeneration policies, for example, put much of the upmarket accommodation in the remodelled city centre out of the reach of many citizens and added to the structural inequalities generated by the neoliberal policy decisions of previous governments.

Situating my study in a wider European context

Birmingham's situation was by no means unique as a number of major cities across Europe which were also facing similar challenges arising from de-industrialisation. I situate my

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[4] ERDF – European Regional Development Fund

study, therefore, within a wider European context since policymakers in these post-industrial cities were often pursuing broadly similar approaches to urban regeneration as major cities in the UK. These included fostering what Charles Landry later called 'civic creativity' (2006) to revitalise tired cities including the pursuit of flagship cultural projects to create a new city image and contribute to the remodelling of city centres to attract international investment. It often meant, however, the reinforcement of existing, or the creation of, new inequalities within cities including, for example, changes in road layouts which isolated particular neighbourhoods from other parts of the city or increases in rents and house prices in newly gentrified areas which excluded former residents (Gehrke et al., 2018).   In addition, the young people brought up in neighbourhoods which had supplied workers for the local factories frequently faced unemployment as they may have had low levels of educational attainment and/or skills which were no longer required.

Thus, in spite of joint city, state and EU – funded initiatives to tackle the growing numbers of unemployed youth in European cities, there was little evidence of improvement over the years and rates of youth unemployment were further exacerbated by the 'austerity' programmes adopted after the global financial crisis of 2008. In 2013, for example, youth unemployment rates across the 28 member states of the EU reached an all-time high of 23.4% (Eurostat, July 2013) as young people found themselves without the necessary qualifications, skills or experience to compete with their elders.

Motivation for my research

Throughout my working life I have been concerned with the different life chances of young people. This was partly the result of my upbringing in a small country town where children were clearly positively or negatively defined by where they lived and whether they passed the 11+ examination or not. I discuss this and other influences on my positionality in more detail in my Methodology and Methods chapter and concentrate in this section on experiences in my working life which have contributed to my motivation to undertake this particular study.

After obtaining a degree in Modern History, I trained as a teacher and went on to teach in both independent and state secondary schools in the UK and for a short while in the former West Germany. Finally I spent almost twenty years prior to the global crisis of 2007/8, and

several after, working mainly on EU and cultural projects and policy issues for Birmingham City Council. This included participating in transnational partnerships with cities across the EU aimed at tackling urban and youth inequalities and in research into the role of the creative sector in urban regeneration. During the course of this work, I became particularly aware of young people's dissatisfaction with decisions made by public institutions about matters which directly affected them, such as education and training, social welfare and their access to the labour market. They felt that they and their needs were being misrepresented or ignored by those in authority and, from conversations with fellow policy officers within the Eurocities[5] network and observations in cities such as Rotterdam, Lille-Roubaix, Malmo and Leipzig, I felt there might be some truth in this.

After finishing my employment with Birmingham City Council, I decided to pursue research into public sector policymaking processes and the nature of their contribution to young people's inequalities. Interest had already been growing amongst officials and politicians at city level in the potential of Big Data and associated technologies to improve the efficiency of services to citizens and facilitate more timely and better informed decision making. I suggest that this had been fuelled partly by the business world's embracing of Big Data and their associated technologies to improve their competitiveness. Whilst these developments have become relatively well known, I believe the same could not be said about policymakers' engagement with digital data and their effects on citizens. This prompted me to focus my research more specifically on the part played by digital data in public policymakers' approach to decision making and the consequences for young people in particular, including the possible exacerbation of existing inequalities and the creation of new ones.

Throughout my time in Birmingham and earlier I have also had a parallel long-term involvement with the arts as performer, trustee, strategist and marketeer/fundraiser and have initiated and participated in projects aimed at building children's and young people's competences and social and emotional resilience through the arts (in my case – music). It is not surprising, therefore, that I was attracted to a research project which involved collaborating with a creative industries company which uses creative practices in its youth

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[5] Network of European cities founded in 1986 which aims to exchange 'know how' between local governments on shared economic, social and cultural issues in order to improve the lives of all citizens.

engagement activities. Thus, I believe that my experiences as an 'insider' of how policies are made and then implemented in cities combined with those as an 'outsider' while seeking to influence institutional policy choices on behalf of cultural and community organisations may enable me to take a more informed approach to the analysis of my findings.

The structure of my thesis

In the sections which follow, I outline the remaining chapters of my thesis beginning with my Literature Review and Methodology and Methods. These are followed first by a chapter in which I describe and discuss findings from my observations and interviews with the founder of Beatfreeks and young people working with the company or participating in its activities. I then move on to consider key issues which emerged during the course of my research. These include the influence of data and digital technologies in shaping the attitudes and decisions of urban policymakers and their possible contribution to young people's inequalities. I also explored the ways in which these young people might be enabled to challenge potentially negative policy narratives of their daily lives since my research indicated that they still feel ignored and misrepresented by public institutions and powerless to change the situation. In my final discussion chapter (Power and Resistance), therefore, I reflected on the power dynamics at work between the different actors in my study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As my study involved a number of different subjects and their interactions in society, I initially situated it at the intersection of Social Sciences and Humanities and referred to literature from a range of   disciplines in order to frame my research topic and shape my questions. Given that young people are at the heart of my study, I began this Literature Review, by discussing literature on how young people are defined and refer particularly to the work of Moreno and Urraco (2018) and different theories of what constitutes 'youth' espoused notably by Woodman and Wyn (2015) and France and Roberts (2017). I then moved on to consider literature on the symptoms and causes of youth inequality and, in particular, the work of Therborn (2012) who argues that young people may experience inequalities based on their personal circumstances. I suggest, however, that they may also

be affected by structural inequalities arising from the decisions of previous governments; in particular, Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal policies and their influence over the Blair/Brown administrations and the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition. I follow this by considering literature from Critical Data and Urban Studies to interpret my findings concerning the contribution of digital data and datafication to the lived experiences of the current generation of young people. These highlighted that policymakers' deployment of data and digital technologies have become important influences in the power dynamics between young people and both the public and private sectors. My observations of the exchanges between young people and policymakers in a number of different situations revealed young people's sense of powerlessness at not being able to convince policymakers to pay attention to their problems. They referred to 'not having a voice' and so I turned to the work of Nick Couldry on Voice (2010) and that of Leah Bassel on Listening (2017) in order to help me to understand the dynamics at work in these interactions. In the final section of my Literature Review, however, I turned to literature on power and resistance to explore the different power dynamics at work between young people and the various other participants in my study in the current political, social and cultural environment. Here I referred in particular to the philosophy of Paolo Freire (1979; 1993); the work of scholars in Social Movement Studies including Jasper (2010) and Mizen (2015) and also in Political Studies.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Methodology

Critical to the success of working within a collaborative research partnership are a shared enthusiasm for the agreed topic and its aims and a willingness of both partners to build a constructive and trusting working relationship.   Thus, I chose to adopt an interactive approach to my research which is based on the idea of knowledge creation through co-operation between researchers and practitioners. This form of action research has been developed, and mainly used, in Scandinavia (Svensson, Ellström and Brulin, 2007; Woolgar, 2000) and I have combined this interactive approach to my research with Critical Realism theory (Bhaskar, 1975).   In this chapter, I also discuss my positionality, how it has influenced my values and interest in the unequal live chances of young people in today's society and thus, my methodological approach.

Methods

Critical Realism theory also accords with my ontological and epistemological positions which have influenced my decision to apply qualitative methods framed by an ethnographic approach to my fieldwork to gather my data. This has been made easier in some respects thanks to the collaborative nature of my study which has enabled me to gather primary data through both my own active participation in the work of the company alongside that of its members.

This has included regular conversations and opportunities for observation, challenge and reflection over a period of at least two and a half years prior to Covid-19 lockdowns. In most cases, I used semi-structured or conversational interviews which were recorded and later transcribed either directly by myself or by using an online transcription service. My data gathering was organised around Anisa Morridadi, the founder of Beatfreeks, and young people aged between 16 and 29 involved with the company; officers and politicians within Birmingham City Council (BCC) and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA); cultural practitioners/policy officers. I have also used participant observation to gain insights into the ways in which Beatfreeks works as an organisation in its own space and also when Anisa and team members engage with different publics in other parts of the city.

My data gathering provided a wealth of material about the everyday lives of the young people in my study who are of diverse ethnic, social and economic backgrounds and have varied experiences of education and employment. I have, therefore, chosen a Cultural Studies approach to the interpretation of my findings which takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the lived experiences of ordinary people or groups which may have previously received little or no attention in the academy.

Chapter 4: Young people and Beatfreeks

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from my partnership with Beatfreeks, a youth engagement organisation originally set up in 2013 by a young graduate of Aston Business School, Anisa Morridadi, with whom I have collaborated for the past three years. Over this period, I have had access to a company whose aims, as currently stated, are to connect young people to business, government and funders and enable them to use their creativity

to change society. It seeks to champion their interests in an environment where, according to the findings of a previous transnational project I managed between 2012 and 2015, young people feel increasingly disconnected from those in authority (Citispyce Final Report, 2015). To achieve their goals, Beatfreeks works with young people from diverse backgrounds to build their own and other young people's social and personal competences to enable them to deal with individual and structural inequalities.

I have based my discussion of the work of Beatfreeks on the themes which emerged during the course of my research. I began by considering the culture of Beatfreeks as an organisation and how the leadership style of its founder and CEO, Anisa, contributes to it. Research into leadership skills suggests that a company leader's personality and values may be instrumental in the shaping of its goals and working practices (Anderson and Sun, 2015). These include self-belief which marches alongside a willingness to take calculated risks and the ability to carry others with you. It also requires empathy, good communication skills, the ability to build and maintain not only trust within an organisation but a shared belief in its goals.

From my conversations with Anisa and members of Beatfreeks, I gained a sense of the value which they place on open, frank but respectful discussions with each other in an informal space which lends itself to openness and the exchange of ideas. Anisa is clear and passionate about what she wishes to achieve but she is also aware of the need to encourage the young members of her team to think for themselves in order to build their personal competences and develop their agency. I contend that her approach resonates with what Weiner (2003) theorises as transformative leadership in his analysis of the emancipatory work of Paolo Freire in which the leader seeks to empower those for whom he/she is responsible through "a permanent relationship of dialogue" (Horton and Freire, 1990:55).

Chapter 5: Policymakers, data and youth inequalities

In this chapter, I explore the contribution of local government's use of data and digital technologies to young people's experiences of inequality. Although research has been undertaken on young people and their experiences of social, cultural and economic inequalities from a Youth Studies perspective, I suggest that comparatively little attention has been paid thus far to the effects of policymakers' use of digital data on their inequalities. Thus, I explore administrative and political barriers to the effective collection,

sorting and use of data in policymaking. These include issues related to the governance and administrative customs and practices of local government; constraints on realising the potential value of data such as cutbacks in central government funding of local authorities and a lack of experienced staff to interpret data and inform policy decisions. I also consider the potential of institutional 'bias' and individuals' personal belief systems and values to influence what information may be used and or omitted.

Amisa'sPolicymakers' use of data may produce digital imaginaries of young people that could contribute to existing or to new inequalities through the negative refiguring of them online as some form of 'problem'. Findings from my study, however, also show how alternative forms of comparatively small-scale analogue or 'humanised' data about young people's lives may generate alternative narratives to policymakers' interpretations of their lives. I argue that these may be used to disrupt the institutional policymaking such as algorithmic data analysis which produces or reinforces their inequalities (Robertson & Travaglia, 2017).

Chapter 6: Voice, Visibility and Young People

Research into youth representation in mainstream media and the public sphere in the EU has found that, although issues relating to youth feature in public as well as political debate, young people's presence and participation in these discourses is limited (Lahusen and Kiess, 2020). I situate these problems mainly within Youth Studies and Critical Political and Policy Studies since they are key disciplines in a context of widespread public disillusion with politicians and party politics. There has been a decline in public confidence in formal democratic processes and an increasing reluctance to become actively involved in them which has been particularly apparent amongst young people (Sloam, 2012). They feel that policymakers are not interested in what they have to say; a situation which continues to be a source of concern amongst organisations and individuals working with young people.

During my time embedded with the Beatfreeks team, however, I had the opportunity to observe how the company sought to enable young people to attract and hold the attention of public and private sector decision makers. In order to understand how this might be achieved, I turned to Couldry's work on the Politics of Voice (2010) and Leah Bassel's insights into Listening (2017) to interpret my findings and also to studies on emotion as , for

example, Jasper (2018) and performativity and voice (Lawy, 2017). I suggest that they all have a part to play in persuading people both to <u>hear</u> and actively <u>listen</u> to the voices of young people and their advocates and respond to what they have to say. Furthermore, if young people's needs and concerns are not acknowledged or their circumstances are misrepresented by policymakers, then they may feel undervalued and ignored. This, in turn, may lead to disillusion with the polity and a disconnection from political institutions and processes as well as mainstream society (Hart and Henn, 2017).

Chapter 7: Young people, power and resistance

As I show in my review of relevant literature in Chapter 2, the power dynamics at work in the relationships between the key subjects of my research are complex. Thus, in this final chapter on my findings, I consider how it might be possible for young people to contest and refigure the power relations between them and urban policymakers. I have drawn primarily on the emancipatory pedagogy of Paolo Freire and his concepts of conscientization, reflection and praxis to consider the ways in which a youth engagement company such as Beatfreeks may contribute to changing this balance of power. I have also used a wider range of literature which looks at other forms of youth activism and resistance from the perspectives of Social Movements and Critical Political Studies. Finally, I explore power and resistance through the lenses of hard and soft power and what I describe as 'constructive' disruption.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this chapter I first summarise the aims of my research, the location for my study and the economic, social and political context in which it has taken place. I then go on to outline the range of actions I undertook in order to gather my empirical evidence. These include my investigation of the data practices of city politicians and officers and their influence over young people's everyday lives; and exploring the use of alternative forms of data by Beatfreeks and the young people associated with it. I go on to outline and then discuss in greater depth the key findings from my research and the contribution to knowledge which I consider that my thesis can make.

I begin with a discussion of the contribution to knowledge which my engagement with the research process itself might make as an older, white, middle-class woman working with

young people of different ethnicities and a variety of cultural, educational and economic backgrounds. This involved reflecting on my own positionality, my choice of research methods   and the ways in which they influenced my data gathering. I then discuss the role of data in policymaking and its influence on young people's lives. This has been informed by my former experiences as a policy officer working in local government in the UK and with my counterparts in cities across the EU but also by scholarship on Data and datafication from different disciplinary perspectives. I highlight problems over the definition of the term 'data' and the effects on citizens of the increasing role it plays in society today.

I go on to consider the part played by alternative analogue 'data' in shaping the lived experiences of young people through an analysis of the findings from my Case Study of my collaborative research partner, Beatfreeks. I highlight the ways in which this company has gathered and used data from its own surveys to challenge policymakers' figuring of young people and discuss how the voices of young people can be heard by power through emotionally charged speeches and creative performances and thus provide first hand data about their lives. I argue that, although these interventions by Beatfreeks and young people are on a small-scale, they have enabled the company to become more vocal and visible in seeking to challenge decision makers to pay more attention to the concerns of young people. In the final section of this chapter, I use the concept of constructive disruption to analyse the contribution of an entrepreneurial social enterprise to giving young people agency to counter the social and cultural inequalities which may be present in their daily lives.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

My research into the role of data and digital technologies in young people's inequalities and the deployment of alternative data to contest them involved interactions between a range of actors including young people; youth engagement workers; urban policymakers; cultural practitioners and commentators. I, therefore, have considered literature from a broad range of disciplines in order to clarify the focus of my research, develop my research questions and later to interpret my findings.

As my study is framed within a collaborative research partnership with the youth engagement company, Beatfreeks, I begin by briefly setting this company's work against the backdrop of the changing context in which youth engagement activities now take place. This includes the restructuring of youth work provision by local authorities to reduce costs and cuts in public funding to support local community groups' work with young people. These may be based, for example, on faith or locality or linked to specific activities such as sports and arts. My review of policy documents and newspaper reports shows that it has become increasingly challenging to sustain existing activities or set up new projects, particularly those which have previously relied on public sources of funding. I suggest, therefore, that these factors may have influenced the design of the company structure of Beatfreeks and the nature of its activities with young people. I propose to discuss this in more detail in my Case Study of Beatfreeks in Chapter 4 whilst turning in this current chapter to a review of literature on the different subjects and issues which the findings from my research with Beatfreeks have highlighted.

Since young people and their inequalities were at the heart of my study, I started by reviewing scholarship in Youth and Youth Transition Studies to help clarify my understanding of the young people who are the subjects of my research. This highlighted an ongoing debate between two contrasting positions which I have examined mainly through the work of Woodman and Wyn (2015) on the one hand and France and Roberts (2015) on the other. The former advocate a perspective based on the concept of 'social generation' whereas France and Roberts have argued for continued attention to be paid to

the role of class in how 'generations' are constructed and the ways in which inequality is conceptualised.

More recently, Moreno and Urraco (2018) have sought to situate concepts of generation and transitions in their historical and more recent academic contexts since they argue that both play a part in determining young people's transition to adulthood. Influenced by my experiences of teaching in secondary schools in cities during 1970s and 1980s, I concurred with their approach and thus explored literature which describes and evaluates the political, social and economic shifts which have taken place over past decades. My review suggests that these may have contributed to structural inequalities and affected the life chances of young people transitioning to adulthood prior to 2000 and those who have reached or are in the process of reaching adulthood in the 21st century.

My evidence, however, indicates that young people's experiences of inequality may also be influenced by their individual life stories and I have drawn mainly on the work of Therborn (2012; 2013) and the elaboration of his thinking by Stigendal (2018) to help me understand their significance. Following this, I consider inequalities which young people may experience as a consequence of the increasing influence of data and datafication in society and over their individual lives through a review of literature on the challenges and opportunities of the deployment of data and digital technologies in 21st century. I begin by reviewing research by scholars including boyd and Crawford (2012); Dalton and Thatcher (2014) and Kitchin (2014) whose work laid the foundations for Critical Data Studies and led to its rapid expansion as a discipline. Issues addressed have ranged from the opportunities that Big Data offers researchers in tackling both scientific and societal challenges to the threats which it poses to society through, for example, misleading assumptions and claims about its objectivity and accuracy. In my research, I found examples of the adverse effects on young people's lives of data gathered and used by policymakers and I have, therefore, reviewed literature on the digital divide to analyse my findings. This includes scholarship which has highlighted the potential of digital data and digital technologies to add to young people's inequalities as well as the ways in which data and datafication are playing an increasingly significant role in their daily lives.

I then review literature from Urban and Data Studies together with Social and Political Sciences to examine the contribution of city policymakers' use of data and digital

technologies to young people's inequalities. Studies by Malomo and Sena (2016) and Poel, Meyer and Schroeder (2018), for example, discuss the enthusiasm for the potential of datafied intelligence but also problems which continue to face policymakers over the collection, analysis and application of digital data. These are similar to those which I have identified through interviews with policymakers as well as my personal experiences in local government and I suggest that the application of digital data and technologies at this level may be more limited than previously thought.

Running through my study have been issues of power and resistance. They are involved in the ways in which young people and policymakers interact with each other and the interventions of organisations like Beatfreeks which seek to bring young people's concerns to the attention of policymakers. I have, therefore, reviewed literature which I believe can assist me in understanding how it might be possible for young people to redress what they perceive to be an unequal balance of power between them and institutional decision makers. For example, findings from my observations of Beatfreeks' events involving young people and both public and private sector decision makers suggest that they provide an opportunity for those in positions of power to hear the views of young people at first hand. Thus, in order to understand how their voices might disrupt policymakers' power over young people, I have applied Nick Couldry's thinking on Voice (Couldry, 2010) and Leah Bassel's exploration of the process of Listening (Bassel, 2017). I have also referenced literature in Critical Political Studies which discusses the decline in young people's engagement with established forms of politics (Sloam, 2011; Henn and Foard, 2011) and research in Social Movements and Activism Studies to interrogate my findings on young people's resistance to existing political and social structures.

Young people in post-austerity cities

During the years in which I collaborated with colleagues in local government within the EU (1989 – 2012), I observed a growing preoccupation with the need to tackle the potentially deficitizing effects of economic, social and cultural circumstances on young people's life chances as they transitioned from child to independent adult. Yet, even when working on policies and projects which related directly to young people, I recall very few instances of discussions over what we meant by the term 'young people' or 'young adults'. There seemed to be a broad acceptance of age as the primary defining factor, since this had been

a widely used indicator within local government to signal transition from one stage of an individual's life cycle to another. Age also continues to be used in the categorisation of citizens by intergovernmental institutions such as the United Nations or the EU's Eurostat database and national governments' own statistical services such as the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS). My own understanding of 'young people', however, has been influenced by my career as a teacher in state secondary schools working with teenagers from a variety of social, cultural and economic backgrounds and later as a facilitator of youth projects. These experiences made it clear to me that the process of becoming an adult is multifactoral and prompted my interest in debates in the academy over this issue. I have, therefore, drawn on the work of scholars who take a class/subcultural view of transition as a linear progression by age from child to independent adult and also those who espouse a social generation perspective. The latter takes into account the individual, temporal and socio-economic factors which influence the process of change from child to adult. For example, many young people are spending more time in education and some are taking longer to become independent adults because of the socio-economic, political and technological environment in which they live. This is relevant to the young people in my study whose progress to adulthood may have been shaped not only by a legacy of structural inequalities originating from a pre-digital world but also by the pervasive influence of data and digital technologies in their lives. They may share certain concerns or aspirations but their lived experiences differ according to their personal situation; values; knowledge; and competences.

In order to review these positions (class/subcultural and social generation), I turned to the work of Moreno and Urraco who contextualise them from a sociological perspective in which they reference the thinking of Karl Mannheim on social generations (1993). He maintained that young people may be transformed into a new generation through their experience of growing up in a shared set of circumstances which may influence the way they see and feel about the world around them. Moreno and Urraco link Mannheim's work with more recent scholarship in order to assess the role of generation in relation to youth transitions today and put forward their own interpretation of generation. They describe this as "a set of people who belong to an age cohort and share a subjective narrative and is determined by the political and socio-economic context in which their personal and social

circumstances take place" (Moreno A. and Urraco M., 2018: 4). But they question the tendency in earlier literature on generations to assume that young people belonging to the same generation have similar lived experiences and point to the importance of the economic environment in producing different patterns of life in different cohorts. This leads on to a discussion of the potential of a plural theoretical model which brings a generational perspective into a relationship with the role of class to interpret the complexities of youth transitions.

Moreno and Urraco refer particularly to the debates between advocates for a sociologically-informed generational perspective, notably Woodman and Wyn (2013; 2015), and scholars like France and Roberts (2015) who are concerned at the possible overshadowing of the traditional class/subcultural - based approach. The latter resonates with issues that were raised by scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham School in the 1970s. They feared that 'generation' would replace social class as "a more potent index of social position" (Clarke et al. [1976] 2006:14). Although these mutually exclusional tendencies have been reduced over time, the renewed attention being paid to a social generational approach has been further criticised by (France and Roberts (2015). Whilst they acknowledge the value of Wyn and Woodman's work in challenging the previously accepted approaches to understanding youth and social change, they express their concern that the theory of social generation is gaining traction as the 'new orthodoxy' without having been subject to rigorous scholarly criticism. Hence, France and Roberts have sought to provide a reflective and measured assessment of a social generational approach to understanding the effects of changing contemporary social conditions on young people's everyday lives. They highlight how little attention is paid in social generation theory to the role of class in how 'generations' are constructed and the ways in which inequality is conceptualised. They suggest that a more useful approach would be to examine the "the interrelationships between macro- and micro-processes that underpin the everyday practice of young people" (France and Roberts, 2015:227). They maintain that the macro-processes which affect young people's lives are not derived from the 'generational' effect but are part of a continuing process in which change once closely linked to class and gender relations has now become associated with 'market forces' and government policies.

Nevertheless, Woodman and Wyn (2015) point out that there has been a convergence of thinking between protagonists of a generational approach and that of scholars in the tradition of the Birmingham School. In their review of these two perspectives, Moreno and Urraco argue that a plural model which incorporates a generational approach in Youth Transition Studies may lead to a better understanding of what it is to become an adult in the 21st century.

I suggest that researchers into the three topics under discussion (generations, transitions and citizenship) have, to some extent, pursued separate paths. Bronwyn Wood, however, shares the dissatisfaction of Woodman and Wyn over the traditional linear view of young people's progression to adulthood. She also seeks a new perspective on research into youth transitions which acknowledges the changing socio-economic and political climate in which such transitions now take place. She refers to the concerns of other scholars in Citizenship Studies such as Isin, Engin, and Turner (2007) and Hall, Williamson and Coffey (1998) over the need to rethink the traditional framing of what it means to be a young citizen in this new and much more fluid environment. She maintains that a siloed approach and an adherence to a narrow step-by-step linear perspective of time are limiting opportunities for scholars across these related disciplines to gain fresh insights into the ways in which transitions are shaped and experienced. She argues, therefore, that a more joined up approach is needed to research into youth progression from child to adult, both within Youth and Transition Studies and between them and Citizenship Studies. Based on evidence from my own study which intersects with several different disciplines, I support Wood's suggestion on how these constraints on scholars' thinking might be removed in order to "arrive at more flexible and dynamic understandings of citizenship and transition" (Wood, 2010:13).

She proposes re-thinking approaches to citizenship and transitions around the notions of 'genealogy', 'wayfaring' and 'threads'" which are derived from the work of Ingold (2007). The first, 'genealogy', sets young people's transitions in an extended time frame since the experiences of the present generation have been shaped by the legacy of what has gone before. The second, 'wayfaring', is more about an approach to study in which key observations or 'light bulb' moments are situated in a broader landscape of continuity and change. The third, 'threads', calls attention to the often complex interactions of young

people in the context of shifting social relations in time and space. Their life patterns have been shaped by the economic and social shifts of past decades and, in particular, the years of austerity which have created an environment that makes their transition into citizens who are able and willing to participate in society more complicated and more drawn out.

It is not only young people whose life chances have been affected by past policymaking. Local government officers and politicians whom I interviewed during my research in Birmingham also acknowledged the influence of previous governments' decisions on the competences, finances and physical and demographic structures of cities. In the two sections which follow, therefore, I review literature which situates the challenges experienced by many young people today (the so-called Generation Z , Rue, 2018) in the context of the neo-liberal regime shift (Jessop, 2003) under the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and her successor John Major between 1979 and 1997. I discuss its influence over the policies of following administrations, referencing in particular the changes in the relationship between central and local government. I then move on to refer to the theories and concepts of inequality on which I have drawn to frame my discussion of the individual inequalities experienced by the young people in my study. Together with the refining of the concept of 'young people' through the dialogues which have opened up between scholars who have espoused different theories either of youth or citizenship, they have informed my perspective on the young people involved in my study.

Contextualising the inequalities of Gen Z

The Conservatives return to power and the espousal of neoliberalism

Across Western Europe, cities such as Birmingham, Lille/ Roubaix, Bilbao and Rotterdam which were reliant on traditional manufacturing industries went into serious decline in the 1970s in the face of growing competition from low-cost economies elsewhere in the world. In the UK, the newly elected Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher in 1979 adopted a neo-liberal approach to tackling the collapse of traditional industries and rising unemployment "to 'modernize' the economy, state and civil society and to promote an enterprise culture" (Jessop, 2003: 140). It encouraged a free market economy and a strong state to generate new jobs, yet the inequalities of unemployment and deprivation remained a challenge to successive governments at both national and local levels. In their

study of the effects of Thatcher's neo-liberal policymaking on the governments which followed hers, Albertson & Stepney (2020) argue that during her time as Prime Minister her policies led to an exacerbation of inequality and an emphasis on individualism. They also point out that they continued to influence the social and economic environment in the UK in the decades that followed. In the following section, I review documents produced by policymakers and academic studies relating to the consequences for post-industrial cities like the site of my research, Birmingham.

Effects of neoliberalism on recovery plans for post-industrial cities

Heavily dependent upon the engineering and automotive industries, Birmingham was hit hard by their decline and the city lacked a workforce which had the skills required for the new knowledge- and service –based economy (Birmingham's Renaissance, Birmingham City Council, 2002). Like other industrial cities, the Labour-led city council developed strategies for the restructuring of its economy and the transformation of its national and international image. As a policy officer working on European and international issues for Birmingham City Council between 1990s and 2000s, I was involved in a number of urban regeneration projects aimed at marketing the city as a thriving centre for business and an attractive leisure destination. These included securing prestige events like the G8 Summit for the city in 1998 as well as   EU funding to diversify the city's economic base and develop its cultural and tourism offer.

 Reflecting on findings from my study of young people and their inequalities in 21st century Birmingham, however, I now consider that regeneration initiatives driven by the need to secure new businesses for the city in the 1990s may have played a part in shaping their experiences of inequality today. Scholars such as Bianchini and Parkinson have situated Birmingham's use of culture in urban regeneration in a wider European landscape of the winners and losers from such investment. They show how politicians at the local level used culture to promote a sense of community and provide opportunities for participation in public life but at the same time sought to achieve significant improvements in image and stimulate economic growth in order to attract new investment, particularly from abroad.

Closer to home, in their study of 1994, Loftman and Nevin examined the arguments made by Birmingham City Council for the benefits to the city of its adoption of the 'prestige model of regeneration'. They acknowledged the potential benefits of the physical

transformation of the Central Business District (CBD) to attract inward private investment and business and leisure tourism. They questioned, however, the City Council's claims regarding the economic advantages accruing from this model of regeneration and called attention to evidence indicating that it may have a negative effect on groups already facing inequalities. In a more recent paper, Barber and Hall (2008) also discuss key themes which have run through urban policy debates on how cities have dealt with the challenges of economic restructuring: the collapse of traditional industries and "the rise of the service and knowledge-based economy" (2008:10). Like Loftman and Nevin, Barber and Hall highlight the ongoing economic challenges and disadvantages experienced by citizens and neighbourhoods. They argue that, in spite of flagship projects and the remaking of the central city spaces to attract new business investment and new leisure and tourism, progress has been uneven, since youth unemployment remains above the national average and socio-economic divisions continued to exist. They also point to the tensions between supporters of investment in cultural projects to attract international investors to the city and those who wished to use culture to animate disadvantaged neighbourhoods and promote social cohesion.

Whilst city councils were engaged in stimulating economic growth both locally and in their surrounding travel to work areas, local politicians were increasingly frustrated at central government's apparent reluctance to provide adequate financial support for their efforts. Here, I have drawn on my recollection of conversations with senior politicians and fellow officers closely involved in the planning and funding of redevelopment projects in the years prior to my joining the city council. They described how they secured financial assistance from the EU and convinced national government to provide the match funding required. This brought additional investment into Birmingham and areas in the region most severely affected by the collapse of manufacturing and heavy industry. What it did not do, however, was rebalance the funding and decision-making powers between central government and local authorities.

Local government reform and neoliberalism between 1974 and 2019

Another aspect of the neoliberal influence on public policymaking has been the rebalancing of the power relationship between central and local government during this period. This has attracted the attention of scholars not only in Government and Politics but Economics

and Urban Geography. I refer first, however, to the work of the late Prof. John Stewart of INLOGOV, University of Birmingham. His tour d'horizon of the changes in local government between 1974 and 2014 has framed my discussion of the other literature which I have used to assess the effects of policymaking in this period on young people's structural inequalities. Based on his long and close observation of municipal governance, he reflected in Local Government Studies (2014) on the state of local government at the time of writing and set this in its historical context following the major reorganisation of local government in 1974. One of the threads which run through his analysis is that of attempts by successive national governments to reorganise local government and restructure not only the relationships between the various tiers of governance but the internal political and administrative practices within individual local authorities. The second is that of the shifting nature over time of the financial arrangements between a Conservative government and Labour-led city councils and the disruptive effects on the relationship between them. The third is the transfer of functions from local government to non-elected bodies including the commissioning of services previously run by local authorities to external providers in the private or voluntary sectors; very much in accordance with a neo-liberal Thatcherite agenda. Stewart argues, however, that the most serious issue which emerged during this period was the growing central control over both functions and finance and the removal of local accountability which contributes to the disconnection between elected councillors and citizens.

Lowndes and Gardner (2016) focus on central government approaches to the devolution of powers and responsibilities to city-regions. These appear at first sight to contradict the views of John Stewart but I suggest that the processes of devolution which they discuss still enabled central government to exercise power over decision making at the local level. In their article on devolution (2016) Lowndes and Gardner summarise the inequity of the central government funding system and show how policymaking at the local level has continued to be in its thrall. They argue that, although devolution was presented as a response to increasing pressure for greater powers to be given to major cities in England following Scottish and Welsh devolution, it actually served to reinforce the supremacy of central government through its continuing control of their funding settlements. Not only did central government make major cuts in the direct allocations of funding to cities such as

Birmingham but, as Lowndes and Gardner also highlight, they subjected the budget for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to the deepest cuts of all government departments. Based on my own experiences, I concur with their view that although devolution to the local level was heralded as a strategy for promoting economic growth, the restructuring of the governance of major cities and their hinterlands (city-regions) has added to the challenges already facing locally elected councils in these areas. They now find that not only have their budgets been cut but that their powers and responsibilities have been reduced by the ceding of some of them to a combined authority. Yet, local councils often bear the brunt of complaints from citizens over the negative effects of continuing austerity measures.

In assessing the effects of austerity measures post-2007/8, more widely on young people, however, I have drawn on the work of Hastings and Bailey et al. (2017) who examine the consequences of austerity for citizens whereby cities are confronted with the challenge of having too few resources and too many needs to be met. They draw on Peck's work on 'austerity urbanism' (2012; 2014) to assess cities' experiences of the funding cuts and their effects upon citizens who may already be experiencing poverty or marginalisation. Peck argues that the state transfers the worst effects of austerity to the city level and that the consequence of this is to subject the already vulnerable or marginalised to further disadvantages. Although his thesis was developed in the context of the USA, Hastings and Bailey et al. have applied his thinking to the analysis of their own study of urban austerity in English cities. They confirm that, as in the USA, austerity measures imposed on cities in England lead to the exacerbation of the inequalities of the poor. In contrast to the findings of Peck, however, they also point to evidence that some local authorities have tried to shield the most disadvantaged but conclude that, in spite of these efforts, "city governments have few alternatives but to download austerity to the poor." (2020:2021).

Youth inequalities – the legacy of previous policymaking

Over the past forty years European governments, including that of the UK, have devoted intensive energies to tackling 'inequality' among their populations but approaches have varied according to the nature of the political, economic and societal structures and values of individual countries. Faced with the collapse of traditional industries arising from increasing competition from overseas and rising unemployment, the Conservative

administration of Margaret Thatcher in the UK adopted a neo-liberal approach to government (Jessop, 2015).   It encouraged a free market economy and a centralising strong state to generate new jobs, but left a legacy of what Jessop (2003) called "possessive individualism" and housing shortages through the privatisation of council-owned housing stock.

Evidence from projects relating to barriers faced by young people in cities across Europe (Citispyce Final Report, 2016 and Eurocities Cities for Active Inclusion Report, 2011) indicated that some of them have had or were continuing to experience an extended transition to independent adulthood and to becoming an active citizen. For example, having a degree or other qualifications no longer seemed to be enough when competing for employment against those with more relevant skills and also work experience. They may have had to seek low paid, often precarious jobs, rely on family for financial assistance, risk 'going it alone' or - if all else failed - apply for state welfare benefits. The situation was even more bleak for young people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds with little or no family support and may have left school without any formal qualifications and so face social exclusion and unemployment (Cities for Active Inclusion Report, 2011). My findings suggest some young people continue to face such problems in their daily lives and that they remain in what I regard as 'transition limbo' because they seem to be suspended between wanting to be independent but without having any idea of how to achieve it.

Youth inequality and neoliberalism in the UK

In his book '*Combatting the causes of inequality affecting young people across Europe'* (2018) the Swedish sociologist, Mikael Stigendal, discusses in depth the causes and symptoms of youth inequality in different countries including the UK. I have, therefore, used his insights to understand the influence on young people's inequalities of UK politicians' adoption of neoliberal principles and policies in the 1980s and after. He links them to the adoption of neoliberal policies by Conservative governments of the 1980s, their perpetuation into the 1990s and on into the period of two Labour governments from 1997 to 2010. These policies were aimed at market deregulation in order to facilitate economic growth and to   generate new jobs; enabling more citizens to support themselves and their families. Stigendal shows, however, that   in a liberal welfare regime such as that created in the UK, the reduction of the role of the state in the regulation of the economy restricts its ability to intervene in the

provision of welfare support. This is then limited to citizens perceived to be in the greatest need. The inequalities which these policies introduced left a legacy not only for the Labour governments of Tony Blair (1997- 2007) and his successor Gordon Brown (2007 – 2010) but also for the next generation of citizens.

Blair's government continued the policies of deregulation and limited social welfare provision but saw young people and their inequalities through the lens of social exclusion and set up a special Social Exclusion Unit to deal with them. Once again, therefore, young people found themselves perceived as a problem to be solved and the climate of austerity arising from the collapse of financial markets of 2008 has further exacerbated the inequalities they already feel (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). Evidence from a report from the European Commission in 2011 confirmed that young people across the EU had been amongst the most seriously affected by global financial crisis of 2008 (Youth Opportunities, Com, 2011:933, Brussels). Reports by the OECD (2011; 2015) also stressed the global challenges posed by the growing inequalities between rich and poor and set out reasons why policymakers and society more generally should pay closer attention to reducing them.

The legacy of the negative effects on young people's lives of the policy decisions between 1980s to 2000s and the impact of the global financial crisis (2008) have compelled, inter alia, economists, international organisations and governments to focus increasingly on the nature and implications of the inequalities which have followed. Amongst the most significant contributions to an understanding of these inequalities are those of the analyses of wealth and income inequalities by Thomas Picketty (2014) and Goran Therborn (2012; 2013). I draw mainly on the works of Goran Therborn (2012; 2013) together with Mikael Stigendal's interpretation of his theory as applied in his analysis of the causes of young people's inequalities across the EU (Stigendal, 2018). Both Therborn and Stigendal distinguish different   types of inequality that may be experienced by young people such as those involved in my study.

In his seminal work *The Killing Fields of Inequality* (2013), Therborn argues that inequalities should be seen as differences which violate the human rights of the disadvantaged (Therborn, 2013 quoted by Stigendal, 2018). He states that these differences or inequalities have three key characteristics; they must be "avoidable, morally unjustified, hierarchical"

(Therborn, 2012: 580). He then conceptualises three "fundamentally different" forms of inequality (ibid) as health inequality which he describes as a 'vital inequality'; inequality arising from discrimination and lack of respect described as 'existential inequality'; and what he calls 'resource or material inequality' which is possibly the most used.

Amongst established forms of resource inequalities which affect young people are wealth, income derived from employment, education and housing. Stigendal (2018) identifies inequality of access to the latter in particular as a significant cause of young people's resource inequality. He argues that the gentrification of urban neighbourhoods which has been a feature of the regeneration of cities has increased the exchange value of property which also increases the inequality of the relationship between the market price of the property and the 'natural price'. This, in turn, affects the ability of a young person to live independently from his family home, especially if that person is only able to access precarious, low-paid employment. Yet, ironically, what he perceives to be an inequality arising from the continuing neoliberal influence in government and society more generally I suggest may be seen to encourage 'individualism'. In my study of Beatfreeks, I have identified examples of such individual coping strategies devised by young people to try and overcome 'resource' or 'existential' inequalities. Their very resilience, however, according to Stigendal (2018), may actually be a symptom of the structural inequalities which underpin their daily lives such as precarious work, unemployment or difficulties in accessing benefits and which may compel them to seek out alternative routes to survival.

Many young people's experiences of inequality can also be described as feelings of exclusion from mainstream society. The concepts of social exclusion and inclusion emerged in the 1990s within the thinking of 'New Labour' as Tony Blair and his colleagues sought to tackle the continuing problems of inequality. They shifted the concept of inequality from that of being 'unequal to others' to being 'socially excluded' from those who are identified as being 'socially included'. That condition of exclusion, according to New Labour's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU): was "a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas face a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown." (SEU 2004: 3). Society is not the problem but the people in a state of exclusion are.

There were doubts at the time, however, over the meaning of this reclassification of the terms of the debates on inequality and I turned to the work of Ruth Levitas (2005) to consider the meaning of the new terms and the implications of the New Labour approach. She conceptualises social exclusion in the context of British political discourse as the condition of being left out or excluded from mainstream society and explores this through an analysis based on the different responses of individuals to their experiences of inequality. She identifies three main discourses which may explain social exclusion but which relate to different policy approaches to tackling them. The redistribution discourse (RED) connects social exclusion to poverty which, according to Therborn, is a form of resource inequality. The social integration discourse (SID) relates to support for individuals to enable them to be included in the labour market; and a moral underclass discourse (MUD) which focuses on negative moral and behavioural characteristics which can contribute to an individual's exclusion (Sirovatka and Spies, 2018). Irrespective of the terminology used - inequality or exclusion – the literature discussed above offers me a way in to understanding the various experiences of inequality of the young people in my study.

 I also refer to the recent work by Fran Tonkiss in which she makes what I consider to be a significant point in relation to my research. She maintains that apart from the inequalities arising from issues specific to big cities, "cities also concentrate, make visible and often intensify inequalities which are not directly, in and of themselves, confined to an urban environment" (Tonkiss, 2020: 286). These may relate to the ways in which individual young people are regarded as disadvantaged. Moreover, in his work on the 'figuring' of youth, Threadgold (2020) discusses how the concept of 'youth' can mean different things to different people, depending on their personal values, interests or the context in which they are framed. He illustrates how young people may be positioned in Youth Studies as a problem to be solved or in a state of 'becoming' between child and adult. Where young people fall into one of Therborn's categories of inequality, for example, they may be figured as deprived or disadvantaged by policymakers because of where and how they live or what levels of education and/or training they may or may not have had. In contemporary society, this kind of information is likely to be obtained from data collected and stored by public bodies using digital technologies. Young people such as those in my study, however, are unlikely to be aware of how their data is then interpreted and used because these data

processes are 'hidden' from them; they are then situated in an unequal power relationship with policymakers. In the sections which follow, therefore, I consider literature which critically examines the implications of the 'Data revolution' (Kitchin R., 2014) for society in general in order to understand the potential contribution of data and datafication to the inequalities of young people in particular.

I feel that before I embark on this, however, I need to preface this particular discussion by defining the different forms of data which are involved in my study in order to avoid any confusion over what data is being discussed.

Defining Data

Christine Borgman calls attention in her book, *Big Data, Little Data, No data* (2015) to the many challenges involved in the conceptualisation and application of data in scholarship and the consequences of their use by different stakeholders. She points out that data are not 'things' but are representations of "observations, objects or other entities used as evidence of phenomena for the purposes of research or scholarship" (Borgman C., 2015: preface xviii). The rapid developments in digital technologies over the past two decades have seen an extraordinary increase in the production of such data but also in the production of vast datasets for use in the business world – Big Data.

Big Data

The advent of the internet and the Web led to the creation of vast amounts of new data, much of it user-generated, particularly through social media and the online platforms by which such content can then be quickly shared on a huge scale. International business consultancies such as Gartner Inc and McKinsey were amongst the first to attempt a definition of this data. This is evidenced by the McKinsey Institute's publication of '*Big data: The next frontier for innovation, competition and productivity'* in which Big Data are described as*:* "data sets whose size is beyond the ability of typical database software tools to capture, sort, manage and analyse" (Manyika and Chui, 2011:1). Further terms such as 'business intelligence' were also popularised through their use in the business and IT communities to describe their activities in identifying market opportunities and analysing their competition (Chen et al., 2012). Both the private and public sectors, however, welcomed the potential of Big Data and associated digital technologies to deliver greater

volumes of more accurate information about a wider range of issues more rapidly than ever before. The UK government, for example, became interested in the opportunities offered by these new technical digital affordances to gather better intelligence to aid policy planning and delivery as is shown in a report produced in 2013: '*Seizing the data opportunity: A strategy for UK data capability'*.

Arriving at a generally agreed understanding of Big Data has, however, been problematic, but particularly since it entered popular vocabulary as a shorthand descriptor for a range of activities linked to the gathering of vast amounts of digital data including their analysis, manipulation and interpretation. Early definitions focused on 'knowable' quantitative attributes of Big Data such as its volume, variety and velocity (first proposed by American analyst, Doug Laney in 2001 and used by Gartner, Inc. in 2013). They have subsequently been the subject of much debate within the academy.

The challenges of Big Data and datafication

My review of literature on data and datafication identifies and discusses the challenges for scholars and for society of the rapid growth and influence of data and associated technologies in government and wider society. I refer in particular to scholars whose work contributed to the establishment and development of Critical Data Studies including boyd and Crawford (2012); Dalton and Thatcher (2014); Kitchin 2014a; 2014b) and Ruppert, Isin and Bigo (2017). In seeking to develop more nuanced characterisations of Big Data and its associated technologies, they posed questions aimed at clarifying, inter alia, the characteristics of Big Data and the role of data analytics and digital technologies in interpreting such data about citizens' lives. They also examined the ethical, political and social challenges presented by Big Data and datafication for scholars, citizens, businesses and governments alike.

Data and datafication are also the subject of debates in other disciplines, notably within the Social Sciences and Humanities, and I refer to literature which discusses issues raised in both these fields over the advantages and disadvantages of applying digital methods to qualitative disciplines. These include concerns expressed within Social Sciences by scholars such as Couldry (2014) and in Humanities by Berry and Fagerjord (2017) and Smith B.C. (2019). In their seminal article 'Critical Questions for Big Data' (2012), boyd and Crawford argue that it is not the volume of data that is key to defining Big Data but rather "the

capacity to search, aggregate and cross-reference large data sets" (2012:663). They critique the ways in which Big Data is regarded, analysed and deployed and question claims for the neutrality/objectivity and accuracy of Big Data and maintain that 'small data' has value and should not be ignored. These are relevant to my study since my findings suggest that young people have found themselves misrepresented by data not only because of possible bias in the policymaking process but also because data may be out-of-date or wrongly attributed. boyd and Crawford (ibid.) also stress the need to take note of the physical contexts in which people meet and connect. They urge researchers not to rely on information from contacts facilitated via digital devices or platforms as an accurate representation of their actual experiences. This speaks to empirical evidence from my observations of Beatfreeks' collection of analogue data directly from young people which they use to contest policymakers' narratives influenced by digital data.

Kitchin's focus (2014) is more on how the availability of Big Data coupled with new data analytics changes the ways in which research is conducted and how knowledge is constituted. He undertakes an extensive exploration of "the new forms of empiricism that declare 'the end of theory', the creation of data-driven rather than knowledge-driven science, and the development of digital humanities and computational social sciences that propose radically different ways to make sense of culture, history, economy and society" (Kitchin 2014:1). He contests the views of those who assert that Big Data is 'neutral' and challenges the argument of Chris Anderson of *Wired* magazine who contends that "correlation supercedes causation" and statistical algorithms can "find patterns where science cannot" (2008:2). Kitchin argues that, as we grow more accustomed to Big Data and as data analytics become more sophisticated, a data-driven approach will no longer be seen as disruptive to traditional methods but will become an accepted method. He also highlights the fact that Big Data does not come out of nowhere; it is framed by a range of previous experiences and knowledge and he goes on to argue that making sense of data " is always framed - data are examined through a particular lens that influences how they are interpreted" (Kitchin, 2014:5).

Like Kitchin, Dalton and Thatcher in their provocation 'What should a Critical Data Studies comprise?' (2014) maintain that Big Data is never neutral but is always shaped by and always shapes a contested cultural landscape in creation and interpretation" (2014: page

reference unavailable). They also contest the concept of Data as 'raw', arguing that, "in both its production and interpretation, all data – 'big' included – is always the result of contingent and contested social practices that afford and obfuscate specific understandings of the world" (2014: page reference unavailable). Their views are supported by Gitelman and Jackson (2013) in their introduction to *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*. Nevertheless, some scholars and industry specialists such as Chris Anderson of '*Wired*' magazine have been enthusiastic proponents of the contribution of Big Data to knowledge, claiming that scale of the data available meant that numbers speak for themselves and have the potential to render hypothesis-driven scientific method obsolete (Anderson, 2008). As data continues to be produced in ever- increasing quantity and variety, however, scholarship has shifted from a focus on Big Data per se towards questioning the ways in which digital data and associated technologies are being used and the implications not only for scholarship but for individual citizens and society as a whole. These include the consideration of the kinds of data which are gathered, constructed and used; the ways in which processes are designed and implemented; the ends to which data are deployed and who has access to them and the regulation of the analysis of data.

Big Data, datafication: the opportunities and challenges for Social Sciences and Humanities

There is an increasing acknowledgement by scholars across a broad spectrum of both fields of the mutual benefits to be derived from developing links between computational sciences and disciplines such as sociology, culture, politics, geography, language and the arts. As I have already mentioned in the introduction to this Literature Review, I have taken a Cultural Studies approach to my research into young people's lived experiences of data-driven inequality since it sits at the intersection of Critical Data Studies and Social Sciences and Humanities. I have, therefore, considered debates over the influence of digital resources on how research is conducted and how knowledge is produced in the Social Sciences and Humanities. This includes, for example, the incorporation of data and data analytics into their research methods and tools, since both may affect perceptions of, and decision making about, young people. My analysis, however, is not so much concerned with the deployment of data and digital technologies as tools but with the ways in which young people's everyday lives are affected by their own production of digital data and the

uses to which it is put. They may use it themselves via digital platforms and mobile devices or it may be used by digital search engines, private corporations or governmental and other public institutions. In their article Data Politics (2017), Ruppert, Isin and Bigo assert that: "data has become a social and political issue not only because it concerns everyone connected to the internet but also because it reconfigures relationships between states and citizens" (2017:1). They also maintain that data "is not only shaping our social relations, preferences and life chances but our very democracies" (2017:2). These are issues which are highly relevant to my discussion of the relationships between my research partner, Beatfreeks, its team of young people and public policymakers.

Deeper philosophical interest has also been expressed about data and digital technologies and the challenges they might pose to the future study of society and social relationships. Both Social Sciences and Humanities are concerned with making sense and meaning of, as well as structuring, social relations and share an interest in the social and political consequences of data and datafication. Thus, I consider their effects on the lives of the young people who are the subjects of my study not only through their lens but also from perspectives of Social Sciences and Humanities. I pay particular attention to Nick Couldry's concerns around Big Data (2013; 2014) to consider the relationship between data and datafication and sociology and Cowls and Schroeder's discussion of the role of data in social scientific research (2015). I then turn to discuss the work of Berry and Fagerjord (2017) and Smith B. C., (2019) together with the White Paper produced by the Alan Turing Institute (McGillivray, Jenset and Heil, 2020) on the challenges and prospects of the application of data sciences to disciplines in the Humanities.

Within Social Sciences, sociologists have been concerned with the impact of Big Data on M. their discipline and their ability to make use of, but not be compromised by, the relationship with those who control access to the data. In his inaugural lecture of 2013 at the LSE, *A Necessary Disenchantment: Myth, Agency and Injustice in a Digital World*, Nick Couldry challenged what he called 'the myth of Big Data'. He followed this up in 2014 when he argued that Big Data can be a source of a different order and a new form of social knowledge which is superior to existing qualitative methods and interpretive models (Couldry, 2014). It is an assumption which appears to have been given credibility by the public sector as well as industry and commerce as they seek to amass and process as much

data as possible about citizens or clients and use it to inform policy-making or business planning. But what kind of new order is Couldry urging us to challenge? It is a world increasingly shaped by the power of data and the algorithm "where so many of our acts are fed into predictive models that have no interest in meaning." (Ibid 2014:891). He argues that sociologists have to find ways of contesting this 'new order' or risk the devaluing of – or even disabling of other older forms of social knowledge. Cowls and Schroeder (2015) focus particularly upon the debate over the nature of the contribution of Big Data to social scientific research and the epistemological and methodological challenges which it poses. They point to a step change in the scale and variety of data available and pose questions over their validity and highlight the debates in the academy over the relative advantages and disadvantages of correlational or causal findings derived from Big Data. They argue that "Mining may be good enough to find patterns and, by implication, correlations in the data may be good enough to show these patterns; but it is still necessary to think about how these fit into causal and theoretical explanations" (2015: 468).

Similar issues have also been discussed by Humanities scholars over the role of Big Data (essentially quantitative) in research areas which are predominantly the subjects of qualitative studies, dealing as they do with people's social, cultural concerns and emotional interactions. These range from concerns over the possible domination of digital science and technologies in the interpretation of human behaviour to the argument that the use of digital tools in humanities may be seen as a bridge between computer sciences and the humanities in terms of the processing and interpretation of data. In 2011, for example, David M.Berry proposed that "computational techniques could give us greater powers of thinking, larger reach for our imaginations, and, possibly, allow us to reconnect to political notions of equality and redistribution based on the potential of computation to give to each according to their need and to each according to their ability" (Berry, 2011:10). Yet in 2017, he and Anders Fagerjord cautioned against Humanities scholars permitting their work to be viewed solely through the lens of computational sciences. Barry C. Smith (2019), also calls for caution regarding our expectations of the seemingly endless possibilities of Big Data and associated technologies, since the generalizations and predictions based on Big Data fail to take into account "the multisensory basis of human experience, emotion and decision-making" (2019:368). Nevertheless, he views the relationship between digital

technologies and Humanities as one which can benefit Humanities research through the use of these new digital tools which make far more data available about human interests and behaviours. He maintains that by analysing the variety and messiness of all this information, researchers may be able to open up new fields of inquiry without necessarily having a specific question in mind. Smith also suggests that their use may shed new light on "the 'human problem' at the heart of some of the grand challenges we face as a species." (2019: 359).

The kinds of online data which such digital tools can be used to investigate include the wide variety and large volume of information generated online by young people who, according to recent ONS statistics (ONS,2021) are amongst the most frequent internet users in the UK (99.5% of users between the ages of 16 and 24). This data, however, is not only useful for scholars but also for private sector companies and public institutions who seek to profile young people by accessing and interpreting their digital traces.   In the next section, therefore, I discuss literature on which I have drawn to explore the effects of young people's digital interactions on their inequalities.

Young people, data and digital technologies

Having spent time over the past three years observing team members of Beatfreeks in their work spaces, I cannot recall an occasion when they were not using the internet via at least one form of digital device, be it PC, laptop or smartphone. They are texting, emailing, using social media platforms including twitter, instagram and more recently snapchat and tik tok for connecting with friends and posting details of events and sharing thoughts on things that matter to young people. They are also trawling the web for information through global search engines such as Google or possibly Yahoo or Bing, using equipment which is most likely to be running Microsoft or Apple software. It is certainly a far cry from the communication methods I used in the first decades of my adult life: typewriters, landline telephones, fax machines, word processors and a mobile phone which felt as big and heavy as a brick! The relevance of their interactions with the web and digital technologies to my study of Beatfreeks, however, is not so much about individual digital competences but how digital technologies are <u>used</u> by the company and its team members to connect with young people in the wider community and to influence policymakers. In particular, I review literature which has enabled me to gain a better understanding of how the interactions of

young people with data and digital technologies may contribute to their inequalities. I refer first to literature which critically examines the opportunities and challenges presented by data and digital technologies in today's world (Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Drawing on scholarship from different disciplines, they consider what it means to be a citizen in a world increasingly shaped by the imbrication of the digital in society. They pose questions over the levels of knowledge citizens possess about the role of digital technologies in their lives and how they navigate their way through increasingly datafied social and governance structures. They argue that "datafication may generate new possibilities for citizen action, but it may also create and reinforce inequalities, differences and divisions, through practices that are frequently obscure to those affected by them " (2018:3).

Their work has enabled me to contextualize my study of data's role in shaping young people's lives within broader debates in the academy. These include discussions over the nature of the digital divide such as the skills, attitudes and values which differentiate users from non-users of the internet. In their article 'Cultural divides and digital inequalities: attitudes shaping Internet and social media divides', Dutton and Reisdorf (2017) suggest that these may be used as indicators of distinct 'cultures' of Internet users and non-users. Non-users of the internet might be regarded as being digitally disadvantaged but users of the internet might also be seen as 'digital underdogs' since they may have little or no control over what happens to the data they generate as consumers and producers of digital content. Hargittai and Hinnant, (2008) maintain, however, that debates have moved beyond the binary view of the digital divide between users and nonusers of the internet and that we need to take a more nuanced approach to understanding digital inequality. They call attention to the influence of factors such as gender, education, levels of general digital literacy, family circumstances and "capital-enhancing" uses of the Web in assessing levels of digital inequality amongst young people.

I refer also to the paper by Robinson L et al. (2015) on digital inequalities in which they discuss the emergence of new forms of inequality alongside more established inequalities such as class, gender and race. They argue that digital inequality should be considered one of the most significant since "It is increasingly clear that individuals' digital engagements and digital capital play key roles in a range of outcomes" and that "Those who function

better in the digital realm and participate more fully in digitally mediated social life enjoy advantages over their digitally disadvantaged counterparts" (2015:570). This literature resonates with my observations of the young people involved with the members of Beatfreeks and their understanding - or lack of it - of the opportunities and hazards which may arise from the data they generate and use and its manipulation by others. Processes have to be set in place to select sources, collect the data and then manipulate the data assemblages. It is these processes as much, if not more, than the actual data themselves which may play a key role in the shaping of young people's inequalities who may not be aware of such processes or be able to track them. Andrejevic et al. (2015), for example, in their examination of data-mining, highlight private sector and their application. As they are likely to be privately owned and controlled, there is no possibility of external critique of their findings and conclusions. "So, as we tweet, post, like, share and Google to generate meaning, related platforms and their analytics generate us as 'bits' in turn and deploy our communicative efforts to their own advantage" (Andrejevic et al. 2015:380). This is relevant to my study since using categories selected from the mass of digital data available from their engagements with the internet to label young people may lead to their misrepresentation and potentially add to their inequalities. I have noted, however, that, although some young people are conscious of possible threats to their online safety and take steps to protect their data, they still continue to use digital platforms and search engines to share data about themselves; their interests; their values and passions; and to build support for causes they hold dear.

The literature I have discussed above refers largely to the implications for young people of the business world's interpretation and application of their data to improve the targeting of their products and their competitiveness. Yet, attention in the academy has also been paid to public sector policymakers' engagement with data and datafication and their effects on young people's daily lives. Therefore, I now turn to review literature on which I have drawn to examine the use of digital data and datafication by policy-makers and their relationship to young people's inequalities.

Data, digital technologies and policymaking

Both private and public sectors have sought to capitalise on the high volume and variety of digital data and developments in algorithms and artificial intelligence which have become

available in recent years. The implications of their use for society, however, have been the subject of much debate within Critical Data Studies and I have already referred in the previous section of this chapter to scholarship within this field. It has covered ways in which data has changed how policy is being made; how it affects the lives of citizens; and how it is able to shape and reshape power interactions at different levels. I now consider the work of other scholars including (Giest, 2017; Malomo and Sena, 2016; Poel, Meyer and Schroeder, 2018; and Redden, 2018) who have explored practical and ethical issues around the gathering, analysis and use of digital data.

Sarah Giest (2017) brings research into Big Data together with discussions within the public policy community over issues such as the ability of government officials to use digital technology to analyse data and the challenges they face in ensuring that this information will be used in the policymaking process. She points out that governments have lagged behind business in having the necessary skills and equipment to make effective use of data and digital technologies. Drawing on studies from within Public Administration and Public Policy literature, she highlights a series of themes which run through their findings which I consider to be helpful in my analysis of datafied policymaking at the city level. These include the requirement for capacity, appropriate skills and a data culture within the organisation as well as an interest in digitizing public services and the application of big data to achieve policy goals.   She calls attention to institutional weaknesses which make sharing information across the organisation inefficient because of a departmental silo mentality and/or concerns about data protection legislation. This resonates with my findings which highlight the disconnect between data gathered by separate departments and the potential failure to benefit from the sharing of information.   A further trend has been to use digital technologies to streamline services to the public and make them more responsive to citizens' needs. Some of the young people in my study, however, have expressed their frustrations over these services at local level where websites are not regularly updated, there are problems with navigating them and obtaining the help they require. I too have had difficulties in searching for and obtaining information from local government online services and I can empathise with their feelings of distance and frustration.

(2018) present the findings from an extensive study across a number of disciplines into the uses of Big Data in national and international policymaking between 2014 and 2016 and position their research in literature on the use of Big Data in policymaking and wider society. They consider issues around the validity, scale and privacy of data collected and the potential for it to misrepresent what is being investigated because it may not be complete. They also highlight the problem of those missing from policymaking because they do not produce any data and the possible power imbalances between those who have access to data and those who do not. The issues of the 'digitally invisible' and the power dynamics at work between those in authority and young people also relate to my analysis of the ways in which policymakers' use of data affects young people's inequality. In addition, this literature also considers the growing influence of political priorities rather than data - informed evidence in determining the processes of policymaking; a tension recently highlighted during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic between national politicians and scientists. The authors acknowledge that there is a fine line between the two and point out that there is a need not only for greater skills in Big Data and data literacy but also a demand for how to show the effectiveness of using Big Data in policymaking. The focus on Big Data in their study, however, excludes from consideration user-generated data such as that which is gathered by the members of Beatfreeks and deployed by them to draw the attention of those in authority to the needs of young people who feel that their views remain unheard.

In contrast to the discussion based on the international study discussed above (Poel et al., 2018), Malomo and Sena (2016) focused on Big Data and local government in the UK. Quoting findings from the thinktank, Policy Exchange (2015), which suggested that the use of Big Data could save local government billions of pounds through the restructuring of services, Malomo and Sena assess the validity of this claim and identify various barriers to achieving it. They refer to the changes introduced by central government to both the funding and service delivery systems at the local level which have compelled local authorities to adopt different ways of working. They reference the use of Big Data and data analytics and move from a general overview of the issues arising from this to a detailed discussion of the benefits and barriers to their use by local government. They show how the most frequently used definition of Big Data which comes from the business world is only of

limited value in understanding the complexity of Big Data in the public sector. They argue that this complexity derives from the changing technology used to capture data and the shifting nature of the types of data which local government is now able to gather, quoting the example of the data acquired from cameras and sensors which monitor traffic flows. They also call attention to the potential incompatibility of data which is on the same issue but has been gathered by different public sector bodies and for different purposes. This becomes even more complicated once relevant data is stored by NGO[6]s or private sector organisations.

More recently, the ability of public bodies to capture, store, update and rapidly analyse vast quantities of data on citizens digitally has increased. This continues to raises serious issues over the safeguarding of personal information and the policy imperatives which may influence the mining and interpretation of data for governance (Giest, 2017). Malomo and Sena also show how the interpretation of the UK Data Protection Act (aka General Data Protection Regulation, 2019) may restrict the sharing of data between departments in local government. Such barriers as these are a source of frustration to some of the policy officers I have interviewed who consider that the sharing of information would be valuable to their own areas of responsibility. There are also wider concerns over issues of accountability and transparency as highlighted by Joanna Redden in her discussion of datafication and the practices of democratic governance (Redden, 2018). In their Report on Data Science for Local Government (2019), Bright et al. from the Oxford Internet Institute set out a number of concerns and 'crucial barriers' to the effective application of data science in local government. Most notable are the lack of financial resources available to invest in in-house expertise (an issue which evidence from my study supports) and the unrealistic expectations of cost-saving benefits arising from investment in data science projects.

At the same time, frustration amongst young people in cities has grown over the failure of policymakers at both national and local levels to address their needs and concerns. This has been evidenced across the EU in transnational research projects such as MYPLACE (2011); Citispyce (2016); and Partispace (2020). It was also highlighted by the protests of 2011 in

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[6] NGO Non-govermental organisation

the UK over increases in tuition fees, the Occupy movement's protests over the financial sector's responsibility for the global financial crisis of 2008. In 2015, there were also student marches against the planned abolition of 'maintenance grants' (BBC News online 4 November, 2015), and more recently young people have undertaken protest actions in support of the Black Lives Matter campaign and Climate Change. They have all contributed to young people's disconnect from decision makers. Young people's engagement in activism is certainly not new but, during my research, I have sensed a growing interest amongst the Beatfreeks community of young people in what might be regarded as more positive or constructive ways of challenging 'authority'. Thus I discuss the literature on which I have drawn to analyse the ways in which young people and social activist youth organisations such as Beatfreeks might be able to disrupt the   unequal relationship between themselves and public sector policymakers.

Young People, Activism and Data

Young people's civic and political engagement in society have long been subjects of interest for political and social actors as well as scholars in Western democracies. Concern has been growing over the 'health' of representative democracy (Sloam, 2014; Hart and Henn, 2017) and either the decline in the youth vote or more recently the continuing lower turn out amongst young people than older voters. Yet, there is evidence to show that young people are not apolitical (Pilkington and Pollock, 2015); but today's generation of young people "feel relatively powerless, politically - just as did their predecessors a decade previously" (Henn and Foard, 2011). During my collaborative partnership with the founder of Beatfreeks, I participated in a number of lunchtime conversations between members of her team. These revealed concerns over what they regarded as the lack of understanding of young people's needs but also a determination to enable their voices to be heard by those with decision making powers and influence over their life chances.

My evidence shows that their approach to making their views known involves a repertoire of different forms of action and emotional engagement to challenge the power of policymakers. I have, therefore, framed my discussion of young people's activism primarily by the work of Paolo Freire on power and resistance. In order to add to my understanding of the various forms of resistance in which young people engage in a post-austerity,

datafied society, however, I have also drawn on literature specifically related to Political and Civic Participation and Social and Data Activism.

Power and Resistance

Freire had a specific concern for the situation of young people growing up against the backdrop of the struggle for power between right-wing governments and the Left in the Latin America of the 1960s. This led him to write his emancipatory *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970; 1993) in which he argued that learning should be an experience through which young people are able to take a critical approach to their situation in society and to their relationship with those in power. With its dual concepts of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', his work may, at first reading, seem over-simplistic in the context of 21st century and as such has been challenged in the academy (Blackburn, 2000; Taylor, 1993). Nevertheless, Freire has been highly influential in the fields of Education and Youth Studies (McInerney, 2009; Giroux, 2010) and, in recent years, scholars in Europe as well as North and South America have been reflecting on the implications of Freire's thinking beyond education. This includes its relevance to new social interrelationships and possibilities of resistance and change (Dalaqua, 2018; Suzina and Tufte, 2020).

Freire followed Marx in believing that the structures of capitalist societies are founded on the exploitation of certain groups or individuals by others and that these make it difficult for the exploited to become 'more fully human'. It was necessary, therefore, to develop processes of learning that would enable 'the exploited' (in Freire's case – students) to become critically aware of the conditions which kept them in a position of subjugation to those who controlled the structures and regulations of society. This relates to the concerns of the young people in my study, some of whom may feel neglected and even penalised by the decisions of policymakers. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, however, Freire argued that critical awareness (conscientization) is not in itself sufficient to bring about change. It has to be part of a process which encourages educator and students to be co-constructors of knowledge through a dialogue of equals as it is this that enables them to become critically aware of the reality of their position in the world. Freire also urged readers of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* not only to become critically aware of inequality and injustice but to reflect on them and be committed to take action (praxis) to reduce them (Freire 1993:27). For him, these are key to citizens' self-determination and active participation in civil society,

enabling the 'oppressed' to realise their potential as socially, politically and culturally aware human beings capable of transforming the reality of their lives. I have, therefore, used this concept of the construction of knowledge through a dialogue of equals to analyse the work of Beatfreeks and its team members in Chapter 4.

I now turn to literature on youth activism to which I referred in the introduction to this section to understand where the activities of Beatfreeks and the young people associated with them fit in terms of the continuum between civil and political engagement and resistance. In his introduction to a part-issue of Parliamentary Affairs in 2012, Sloam discusses the crisis around youth disengagement with traditional politics shortly after the mass student protests against the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance[7] in England and the London and Birmingham riots of 2011, in which young people were particularly prominent. He links the increasing complexity of young people's lives and the changing pattern of youth transitions in 21st century to their rejection of traditional forms of political representation. As I too have observed, he draws attention to the fact that young people have suffered more than most from the cuts in government spending and services post -2008. He cites, for example, rising youth unemployment, the closure of youth centres and increases in university tuition fees. My own research with young people in Birmingham suggests that they have little faith in politicians and feel powerless to achieve change within the system. Yet, they appear to be interested in participating in some way or another in civil society; be it through voluntary work or taking part in social justice actions both online and in real life. Sloam, however, poses the question about the power of young people to influence decision making: "Is civic and political engagement outside electoral politics enough?"(2012:7), having already expressed the concern that if young people do not participate in the formal political processes such as voting, their interests are less likely to be taken seriously. He argues that "the disconnection between young people and electoral politics has created a dangerous divide, undermining the social contract and young people's sense of citizenship" (Sloam, 2012:10). Thus, his concluding thoughts focus

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[7] Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA): This was originally proposed by the Labour government in 1998, piloted in 1999 and implemented nationally from September 2004. It was a means-tested scheme aimed at enabling 16 – 18 year olds from lower income families to pursue their education beyond the age of 16. In 2010, however, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition announced the scrapping of the scheme in England as too costly leading to mass protests by students.

on the policy 'establishment' and how it ought to respond to the problem of non-participation and marginalisation of young people in political and civic life. He refers to the need for politicians and institutions to listen to young people and give them a platform for their voice to be heard.

Voice and Power

Having a Voice to speak to and be heard by 'Power' are themes which I have observed as ever- present in the work of Beatfreeks. Yet, I have found during my research that certain voices can have a particularly powerful effect on those who are listening and elicit what appear to be emotionally charged reactions. This has led me to explore scholarship relating to how we, as sentient human beings, communicate how we feel about things and why they might matter to us. This topic has been studied from a number of different perspectives including Affect (Ahmed 2004; 2014), Social theory (Sayer, 2011) as well as Emotion (Jasper, 2011; Fox N. J., 2015) but I have focused on the concepts of Voice and Listening and the ways in which they contribute to attracting and holding the attention of those in positions to influence their lives. I have, therefore, turned to the work of Nick Couldry on 'Voice' and that of Leah Bassel on 'Listening' in order to understand the dynamics between young people, Beatfreeks and policymakers. In his book, *Why Voice Matters*, Couldry describes Voice as "the process of giving an account of the world in which we act" (2010:91). He argues that if we are denied that possibility, then it is as though an individual's voice has no significance; it does not matter. This is certainly what I have detected in the feelings of young people I have encountered during the course of my research. In both Couldry's and Bassel's views, 'Voice' is much more than a description of the process of speaking; it has to be both heard and listened to in order to be acknowledged. Bassel argues that 'Listening' is both a social and political process but that it has not received the same level of attention in research as 'Voice'. In her book, *The Politics of Listening* (2017), she explores the conditions which may inhibit or facilitate the opportunities for voices to be acknowledged and listened to. She refers to the work of Susan Bickford who argues that 'Voice' and 'Listening' are interdependent as we are all both speakers and listeners and neither has meaning without the other. Of particular relevance to my study, however, is Bassel's examination of what she describes as "vertical

practices demanding that the powerful listen" (Bassel, 2017: 13) and horizontal practices which seek to "access each other's experiences and create a mutual 'Us' " (ibid.)

Social Movements and Activism

Studies on voice and emotion are closely linked to Social Movements and Activism on which I have drawn to explore how young people's voices might achieve recognition. I refer first to the review of activism and social movements by Earl, Maher and Elliott (2017) who emphasize the importance of treating 'youth' activism differently from that of 'adult' activism and seek to encourage the development of a more wide-ranging literature on this topic. They include in this the changing contexts for youth activism such as moves towards the normalisation of protest outside the confines of traditional political activities and increasing participation in NGOs and other social movements. They also highlight the benefits which might accrue to further research on youth organisations by connecting with other relevant research areas and literatures such as youth political engagement (as discussed above) and participation in social movement organisations. Here, I reference the work of Mizen (2015) who takes a social realist approach to argue for "the relational nature of human emotions" (2015:170) which enables us to respond to what is happening around us through making an emotional connection with it. He maintains that researchers should not only focus on the actions of such organisations but also on the motivations of the individuals involved in them and highlights the importance of emotion as a motivational force which can connect participants to issues of public concern. Castells (2015) also highlights the role of emotion in young people's activism when he points out that young people as well as their peer networks are driven by their passions and interests to pursue issues which matter both to them and to others.

Data and power

Findings from my study of Beatfreeks and their relations with young people and policymakers have highlighted the multi-faceted role which digital data and related technologies play in the lives of young people. Finally, therefore, I consider their contribution to youth activism, drawing predominantly on the research of Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2017), Gutierrez (2018) and Gutierrez and Milan (2019). Stornaiuolo and Thomas examine young people's use of 'participatory' media sites as a means of achieving social change. They set their argument in the context of education research in order to provide

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"counter-narratives to dominant narratives of "at-risk" or disaffected youth" (2017:337) within educational establishments. They explore inequality from an approach which "foregrounds youth epistemologies and experiences" (2017: 339) rather than one which is framed by a particular concept such as the 'digital divide'.

Miren Gutierrez, however, explores data's role in activism and shows how it can be analysed from a number of different perspectives. This largely depends on how the information itself is gathered and may range from accessing open-source datasets to creating one's own. She argues that it is essential for people to deploy alternative forms of data to those used by governments and the private sector in order to challenge the power they exercise over their lives. Gutierrez examines various forms of data activism ranging from formally constituted, often international, organisations such as Oxfam to small-scale localised actions against various forms of social inequality and shows how the use of data and digital technologies in activism enables citizens to "generate disruption for social change" (2018:60). Together with Stefania Milan, she has then gone on to explore how the interactions of individuals with data and associated technologies changes their approach to activism.

Summary

My research has involved a number of different subjects which could be relevant to several different fields of study and so I have reviewed literature relating not only to the subjects of my investigation but to the various disciplines which I felt would assist me in the analysis of my findings.   Thus, I have drawn on a combination of Critical Data and Youth Studies together with theories of inequality to analyse the role of data in policymaking and its contribution to youth inequalities. I have situated this discussion in the context of Political and Urban Policy Studies since young people's lived experiences may also have been influenced by the legacy of structural inequalities arising from policy decisions taken long before they were born.

 In order to analyse the ways in which different forms of data and digital technologies may contribute to securing the attention and possibly action of decision makers, I have drawn on analogue data (survey) in combination with digital technologies (digital platforms to reach out and communicate with others) and creative practices (non-digital). I have also referred to Malomo and Sena's critique of the fragmented nature of data held inside and

outside the public sector as it illustrates both the potential for misinterpreting the influence of digital data and problems faced by young people when seeking to access public services.

Beatfreeks, however, has at its disposal a variety of tools across its different activities to raise awareness of the needs and concerns of young people. They are often combined in order to maximise their impact when engaging with key influencers and policymakers. The ones most often used to attract attention are creative practices such as spoken word or music performances and interactive visual installations. I, therefore, have reviewed literature by Couldry and Bassel on voice and listening to analyse the ways in which these activities are used by young people to attract the attention of those in positions of power and influence over their lives and make them take notice and act on their concerns. Their work highlights the power of Voice to affect the emotions of others and this has prompted me to explore the role of emotion in the relationships between young people and those who exercise some form of power over their lives as, for example, in social movements.

In addition, I have also reviewed literature on political, social and data activism as well as on the thinking of Paolo Freire and the work of scholars who have interpreted his work for our times, since issues of power, powerlessness and resistance run throughout my study. Hence, the literature discussed in this chapter has contributed significantly to the theoretical framework for analysing my data, as can be seen in the following chapter on my Methodology and Methods.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

My Methodology has been influenced by the ways in which my research intersects with several different disciplines and by its framing within a collaborative research partnership. I have, therefore, I situated my investigation within Cultural Studies and adopted an interactive form of action research in which both researcher and the key partners in the research project participate in its design and conduct and jointly reflect on its outcomes. This collaborative framework enabled me to adopt an ethnographically informed approach to my interviews and observations within the community of young people who are members of the Beatfreeks' community. It also allowed me to step outside this participatory relationship and to take a more critical approach to their activities and also to their interactions with policymakers whose decisions may contribute to their inequalities.

This study took place between November 2017 and June 2021 in Birmingham, UK as I considered the city to be an appropriate site for my research for the following reasons. It is the second largest city in the UK with a population of 1,141,800 of which approximately a quarter corresponds to the 15 to 29 age range of the young people who are one of the main subjects of my study (ONS[8] estimates, 2019). Birmingham is also one of the most ethnically diverse in the UK with 46.9% of residents identified with a minority ethnic group other than White British compared to an average in England and Wales of 19.5% (ONS estimates, 2013). The life trajectories of young people in this and other major cities can, therefore, be very varied. Therefore, I sought to investigate the following questions:

- What can be learnt from a study of Beatfreeks about alternative forms of youth engagement with policymakers and their potential contribution to shifting the balance of power between policymakers and young people?
- How might the collection and creative communication of data by young people enable the present generation of young people to contest the negative normative and potentially data-influenced policy narratives of their everyday lives?

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[8] ONS – Office of National Statistics in the UK

- In what ways does data-driven policymaking at the local level contribute to young people's economic, social and cultural inequalities?

Influences on the framing of my research design

Michael Crotty wrote in his book *The Foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process* (1998: 216) "As researchers we have to devise for ourselves a research process that serves our purposes best, one that helps us more than any other to answer our research question." In my case, this has proved to be not only stimulating but also challenging as I came to realise that my approach to research had to take into account several different but related elements. The first was the pre-determined framing of my PhD study as a collaborative research project by Birmingham City University and the Birmingham-based creative industries company, Beatfreeks. The second was the broad scope of the objects of study presented in the first iteration of the research topic: Big Data and data visualisation; young people; social and cultural inequalities. The third was my own positionality in relation to my creative industries research partner, the proposed topic and the participants in the study. The first part of this chapter, therefore, is devoted to an exploration of how these have contributed to the shaping of my methodological approach and why I believe that this has enabled me to develop my thinking and refine my research questions. I then move on to discuss my methodology and, finally, I set out the methods which I have used to collect, organise and analyse my data.

My positionality

I consider it to be essential to acknowledge the beliefs and values that have influenced my ontological and epistemological world views. These, together with the variety of experiences gained through a portfolio career may provide a source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks (Maxwell, 2005). Nevertheless, being a white, middle-class woman embarking on research involving young people of diverse ethnicities and family backgrounds at the age of 69, could be a hindrance rather than a help in understanding the lived experiences of young people from diverse backgrounds and different ethnicities and at least forty years younger than myself. Yet, Stuart Hall maintained that: "There's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all" (Hall, 1998:18); hence my decision to place a discussion of the influences on

my positionality at the start of this chapter. Although my values and my persona have been shaped largely by the circumstances of my upbringing and education, my assumptions about the world have been developed over time through my experiences in higher education, my portfolio career and the impact of external events and issues.

My upbringing and education

I was brought up during the 50s and 60s in a market town in Oxfordshire which then numbered about 30,000 almost exclusively white inhabitants. My home was a 'typical' two parents and two children middle-class family of the period living in a 30s semi on the outskirts of the town. We had close contact with both sets of grandparents and two aunts, uncles and cousins who lived in the same town or one of the villages close by. So family ties were always important to me. All the adults were honest, law-abiding citizens who had a strong work ethic and also had a sense of social responsibility which showed in their voluntary activities; they were compassionate 'doers'. We were expected to abide by the law, to conform and to accept rather than challenge 'rules'.

Both my parents valued education. On reflection, I think that this was their own educational ambitions were thwarted by the Great Recession of the 1930s. Entrance exams for the Civil Service were cancelled for my father's cohort of school leavers and a desire by my mother's father to ensure his daughter left school as soon as possible (at 14) to acquire skills which he thought would always be needed – shorthand and typing. I believe that these disappointments fuelled my parents' determination to give their children the opportunities they never had. So, I received a state education which combined sound – sometimes outstanding - academic teaching with a variety of extra-curricular activities up to the age of 18. I was indeed fortunate to have teachers who were willing to share their love not only of their subject but also their personal enthusiasms and skills beyond the classroom. I doubt very much, for example, whether my potential as a musician would ever have been actualised without the opportunities which they opened up for me. I believe that this is key to why I feel so frustrated with the current state provision of education whereby limited resources and increasing pressures on teachers and pupils to meet prescribed targets continue to squeeze the opportunities for 'informal/creative learning' for so many young people. I also feel fortunate that many of my generation (entering higher education from state schools in the late 60s and 70s) were able to go to university thanks to state

funding of our tuition fees and access to means-tested maintenance grants. My university experiences, contacts and degree opened up career paths which would not otherwise have been possible. Over recent years, I have felt increasingly guilty that many young people today are no longer able to benefit from the kind of state education system which enabled me to flourish. This is why the life chances of young people facing social, economic and cultural inequalities matter to me.

My professional life

As an undergraduate and later a teacher of history and government and politics, I studied the transformation of social institutions over time and examined relationships between rulers and subjects, government and governed and between the powerful and the powerless. Then, during my 20+ years working in the public sector, I observed and participated in the actual exercise of power through policymaking and the management of relationships between people, organisations and government agencies at local, regional, national and EU levels. Whilst doing so, I became increasingly concerned about situations in which public institutions and systems appeared to privilege their own interests over those of the subjects of their decision making. I also observed the inequalities experienced by certain individuals or groups of young people at the hands of officialdom whereby they are continually required to show their BRAPas proof of their right to remain in the country and are not able to refuse.

 The worst example of men and women being powerless in the face of unjust and unfair treatment at the hands of the juggernaut state, however, must be the Windrush debacle which finally came to light in 2018. It related to successive UK governments' treatment of people arriving from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1971 to meet labour shortages in the UK following World War II.[9]

I believe in truth and social justice but have grown increasingly concerned about the ability of our democratic structures to treat everyone fairly. Trial by media and the advantaging of

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[9] The people who arrived in the UK were called the Windrush generation after the ship which brought over the first workers in 1948. They and their families had the right to remain in the UK, but after immigration rules changed in 1971, it was almost impossible for them to   prove their legal status because of poor record keeping in the Home Office. This had led to people being wrongfully detained or deported.

the wealthy over the poor in legal proceedings through revisions to Legal Aid are examples of the failure to adhere to the principle of 'all are equal under the law'. All of these concerns are underpinned by my original training as a historian which highlighted the importance of understanding the context – historical, political, economic and social - in which social structures and systems are shaped and changed. As C. Wright Mills (2000:158) observed: "we have come to see that the biographies of men and women, the kinds of individuals they variously become, cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieux of their everyday life are organised".

Reflections on my persona

My upbringing and my life experiences have shaped not only how I see the world but how I deal with it. My social experiences in secondary school were often quite negative. I always wanted to do well and to win praise from teachers but I failed to read the social cues of my peers and so found myself being subjected to what I now understand was emotional bullying. Looking back now, I realise that I never learnt how to 'play the game' and so was 'othered' and thus feel an empathy with young people who may feel that they 'don't belong'.

I found Bourke's insights (2014) into the research process particularly useful in helping me to understand my positionality in relation to my own fieldwork. He points out that "the identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process" (2014:1). Thus, he stresses the importance for the researcher of being aware of their own subjectivity and being prepared to reflect on how this might affect their understanding of the different experiences of research participants. This is relevant to my study since participants range, on the one hand, from young people who are involved with Beatfreeks to local and regional public officials and politicians, on the other. In the case of young people, for example, I am of an older generation than the young people in my research and could also have been perceived by them as coming from a more privileged background and unlikely to understand their problems. By contrast, I may have found it easier to gain acceptance amongst policymakers because of my own career in local government. In both cases, as Bourke (2014:1) suggests "identities come into play via our perceptions, not only of others, but of the ways in which we expect others will perceive us".

My ontological position

Having considered the various questions that I needed to answer in my study, I initially felt that an interpretivist paradigm in which the core belief is that reality is socially constructed would be appropriate for my study. Whilst an approach involving the concept of multiple constructed realities might be relevant to my research, I nevertheless decided that I could not agree with the basic premise that there is no reality outside our own subjective experience and so decided to explore other paradigms. After further reflection, I adopted an approach influenced by the Roy Bhaskar's work on Critical Realism which emerged as a critique of the Positivist approach in the social sciences in the 1970s. This argues that an external world exists independently of human consciousness, but at the same time there is a dimension which includes our socially determined knowledge about reality. Bhaskar's ontological view is that there are three layers of knowing - the 'empirical', the 'actual' and the 'real' (1989). The first is what can be seen or experienced; the second is what is happening but may not be seen but which is having an effect on the empirical and the third (the 'real') is structures which are not possible to see but which are 'real' because their effects can be experienced or observed through their impact on the 'actual'. By applying this Critical Realist approach, I felt better able to explore the influence and interrelationship of the different interests involved in my study.

There has, however been comparatively little work undertaken on how to apply Critical Realism in empirical research (Yeung, 1997) and it was not easy to find examples in the literature of details of methods informed by Critical Realism (Fletcher, 2017). Nevertheless, as my research topic involves a range of subjects and objects of study, I considered that a critical realist perspective would enable be to be flexible about the suite of methods I used in order to obtain the range and depth of data I need (Sayer, 2015). In addition, it also enabled me to gain a better understanding of entities which may lack materiality in themselves such as power, inequality and resistance but are none the less 'real' in terms of the influence they exert in the social world.

Research design

On the surface, my research question deals with a binary relationship between policymakers in the public sector and the subjects of their policymaking: young people facing inequalities. Yet this relationship is far from straightforward, bringing into play as I

suggested above a range of concepts and possible actors on both sides. Clearly, policymakers are not an homogenous group. For example, each may be shaped by individual knowledge and experiences as well as relationships with family, colleagues and a range of other actors. These include the suppliers/sources of the information on which they base their decisions; the organisations for which they work; their resources; and their administrative practices and environments. Similarly, young people categorised as facing inequalities are differentiated by individual life experiences relating, inter alia, to family, education, place, economic circumstances as well as their gender, ethnicity and social class. All of these contribute to a complex world of social structures and relationships and so I have adopted a mixed methodology which draws on both interpretivist and critical paradigms to inform my analysis of the multiple interactions between the different subjects involved in my study. An interpretivist methodology is directed at understanding the world from an individual's perspective (Creswell, 2009) whereas a critical methodology is directed at "interrogating values and assumptions, exposing hegemony and injustice, challenging conventional social structures and engaging in social action" (Crotty, 1998: 157). Hence, I have turned to the work of Paolo Freire to uncover how young people's lives are constituted "through relations and encounters with others, institutions and places around them" (Citispyce Final Report, Chapter 2, 2016:62). This accords with the aims of interactive research which seeks to engage participants in the research process and add to knowledge through shared reflection.

A qualitative approach

My research involved several different actors and concepts from different disciplines but, before even embarking on my research journey, I was committed to a formal collaborative research partnership with a youth engagement organisation Beatfreeks, underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding signed with my university. They had agreed on a topic which would meet their objectives as both a contribution to academic inquiry and to practice. Each organisation had its own preliminary expectations of what success might look like as a result of this joint commitment to invest personnel, time, knowledge, expertise and experience into what was to be my PhD project. By contrast, I came to this project as an outsider, not knowing quite what to expect from a collaborative research project with a creative industries partner, even though I had been involved in several

transnational research projects over the years involving policymakers, academic researchers and occasionally NGOs. Yet, I felt attracted to this particular Research Study as it combined a number of themes in which I had become interested during the course of my portfolio career and through activities beyond my professional life. These themes included: inequality; the life chances of young people; the relationship between government and citizens, including the growing democratic deficit and distancing of policymakers from the objects of their decision making; the value of the arts/ creative practices to society; and the growing influence of the digital. I, therefore, decided to adopt a qualitative approach to the gathering of my data since it would give me opportunities to find out what my research subjects themselves think about their experiences of the world in which they live.

Practical considerations

From my first meetings with Beatfreeks, it was clear that we would need to be able to work closely together to maximise the benefits of the collaboration either for developing best practice or for pursuing rigorous academic enquiry. Fortunately, I had previously witnessed Beatfreeks' ways of working with disadvantaged young people and sensed that we might have similar interests such as social justice and a belief in the transformative power of the arts, particularly for young people. Nevertheless, this project presented an immediate challenge in terms of identifying a research process which would provide a methodological framing able to deal with the complexities and breadth of the objects of study involved and satisfy the aims of both myself and Beatfreeks. One of my first tasks, therefore, was to identify a methodology which would be acceptable to us both, in terms of our values, belief systems and expectations regarding the outcomes of our collaboration.

In my reading on collaborative research projects, I noted that they are often driven by the needs of the practitioners who look to a researcher to help them reflect on and potentially solve a problem they have previously identified. This kind of project appears to treat the researcher more as a consultant whose own objectives may be subordinated to those of the practitioners (Huberman, 1990). Thus, the initial phase of my engagement with members of the company was focused on the preparation of Beatfreeks' first survey of young people's everyday lives (Brum Youth Trends Report, 2018). I familiarised myself with the objectives of the project and later contributed to the analysis of the data obtained on young people's views of their lives in Birmingham. I was made welcome in the Beatfreeks' office

by Anisa, the founder and CEO of the company,   and the time spent working on this survey in the company's work space gave me opportunities to meet and build a rapport with various members of the team.

This initial period allowed me to familiarise myself with the working methods of the members of this youthful and creative team: how they manage their involvement in the different elements of the company's work; how they relate to each other; what motivates them; what influences their thinking. I also had full access to documents and was invited to observe and/or participate in strategic planning discussions. It set a pattern for my future working relationship with members of the company and I sought to find a methodology which might best achieve mutually beneficial learning for both Beatfreeks and myself. Hence, I decided to adopt an interactive approach based within the action research continuum.
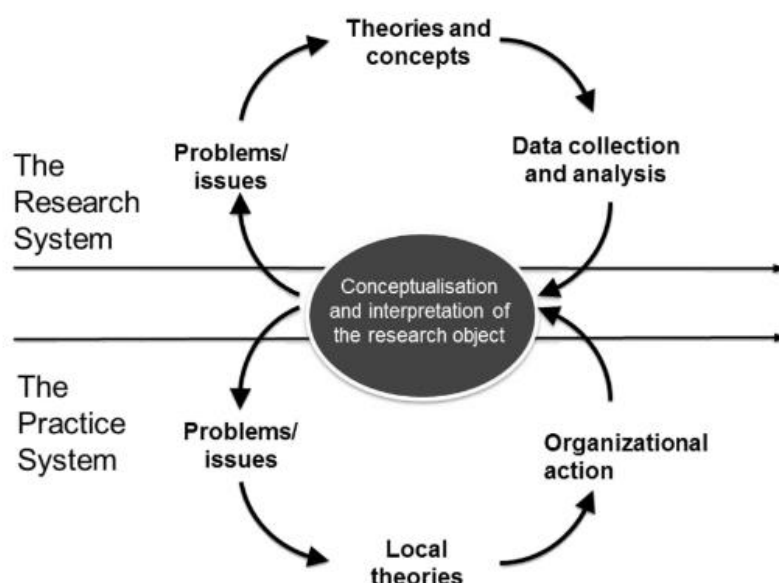
Interactive Research Methodology

The scientific value of collaborative or action research is still a matter of debate within the social science research community, particularly with regard to "objectivity" and validity. Yet it offers an opportunity for both researcher and practitioners to challenge each other's thinking (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) and allows a flexibility in terms of the methods which can be used to obtain data. For these reasons I decided to adopt this methodology which incorporated interactive research within the framework of a qualitative study. The deployment of interactive research has largely been in Scandinavia and is regarded as a development of the action research tradition. It draws on Critical Realism and the idea of knowledge creation through co-operation between researchers and practitioners (Svensson, Ellström and Brulin, 2007; Woolgar, 2000). It is described as one in which equal and mutually advantageous relationships between researchers and stakeholders can be established so that the latter are actively collaborating in the process of research rather than being simply the object of it. It demands, however, "a broad range of knowledge on the part of the researchers and is more work-intensive for both the researchers and the participants – in terms of data collection, dialogue, meetings, feedback – compared to traditional academic research" (Svensson, Ellström and Brulin, 2007:243). It appealed to me particularly because it stresses the joint learning that goes on between the participants and the researchers throughout the entire research process – from the definition of the

problems to the analysis and the dissemination of the results (Nielsen and Svensson, 2006). The process must be both reflexive and critical and must enable participants to go beyond their initial understanding and experiences in order to find new insights and reveal or make 'actual' the hitherto concealed 'real' (two of the layers of Bhaskar's Critical Realism teory).

With its emphasis on conducting research *with* – not on – participants, I considered action research theory to be a 'good fit' with the values and practices of Beatfreeks and it soon became clear that we had a basis for "joint knowledge acquisition" (Svensson et al., 2007). For example, we were all interested in exploring different ways in which data might be communicated in order to make a greater impact upon the target audiences such as, for example, policymakers. Moreover, in this form of research, it is crucial that the researcher and participants should be able to co-operate with one another. This is where even a previous limited encounter between myself and Anisa made an interactive approach more feasible.

Originally used mainly in educational settings, the Interactive research method has increasingly been used to address issues within other types of organisation. They all require the 'buy-in' of both practitioners and researchers since they all have a direct investment in a 'successful' outcome to the research and will be actively contributing to the research process itself. The importance of shared goals and commitment to investing time and energy into a research project cannot be overestimated. I believe, however, that my research topic was one which was regarded not only by Anisa but also by members of her team as valuable to gaining more insights into the lived experiences of the young people with whom they work and the future direction of the company. Their willingness to participate and co-create made it possible to maintain a two way flow between research and practice as well as an iterative and reflexive process in that the knowledge learned and shared has informed the activities and thinking of both researcher and practitioners. This process is shown in the diagram below which Svensson and his colleagues devised and have included in a number of their research publications.

Interactive research as a two-way flow of problems and knowledge (Svensson et al., 2015:352)

Methods

Data Collection

The site of my investigation – Birmingham, UK

Apart from the practical considerations of Birmingham being the location of both my university and my collaborative partner, Beatfreeks, there are other reasons for making the city the site for my fieldwork. It is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK and possibly in the EU and young people between the ages of 15 and 29 (my target cohort) account for almost a quarter of its population (ONS Population estimates, 2019). Like other post-industrial cities, it continues to have high levels of deprivation and, according to the most recent Index of Multiple Deprivation published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2020, is ranked as the 7th most deprived local authority in England. In 2018, Birmingham's GDP[10] per head was well below the national

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[10] GDP Gross Domestic Product

average but at the same time the city had the largest city economy outside London when measured by GDP (Birmingham City Council, Update Q4, 2019).

Thus, the city offers opportunities for exploring the activities of youth organisations aimed at building the resilience and competences of young people from different ethnicities, neighbourhoods and family circumstances. Like other major cities in the UK, Birmingham faces many competing demands on its resources and interest has been growing amongst policymakers in the potential of data and digital technologies to improve their decision making. I, therefore, consider that my study may be relevant to not only to policymaking in Birmingham but in urban areas elsewhere.

Primary Data

Interviews

My collaborative research project was originally framed by Anisa, the founder of Beatfreeks in discussion with researchers at Birmingham City University. The initial aim was to undertake a Case Study of the company and use it as the starting point for gathering information on young people, their inequalities and their relationship with digital data. The company's work space provided a key environment in which to begin collecting young people's data for my research. Those whom I met then, and subsequently, came from a range of ethnicities, had different interests and skills and had varied family and educational backgrounds.

As I proceeded to refine my research topic, I narrowed down my field of enquiry to young people in cities like Birmingham and the possible contribution to their inequalities of the use of digital data and digital technologies by local government policymakers. These include both officers and politicians who bring their individual as well as collective values, skills and experiences to their various areas of responsibility. I was fortunate enough to still have some contacts within Birmingham City Council whom I could approach for information and, although it took some time to fix the times and dates, I managed to interview most of them. It proved easier to set up appointments with members of Beatfreeks since the collaborative nature of our relationship involved my visiting their work space for observation purposes or meetings. This meant that I quickly became a familiar face to them in their work space and conversations by the kettle and tea and coffee mugs helped establish trust between us – not to mention communal lunch breaks.

As Beatfreeks originally described itself as a creative industries company and used creativity to enable young people to catch the attention of influencers in the city, I sought to identify possible interviewees from amongst cultural commentators and practitioners who were familiar with the company as well as wider societal and cultural issues both in the city-region and further afield. Again, access was facilitated by my track record of personal engagement with the cultural life in Birmingham and the wider region. I also conducted interviews with a senior member of 'Birmingham Race Action Partnership (St)**'**, a well-established charity in the city which aims in its own words "to transform the way we think and do equality" (www.brap.org.uk) and a creative youth engagement organisation located outside the West Midlands. I later found several of these interviews useful as a validity check on my findings.

I thus organised my collection of primary data around four different subject groups:

1) Anisa and core team members of Beatfreeks

2) Officers and politicians within Birmingham City Council (BCC) and the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

3) Young people between the ages of 15 and 29 linked with Beatfreeks

4) Cultural and youth work practitioners

My methods for the data collection have been based upon the principle of an interaction between participants and researchers which calls for the researcher to confront his/her own preconceptions and reflect on this process. In most cases, I used semi-structured or conversational interviews which were recorded and later transcribed either directly by myself or by using an online transcription service.

The aim of these interview approaches has been to provide opportunities for interviewees to share other issues, ideas, reflections beyond those elicited through specific questions. In this format, however, I have had to be aware of what kind of identity I was portraying and the potential effects it may have on the interviewee and their responses (Bourke, 2014). For example, by demonstrating my familiarity with the workings of a particular organisation, I may be encouraging confidences that are relevant to my inquiry but which may be unethical to use.   I have supplemented individual interviews with material gained from

discussions which took place in focus groups convened by Beatfreeks where I shared the facilitation with members of the company.

Focus Groups

I acted as an observer, participant or co- facilitator in group discussions convened by Beatfreeks in external venues as well as the company's own office space. The young people gathered together by a community organisation, however, proved to be unsatisfactory because the participants were mainly atypical of the cohorts which we were seeking to reach. Not surprisingly, the ones which were directly organised by Beatfreeks were much more informative as the recruitment process and the group sessions were much more carefully managed by members of Beatfreeks. Unfortunately, Covid-19 put an end to face to face discussions of any kind but I was able to link up with members of Beatfreeks online for either a reflexive conversation about my findings or a form of focus group in which I adopted a purposeful interviewing approach to maximise the value of the short time slots available.

Participant observation

Marshall and Rossman define 'observation' as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artefacts in the social setting chosen for study" (1994: 79). From the beginning of my involvement with Beatfreeks, however, my research was more closely aligned to ethnographic 'participant observation' which requires the researcher to work towards an "immersion in a specific culture, preferably for a longer period of time, in order to acquire an 'insider' understanding either as a (marginal) member or as a visitor" (Ciesielska; Boström and Öhlander, 2018: 34). After officially becoming Beatfreeks' research partner in October 2017, my visits to their office space did not conform to a set pattern in the first months of our collaboration as members of Beatfreeks got used to my presence and I became accepted as part of their community. Fine suggests that ethnography is most effective when one observes the group being studied in "a setting in which one can explore the organised routines of behavior" (Fine, 2003:41). Yet, I found that an ethnographic approach to collecting observation data also worked for me in situations where patterns of behaviour were seldom 'routine'.

I gradually spent more time with Beatfreeks as I got more involved with DOINK[11], the company's data collection and visualisation team, and its main data project, Brum Youth Trends (BYT)[12] Survey 2018.   This had been specified in the original, and later revised, Memorandum of Understanding between the company and Birmingham City University (BCU) as a key focus for their research partnership. Thus, I was expected to play an active part in the analysis of the data from this survey of young people's perceptions of what it was like to live, study and/or work in Birmingham in 2018. During the summer of that year, I acted as a 'critical friend' in the identification of the Survey's key findings and profited from the opportunity to observe the interactions between team members who were closely involved in the project'. I also listened to and shared in their reflections on what should be included in the final version of the report, Brum Youth Trends, 2018. The majority of my observations were carried out in two contrasting work spaces and were either a visit solely for the purpose of observation of activities and interactions of team members and other occasional visitors or one combined with another purpose such as conducting an interview. Thus, I could observe the team members' ways of working including their personal interactions as well as their engagement with 'visitors'. My presence in the office also gave me opportunities to tease out the dynamics at work in the relationships between Anisa and different personalities within the team.

In addition to time spent in the Beatfreeks work space, I observed a range of events organised by the company in locations in other parts of the city. These included the Brum Youth Trends Summits of October 2018 and 2019 in Birmingham Town Hall, Poetry Jams and other performance events in central Birmingham. I took field notes by hand of these for later reference and, in the case of the two Summits, I made audio recordings of parts (with permission) for later transcription. I also observed three data installation projects in Birmingham: one in the Atrium of Millennium Point; another on a street in the main shopping area of Northfield (a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city); and the third in The Council House, Victoria Square in the heart of Birmingham.

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[11] DOINK - Do and Think Tank – Beatfreeks' initial data gathering and visualisation service

[12] BYT is an acronym used by Beatfreeks when referring to the Brum Youth Trends Surveys and Summits

Breaking my leg twice during the course of my research in 2018, however, meant that my direct observations of Beatfreeks Collective's activities in the spring of 2019 were somewhat restricted by my lack of mobility! Nevertheless, I was able to undertake different forms of observation through our interactions online and occasional visits to events. By the summer, I was again able to be a more present observer and participated in the work to complete and then analyse the data from the BYT Survey 2019 as well as in other activities of DOINK such as the physical data installations in public spaces. Unfortunately, observations of activities in the field after March 2020 were not possible because of Covid-19 restrictions.

I recorded the majority of my observations in the form of written field notes taken either during or after the activity at which I was present or in which I was more directly involved and I made audio recordings for later transcription. These then acted as prompts for reflection on the potential significance to my research of what I had observed and I also used them to identify possible categories and themes to aid my coding and the analysis of my findings.

Although I am not a skilled photographer, I collected visual images to enrich my audio and written data. These included a limited number of photographs taken by myself at a selection of Beatfreeks' activities because I wanted to see how Beatfreeks approached engagement with young people in different situations. I have analysed these in conjunction with images taken by members of the company themselves and published on their website or taken by participants in activities who have placed them on Twitter or other social media platforms. I have obtained the consent of Anisa to use material from Beatfreeks in any presentation or publication relating to this project and as well as the consent of specific individuals whose images or comments are freely available online.

Reflections on collecting my primary data

I consider that I have been fortunate in the collection of my primary data since, although there may have been delays in fixing dates for interviews, I encountered no resistance to my requests. This was particularly evident with regard to Birmingham City Council where I worked for more than 20 years. Although many of my contemporaries have moved on, a small number of councillors as well as officers who knew me were still in post and were happy not only to meet me themselves but also to introduce me to potentially useful

interview contacts whom I did not know. I also secured interviews with people in the cultural sector with comparative ease because of my long term involvement in the arts in the city.

In the cases mentioned above, I benefited from the willingness of potential interviewees to accept me as 'someone like them': educated, with knowledge of the institutional context and the professional area in which they work. Hence, I was able to establish a rapport with them fairly quickly but I had to take care not to identify too closely with them since, as David Walsh points out "a degree of marginality in the situation is needed to do research" (1999:226). My other concern was that my data might be skewed and/or only partial because of the access to particular officials I have been afforded through my professional networks. Nonetheless, these contacts have enabled me to interview senior officers and members of the City Council with direct responsibilities for policymaking and implementation.

Secondary Data

Beatfreeks Data

Beatfreeks' data and the ways in which they engage with both young people and those 'in authority' such as City Council officials are central to my investigation. Anisa has positioned the company as an organisation which has a social justice agenda and seeks to give young people a 'voice' in order to enable them 'to speak truth to power'. Thus, I needed to understand the strategies that Beatfreeks deploy to reach out not only to young people but also to those who are in positions of power. These included their use of language and imagery in events, in print and online as well as their experiences of and experimentation with alternative ways of collecting and communicating data. I also observed the evolution of their website over time including the style of presentation of information and images and again the use of language.

Beatfreeks' surveys are a grey area in terms of which constitute primary or secondary material. I consider the Brum Youth Trends Survey of 2018 to be a primary source as I shared responsibility for the initial coding and analysis of the data. I felt, however, that I could not regard the Survey of 2019 as one of my primary sources because I was unable to

take an active part in devising the questions or the first stages of data analysis. I was, however, consulted on specific aspects of data interpretation and validity.

Institutional Data

I used Birmingham City Council's website to access information relevant to my investigation of the relationship between young people facing inequalities and public sector data-informed policymaking. I identified local government documents in the public domain both in print and online. These included:

- Birmingham City Council's official website pages which included links to departmental policy documents (www.birmingham.gov.uk)
- Budget reports and other financial documents (www.birmingham.gov.uk)
- Strategic planning documents including the latest iterations of the City Council's Big City Plan (www.birmingham.gov.uk) West Midlands Combined Authority documents online, including those referring to the   Arts Council of England (ACE) website. To these, I added online articles relevant to my research such as those published in the press and by policy think tanks and NGOs.

Summary of data collected

My fieldwork took place between November 2017 and June 2020 but I also re-contacted certain interview subjects during the following three months to clarify specific points or to share my reflections on my findings.

Interviews

- 33 Individual interviews conducted:
    - 6 policy officers
    - 3 politicians
    - 17 young people involved with Beatfreeks

Focus Groups

- 2 Focus groups in physical spaces:
    - 1 in Beatfreeks Collective office space (12 young people invited by the company)
    - 1 in a community venue (between 18 and 23 participants gathered together by a community worker) NB: The number varied as several individuals left the session and others joined late.
- 3 Semi-structured online groups conducted under Covid-19 restrictions with established members of Beatfreeks and those who had recently joined the team.

Observations

- 28 Observation sessions in the field comprising:
    - 19 in Beatfreeks' office spaces
    - 2 Beatfreeks' activities outside the office
    - 4 Public events organised by Beatfreeks
    - 3 Data installations: 2 in public spaces; 1 in the Council House, Birmingham

Methods for Data Analysis

My research has been situated within a collaborative study in which Anisa, as the instigator of the project, had already begun to reflect on the possible aims and objectives she would like to achieve. I, on the other hand, had no preconceived expectations of the outcomes of our partnership, preferring to see what information might emerge from my initial observations and conversations. Yet, from our initial discussions, a number of potential topics in which we both had an interest emerged from our 'hybrid' approach. These then provided a starting point for collecting and coding this early data according to themes in which we both expressed an interest and reflecting on their implications for our study. But we both agreed on the need to be flexible and not allow ourselves to be constrained by existing narratives of young people's lives.

Hence, I situated my data gathering within an ethnographic frame in order to be open to new themes or patterns which might emerge from the data as my research progressed. Some of my interviews were conversational ranging beyond what I expected to be discussing and so I decided to adopt a thematic approach to my coding (Guest, Macqueen and Namey, 2014) and began by framing the analysis of my data according to broad themes and concepts that were drawn from my research questions (Saldana, 2013;). I then made use of Microsoft Word for its highlighting, track changes and comment functions as I added to my original list of issues to consider. This helped me to organise my expanding list into subcategories during a second phase of coding (). These allowed me to incorporate primary data derived from my interviews and conversations with the subjects in my study as well as secondary data from surveys and information gleaned from Beatfreeks members and policymakers.

Below are two tables which show first (Table 1) the participants whom I identified as relevant to my study early on in my partnership with Beatfreeks together with topics which

we might pursue. This is followed by Table 2 which sets out evolving themes that emerged from further reviews of the data I had gathered and which I wished to pursue in greater depth.

Table 1: Initial actors and themes identified

Beatfreeks – motivation, values & ways of working
Young people in my study
Policymakers and Policymaking in cities
Social and cultural actors
Influence of data and digital technologies in society
Young people's inequalities and data
Political, social & cultural contexts to my study
Interactions between Beatfreeks, youth & policymakers

Table 2: Emerging themes from my primary and secondary data

The reshaping of youth engagement practices in today's society
The influence of policymakers' values and decisions from 1980's onwards on the lived experiences of young people today
The characteristics of the current generation of young people
Young people who may be missing from or misrepresented in policymaking
Policymakers' use of data and its effects on young people's inequalities – assumptions vs reality
The potential of alternative forms of data to disrupt disadvantaging policy narratives of young people's lives.
The role of creativity, voice and emotion in interactions between young people and policymakers
The power dynamics at work between Beatfreeks, young people and policymakers
The potential for new models of democratic participation by young people

Theoretical Framing of my Data Analysis

As can be seen from the various themes set out in the table above, my research sits at the intersection of several disciplines and, therefore, I have taken a Cultural Studies interdisciplinary approach to the framing of my study. This has enabled me to draw on theories and concepts from several different fields to interpret the findings from my research. They have already been discussed in the literature review which preceded this chapter but I refer to them here because they have all informed the analysis of my data.

Youth Transitions and Youth Inequalities

My empirical evidence indicates that young people's life trajectories can differ widely but that most are likely to have experienced either individual or structural inequalities or both. I have, therefore, drawn on the work of scholars in Education and Youth and Youth Transitions Studies and Therborn's theory of inequality to help me understand what it is like to be young and growing up in cities today. Concerning structural inequalities, I suggest they have their roots in the political values and policies of previous governments. Hence, I have used literature from Political and Urban Studies to contextualise their influence on the current generation of young people including Bob Jessop's work (2003) on Thatcherite neoliberalism).

Digital data's influence in policymaking

 A key contrast between policymaking pre-21st century and today is the extent to which digital data practices have become part of citizens' daily lives and are also present in public sector policymaking. At the beginning of the current decade, scholars such as Kitchin (2014) and boyd and Crawford (2012) published research on digital data; its forms and deployment in government policymaking and influence in civil society. Yet, Poel, Meyer and Schroeder (2018) who examined the role of data in government have expressed doubts about the extent of the influence of digital data and data technologies at the local level. Since my findings suggest that other factors apart from digital data may play a more significant role in shaping policy,   I have drawn on this more recent study to understand why this might be the case.

The power dynamics present in my findings

Findings from my research indicated that several different forms of power dynamics are present in the interactions between the key participants in my study. They concern the relationships of young people not only with politicians and officers in local government but also within youth engagement organisations such as Beatfreeks in which young people work or volunteer. These findings also suggest that policymakers' use of data may contribute to negative narratives about the lives of young people who then may seek to challenge the consequences of such views on their lives or feel powerless to resist. I have, therefore, turned to literature on power and resistance to analyse the various power dynamics which I have identified in these relationships.

Policymakers, data and young people

Policymakers, data and young people are three of the key subjects in my research and the relationships between them can be examined from several perspectives. These include Critical Data, Critical Political and Youth Studies but I also draw on Policy Studies to explore the use of data in the policymaking   process and how it may affect the outcomes for young people and their inequalities.

Young people's responses to the power of policymakers

In Chapter 6 (Voice, Visibility and Young People), I focus on the interactions between young people and decision makers in both local government and business which I had observed during Beatfreeks' public presentations of their findings from analogue or - as they refer to it – humanised data collected and interpreted by themselves. I have noted how the ways in which young people spoke about their concerns and aspirations together with the reactions of young people who heard them appeared to shift the power dynamics in the auditorium. I, therefore, have drawn on literature on voice and listening (Couldry, 2010; Bassel, 2017) as well as emotion (Fox, 2015) to interrogate my findings from these events which Beatfreeks claimed enabled young people to 'speak truth to power'.

Power and resistance

The findings from my time embedded with Beatfreeks (Chapter 4) prompted me to reflect on the nature of the relationship between Anisa and her team members and also the relations between the team members themselves. I have used the emancipatory pedagogy

of Paolo Freire to analyse the power dynamics present in these relationships since his ideas have their origins in educational theory and praxis and has generally been perceived to focus on developing the critical consciousness of students. It has, however, also been used to understand the struggles of the 'under-represented' and 'disadvantaged' to resist the power of those in authority. I suggest, therefore, that by taking a Freirian perspective, it may be possible to shed new light on the interactions not only between Anisa and the young people involved with Beatfreeks but between young people and policymakers.

Chapter 7, is devoted to a wider reflection on the different contexts and ways in which power might be either exerted over others or resisted. Evidence from literature in Critical Political and Communication Studies reveals not only young people's frustration at their lack of Voice within UK's formal democratic processes of politics and policymaking but their turn to alternative ways of making their concerns known. I have, therefore, used this literature together with studies on youth participation in Social Movements and Activism to analyse these activities and their potential to disrupt policymakers' power over their everyday lives.

Throughout my research, I have been conscious of the possible sensitivity surrounding my data collection because of my potential familiarity with some of the data sources and the risk that my references to them might disclose their provenance. This awareness stems from my experiences of working on confidential material at different stages in my professional life. Hence, in the section which follows, I discuss the ethical issues concerning my responsibilities as a researcher and the measures I have taken to comply with Birmingham City University's ethical guidelines and those of my collaborative partner company. Beatfreeks.

Ethical considerations

I am aware that Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) research poses specific ethical issues. These are derived primarily from the research methods used such as qualitative and observational studies which tend to be dynamic and flexible depending on the way in which participants behave. Their priorities include data protection and privacy, the process of obtaining informed consent, and the commitment to 'do no harm'. These apply both to

research conducted with human subjects face to face using physical human data and that conducted online.

Because my research involved human participants and data derived from my observations, interviews and other interactions with them such as responses to surveys, I needed to ensure that appropriate ethical procedures were in place in order to protect their privacy and identity. All interview subjects received information on my research before any activity took place and were given a Consent Form to sign prior to any interview taking place. This allowed time for any queries to be raised either in writing or verbally. All Interview subjects were given assurances that:

- They are under no pressure to take part and there is no penalty for not doing so;
- They are free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice;
- Their personal data as provided by themselves will be kept securely and will be subject to appropriate procedures for confidentiality such as anonymization.

This applied to the young team members and others closely involved with Beatfreeks as well as to the young people who provided data through their participation in focus groups and their completion of surveys. My previous experiences of communicating sensitive information also meant that I was conscious of the importance of ensuring that data obtained from interviews with policymakers (mainly councillors and officers in local government, in the case of my research) was treated as privileged and not obviously attributable to a specific person. For example, even though I had set out the process for safeguarding an individual's identity, one person was not prepared to go ahead with an interview in case he/she revealed data that was confidential and were later identified. Fortunately, the information I was hoping to acquire was not material to my findings and the main ethical challenge that I actually faced was managing the implications of online interviews and surveys and access to digital data, especially participants' use of social media.

Data protection and privacy online are increasingly difficult to guarantee but I appreciate that researchers have a duty of care to participants and must endeavour to limit the possibility of breaches of confidentiality and anonymity caused, for example, by a failure to

store or use data safely. Hence, I have protected my research data through the use of password protected and encrypted cloud storage which is separate from all other personal material and I have coded my fieldwork data in such a way as to avoid identification of participants. This latter involved using my own double coding system for anonymising data sources from my fieldwork which assigned an alphabetical identity to each data source and these were then matched with a second reference code which included the gender, a category and a number.

In the case of any individual who could potentially be identified by any text or other reference to his/her activity, I sought their specific consent to be acknowledged. This has only been necessary in the cases of the founder and CEO of Beatfreeks, and a colleague who until recently had been involved with the company since the beginning. In both cases, I have referred to them throughout by their first names. I used the paper Consent Form format recommended by my university and created an electronic version for participants where it was not possible to meet them face to face, for example during Covid-19 restrictions, or where they preferred to provide an electronic signature of consent. I also obtained recorded oral consent in certain cases when young people were reluctant to sign the form itself. These documents and recordings have been kept securely and separately from the codification lists which guarantees confidentiality and anonymity, both in the data-gathering and data-analysis processes.

CHAPTER 4: BEATFREEKS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce my collaborative partner in more detail as it is the organisation at the centre of this study. I explore its structure and ways of working and relate them to key themes which I have identified in my research. Saito and Sullivan (2011) in their study 'The Many Faces, Features and Outcomes of Youth Engagement' review the many forms which youth engagement work can take. They examine the different approaches taken by youth practitioners to their work and the effects these may have on the young people with whom they work. Their study appears to concentrate more on the outcomes for young people of the different approaches taken by youth practitioners with which youth organisations engage rather than on the personnel, aims, structures and activities of the organisations themselves. However, by taking an ethnographically-informed approach to my research with my collaborative partner, Beatfreeks, I have been able to examine the structure, values and ways of working of a youth engagement organisation through the lenses of the founder and young people associated with this particular youth engagement company. I contend that, by paying such close attention to my research subjects, it has been possible to gain deeper insights into the everyday experiences of young people living in an ethnically, socially and economically diverse city in post-austerity Britain.

My study has taken place over an extended period of time (approximately three and a half years) and has involved a detailed examination of the relationships and actions of a specific set of participants in a particular location over a particular period of time. I have had access to the full range of the company's interactions with young people in the city and been able to observe and talk to any member of the Beatfreeks team in their workspace (subject to their prior consent). I have, therefore, interviewed young men and women aged between 15 and 30 involved with the company from a variety of ethnic, cultural, social and educational backgrounds, each of whom has different skills and competences. In addition, I have observed their interactions with each other and with local influencers and decision makers predominantly from the public sector.

In this chapter, therefore, I first describe the context in which Beatfreeks was founded and the early stages of its development. I then discuss my findings on the interactions between

the founder (Anisa) and members of her team and analyse the relationships between these predominantly young people and the ways in which they work. Finally, I consider the ways in which Beatfreeks' approach to developing the skills and competences of young people may add to knowledge on how to develop more effective youth engagement work and enable young people to have a voice in the making of policies which shape their lives.

Beatfreeks: background

Beatfreeks was founded at a time when young people were experiencing high levels of unemployment because of the continuing adverse effects of 'austerity' following the global financial crisis of 2007/8. Some were struggling to compete in the labour market with adults who had both qualifications and experience but others were remaining in education for longer and/or choosing unregulated, precarious jobs to make ends meet. This second option was one which some young people interested in the arts chose to pursue as it offered a chance for them to determine their own life chances through the use of their creative practices.

The founder herself (Anisa) had become involved in the arts during her school years in Birmingham and was running her own youth dance project when she was only fifteen. Then in her final year of a Business and Management degree course at Aston University, she was awarded the *Birmingham Young Professional of the Year (BYPY) 2012 'Aspiring Talent' Award***.**   In her acceptance speech, she emphasised her commitment to represent young female entrepreneurs from the region:

> **"**I try to be a positive role model and aim to raise the aspirations of young people. I have proved that enterprise is a viable option for people of any age."

> (https://www2.aston.ac.uk/news/releases/2012/may/aspiring-talent-award-won-by-aston-university-student)

She then went on to launch her company, Beatfreeks in 2013, after testing the water with a series of self –promoted free Poetry Jams in coffee shops in the centre of Birmingham earlier in that year.   It comprised herself and an aspiring young spoken word artist, Amerah Saleh. They started work by securing commissions to deliver workshops, music and drama projects and other youth engagement activities and quickly attracted young people with

their own creative aspirations who were keen to have a platform to share their work and to be with like-minded others.

During our conversations, Anisa shared thoughts about her own positionality, the future direction of Beatfreeks and the kind of influence she seeks for herself and the company over the attitudes of policymakers towards young people. We discussed the ways in which her personal attributes and values have shaped the culture of the company and the young people who become involved with Beatfreeks. These have all helped me frame my analysis of my empirical evidence. Therefore, I begin by examining the company structure and its aims.

Beatfreeks: the organisation

Structure and aims

Within two years of its formation in 2013, Beatfreeks had moved from being a relatively informal and loose association of young creatives to a more structured organisation. It comprised a core of three full-time paid staff, three part-time apprentices and a group of fifteen sessional freelancers paid on a project by project basis (Citispyce Final Report, 2016). It had a Chief Executive (its founder, Anisa) and four Directors (over the age of 24) to advise and guide this relatively young company. It also had a Youth Steering Committee composed of ten young people aged between 17 and 24 drawn from the pool of young people already connected to the company. Its task was to represent the views of young people and to keep the founder and company directors informed of young people's concerns and to suggest new projects. The company's work was divided between two operating arms: Beatfreeks Arts (not-for-profit company) and Beatfreeks Consulting Ltd (private limited company). The latter included a data gathering, analysis and visualisation service then called DOINK (Do and Thinktank) which I understand was originally aimed at income generation from the private sector.

By the time I began my research with Beatfreeks in October 2017, however, the company had leaders of at least four key strands of its work in addition to Anisa as well as project workers, interns and occasional freelancers. Since then, I have seen the number of team members more than double as Beatfreeks has taken on more and bigger projects from both the private and public sectors. For me, a noticeable change in the structure of the

organisation has been the creation of dedicated administrative roles in addition to creatives and youth and community engagement workers. For example, at the time of writing, Beatfreeks had recruited a Finance Officer and an Office Manager, reflecting its founder's business training and her acknowledgement of the need to ensure a sound administrative structure to support the company's expansion.

During this period, Beatfreeks has also continued to add to its already impressive business, public sector and cultural networks. The graphic below is taken from its website in 2017 and, as can be seen, the company already had an extensive number of contacts. Most of these reflect the early emphasis on Arts and Culture and registered charities compared to a relatively small number of organisations involved in youth engagement and social justice activities.

Since then, however, Beatfreeks has expanded its range of activities and, as can be seen from the evolution of the company's online presence since 2013, its founder has sought to adapt the company's mission statements in line with her perceptions of where the next opportunities for growth might be. In 2016, for example, the website showed a shift towards enabling young people to influence decision makers in both the private and public sectors:

> "Beatfreeks is a growing community of young creatives. We connect them to businesses, governments and funders to get them to influence how the world works."

There is still a reference to young creatives but there is already more of an emphasis on giving young people a Voice and influence with policymakers.

The same year, the company was identified by researchers investigating how young people were dealing with the consequences of austerity in the EU as an innovative social enterprise

using creative practices to combat youth inequalities (Citispyce Final Report, 2016). Reading the report from this research, it appears that the innovation was not so much in the creative practices deployed but in the way in which the company approached its engagement with young people. This was based on the principle of working **'with'** young people rather than treating them as objects to whom or for whom things were done. One of my first interview subjects who works in the cultural field seemed to think so, as he observed:

> "Beatfreeks doesn't have an art form practice but actualises young people's potential". (M/cp2)

When I began my research in late 2017, Anisa had already been engaged for more than two years in using creative initiatives to call the attention of policymakers to young people's concerns and challenge policy narratives about young people's disengagement with politics. Beatfreeks had also, however, been seeking to raise young people's own awareness of political issues that might affect their lives such as the event organised in 2015 prior to the General Election of that year. It included the use of music and spoken word to encourage debate and as a blog in the HuffPost[13] had noted in 2015: "Beatfreeks happens to be one of these initiatives which are steadily creating disruptive vehicles for change through a range of alternative medium (*sic*)".

My study suggests that Anisa has always kept the trajectory of her company under review and she embarked on a major restructuring of the organisation in 2019/20 to enable the company to capitalise on emerging opportunities.

She blogged about the decision on Beatfreeks' website in Feb 2020 writing:

> "A clear point that came out in every conversation was that our trading names Free Radical, Young Giant and DOINK confused people. ....That's why we're streamlining our brands. From now on, we are using the names Beatfreeks Arts and Beatfreeks Consulting and to be honest if you just call us Beatfreeks, well that's fine too." (Beatfreeks.com)

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[13] Formerly known as The Huffington Post, HuffPost is a news website but also a political blog. Founded in 2005 this American company now has staff and guest writers not only in the USA but in other parts of the world including the UK. Its main readership is within the 25 to 45 age group.

I suggest that this was, in part, a response to Beatfreeks' growing reputation as a source of up-to-date information about young people; their life styles and their attitudes. I suggest, however, that might be attributed to Anisa's own desire to shift the focus away from 'an arts-led youth engagement company' to one which moves 'social justice and empowering young people' to the forefront.

As she stated:

> "We're interested in getting young people their share of power in order to work with business, government and funders to build the 'Institutions of the Future'."

Positioning Beatfreeks in 2020/21

Following on from conducting that interview (Nov, 2017) early on in my collaborative partnership Anisa and Beatfreeks, however, I have since had the opportunity to observe and later reflect on the ways in which the company structure and activities have developed over more than three years. I have noted, for example, that, whilst Beatfreeks continues to use creativity to enable young people to develop their competences, it has also used it to grab the attention of member of the public through 'flash mobs' or other forms of artivism. And it has also built a reputation as a 'go-to' source of reliable information about young people's current interests and concerns which has continued to spread within the business community.

Anisa herself acknowledges that it is hard to pin Beatfreeks down. When I interviewed her in March 2020, she reflected:

> " I think that probably – and I don't know how to ….necessarily frame this, it's ….it's that refusal to be defined, and almost as a state, an act, of rebellion as in Yeah, that kind of piece, you know, people can't quite put their finger on.   Are you an agency? Are you a development organisation? Are you an arts company?"

It seems from her point of view that being hard to define is of itself a means of defining her company. She talked about how she and the team joked about her having had 10,000 job titles or Beatfreeks having done 10,000 things and then said: "But it's meant that we've constantly adapted and changed." What do these findings tell us not only about Beatfreeks' aims, ambitions and actions but about what kind of organisation it is? For

example, should it be regarded as an entrepreneurial enterprise or as a social activist organisation seeking to challenge policies which have contributed to youth inequalities?

My findings suggest that, whilst Beatfreeks has ambitions to disrupt policymakers' often data-driven decisions affecting young people, the company is engaged in what is regarded in Management and Business Studies as unconventional entrepreneurship. This is described by Guercini and Cova (2018) as that in which the would-be entrepreneur is driven by a particular passion to set up his or her own business. In the case of Beatfreeks, a cultural commentator and practitioner in Birmingham to whom I spoke in 2018 described its founder's particular passion and her entrepreneurial strengths:

> "Anisa is passionate about creativity for social good but also a real business
> entrepreneur: focused - a strategic thinker and networker". (M/cp3)

I contrast this with the conventional route to entrepreneurship where recognition of a new business opportunity is regarded as the main incentive for becoming an entrepreneur.

Based on my empirical evidence, I consider that this combination of passion for social justice for young people with her business skills is essential to ensuring the company's continued viability as a business and its ability to influence policymaking. At the same time, I contend that other youth organisations who depend upon public or charitable funding to continue may benefit from Beatfreeks' approach to a more sustainable model of political and social engagement. This leads me on to assessing the leadership skills which are needed to build and motivate a team at the same time as developing the competences of individual members so that they can speak for themselves as well as for other young people.

Leadership style and skills

It is not only business acumen and passion for a cause that is needed to influence policymakers. Much depends on leadership within an organisations and research into leadership skills suggests that a company leader's personality and values may be instrumental in the shaping of its goals and working practices. Studies on entrepreneurship in particular show that this is more likely to be the case where the head of a company is also its founder (Gravells, 2012; Rubin et al., 2005). Amongst the personal qualities required for effective leadership, the literature highlights: having a clear vision; self-confidence and self-

belief; being proactive and alert to new opportunities, as well as having high performance expectations, and showing supportive leadership behaviour (Engelen et al., 2015); and emotional intelligence (Hur, van den Berg, & Wilderom 2011). From my observations of Anisa in different working environments and conversations with her about her motivation and aspirations, I have identified personal traits and values broadly in line with those defined in this literature. I suggest that there are also other attributes which may distinguish her leadership style from others and play a part in shaping relationships with young people both inside Beatfreeks and in the wider community.   During the course of my observations of Anisa and members of the team in several different spaces, I have noted a willingness to support and trust colleagues to run with their own ideas; to encourage team work and not to take everything too seriously.

During my research, several of my interview subjects who are familiar with Beatfreeks and its work commented unprompted on the importance of the influence of Anisa's personality on the company's ethos, ways of working and advocacy style. One remarked on her entrepreneurship but set it in the contexts of the continuing influence of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberalism and the changing attitudes towards the role of young women of colour in society:

> "there's something about the power of a woman of colour from Birmingham with a degree but who also embodies Thatcher's spirit of enterprise (get out there; build it; try to build an alternative business model) but at the same time when ACE[14] comes back let's have a grant as well." (M/cp2)

 I, therefore, reflect on the style of leadership in Beatfreeks and whether it is unique because of the personalities involved or transferable to other youth engagement organisations.

Self -confidence, self-belief and self-reflection

These three traits relate to the personal qualities which have been cited as important for effective leadership (Gravells, 2012).   Anisa told me of how she became frustrated in her teens with the dance company she attended and so decided to start her own. Later she

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[14] Arts Council England which administers public funding for the Arts

reflected on how setting up her dance company had given her the confidence and belief in herself so that she was willing to pursue a career as a social entrepreneur. She explained:

> ."...... my story of having been involved in social enterprise at fifteen is hugely relevant, because I developed that thirst, that desire and those skills and so Beatfreeks was like, what's the next real professional step into winning a social purpose for business?"

Proactivity

Like other entrepreneurial enterprises as mentioned above, Beatfreeks is alert to new opportunities, willing to adapt existing plans in order to seize the moment. One of the team members told me of how the company responded to the Covid-19 pandemic during the summer of 2020. It was finalising preparations for its annual Youth Trends Survey when the first Covid-19 lockdown was announced. Instead of cancelling the survey, the team members switched their attention and resources to undertaking a national survey to capture young people's responses to the impact of Covid-19 on their daily lives as it happened. It meant revising their tried and tested data collection methods to take account of 'lockdown' restrictions by combining an online-only survey with diaries written by young people about their personal responses to the pandemic. The data was collected and analysed and the report produced and circulated within less than three months (Taking the Temperature, Beatfreeks 2020).

Strategic thinking and flexibility

Identifying new opportunities, however, is not necessarily sufficient for a company to gain competitive advantage. It requires an understanding of how such opportunities might contribute to the company's aims and objectives in the longer term. But, as shown in the example above, it may also need flexibility and a willingness to change existing plans. Shortly before the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, Anisa and I had discussed her plans for refining Beatfreeks' data capture and visualisation activities, DOINK[15]. She wanted to continue to use creative ways of capturing and communicating data but felt that a different structure was needed. She told me:

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[15] DOINK = Do and Think Tank – part of the consultancy arm of Beatfreeks

"We are still doing that work of creative visualisation, creative capture of data. But what we're doing more of is obviously tying that more into our (new) model ie people commission (us) to do it for them as opposed to us coming up with our own ideas and doing it for ourselves. [...........] It's much tighter now that it's tied into our model".

She is clearly happier with the new approach with its ability to continue to capture data about young people's lives by accepting commissions from the public and private sectors to provide data insight services. I suggest that this is also evidence of her strategic thinking and entrepreneurship since, by generating funds in this way she is diversifying the company's sources of income whilst reducing costs.

Emotional intelligence and communication

In order to understand how leaders of youth work `such as Anisa engage with young people, I have turned to the work of Paolo Freire who maintained that "As an educator I need to be constantly 'reading' the world inhabited by the grassroots with which I work" (1998; 2001:76). It has helped me to 'read' Anisa's own approach to 'reading' the world of the young people with whom or on behalf of whom she works. For example, she told me about how she could still identify with the experiences of the young people in her dance group whilst at the same time being able to conform to the expectations of the business community in which she worked after leaving university. This capacity for empathy with young people who feel marginalised in today's society is essential to building trust in order to understand their needs and accurately represent the voices of those affected by a society whose "perverse ethic is founded on the laws of the market" (Freire, 2004:100). By contrast, her speeches targeted at influencers portray herself as a confident and highly competent young woman who knows her subject - young people facing inequalities. She is able to make the case for their voices to be heard by using concepts and language that this audience is accustomed to using and hearing.

These are aspects of her communication and networking skills which enable her to enter into dialogue with those with power and through her, to give agency to Beatfreeks as a collective to undertake actions to transform the institutional structures which have figured young people according to their own perceptions. As I found in my discussions with the CEO of a youth arts organisation in the East Midlands, however, this sensitivity to the

attitudes and priorities of decision makers and funders is not necessarily a unique trait but is a shared 'sine qua non' for any youth organisation seeking to ensure its continuing survival/success. It goes hand in hand with the ability to establish a relationship of trust with both stakeholders and young people in order to manage the needs and expectations of both.

Values and concerns

Beatfreeks' work is underpinned by values which feature frequently in literature on the characteristics of youth engagement. These include listening, trust, respect and fairness (Martinez et al., 2016) but my findings reveal other values which distinguish the leadership and the ways of working of the company. These are a commitment to openness; a refusal to be pigeon-holed; a continuing belief in the power of creativity to change hearts and minds; and especially a passion for social justice, particularly for young people who are unable to make their voices heard. I have already mentioned Anisa's flexibility and being hard to pin down. It seems as if her entrepreneurial self always wants to be ready to respond to new opportunities and take on fresh challenges, which means being free to change the image, the narrative and ways of working as may be required.

Passion for social justice

Spend any time in conversation with members of the Beatfreeks team and you soon realise that social justice is what drives them. Anisa told me how the inequality of opportunity between her business graduate peers and the bright young people with whom she spent some of her teenage years had originally motivated her to set up her own social enterprise:

> "I think there wasn't one moment. It was just a combination of my life experiences, what I saw in the city at the time. And also, yeah, that kind of desire as a social entrepreneur to make something meaningful too, as a business, whilst also changing, changing the world at the same time."

Socio-economic and political awareness

In one of several reflective conversations which I have had with Anisa during our collaboration, she told me about a conversation with young lawyers and business people

after winning the BPS[16] Birmingham Award for young professionals whilst at Aston University Business School. They asked her about what it was like to be a young person in Birmingham which set her thinking about the contrasts between them and the young people in the youth dance group she had set up before going to university whose opportunities were so limited by comparison.

She felt as if she was operating on two different levels, one as a young professional but the other as a young creative and being conscious of a disconnection between them:

"So the dancers from my class, my friends, whatever, they were saying, like, 'nobody listens to us'. 'Yeah, no one asks us what we want'. And that, you know, was a mix of people, some were graduates, some weren't. They were just building their own things they were doing, putting on their own events, they were putting on their own projects, and they were going to set up their own businesses. So I remember just feeling that there was a massive disconnect...........and I could see (it) happening in the city, which was, you know, like I said, these big institutions, and then the really young people with the talent."

Anisa explained to me how the different realities of their worlds motivated her to become not just an entrepreneur but a 'social' entrepreneur by combining her business skills with the creativity of young people to bring about social change. In his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1993: 41) Paolo Freire wrote: "The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by revolutionary leadership but the result of their own critical awareness (conscientização)." Thus, using the lens of Freire, I maintain that Anisa had become critically aware of the gulf between these two worlds and felt compelled to address the inequalities which she had witnessed by providing young people with the leadership, skills and opportunities to combat them. Her motivation and understanding of young people's issues, however, are not unique but are similar to those of workers in other youth engagement organisations. I realised this when I met a young woman who works with a creative engagement company in the East Midlands. In conversation with her about the young people she encounters, she stressed the importance of talking and building trust with them:

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[16] BPS - Business and Professional Financial Services Birmingham

"I think it was someone from a young fenlands cultural consortium, and she got up on stage and her phrase was 'it's one thing talking to young people, but another thing talking with us', and I just thought that summarised it perfectly for what we were there to do." (F/cp6)

Later in our conversation she added:

"It's about that trust-building......... We've tried to get rid of every barrier possible, but it is about that trust-building with the young people directly that there is something for them and they can access it." (F/cp6)

In his introduction to Freire's Pedagogy of Freedom published posthumously in 1998, Stanley Aronowitz summarised Freire's view of the task of a good teacher as one which is "to encourage human agency, not mold it in the manner of Pygmalion" (1998:10). Hence, in applying the lens of Freire's thinking to findings from my observations of Anisa and interviews with members of her team, I consider her leadership style to be one that permeates the culture of the whole organisation and is capable of fostering both individual and collective agency.

Culture of the organisation

The Beatfreeks culture is one of openness, trust and mutual support which has been shaped mainly by the personality and values of Anisa and the young people she has recruited to work with her. Based on my observations and participation in conversations, it is clear that they all value the culture of open and exploratory dialogue and appear able to look critically at what they are seeking to achieve for themselves as individuals and for the young people with whom they work. They are not, therefore, passive recipients of Anisa's knowledge but, in Freire's words, "they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (1970; 2017:53) and can thus journey towards their own and other young people's liberation from 'oppression'. This collective solidarity is fuelled by a shared commitment to building the confidence and competences of young people facing often multiple disadvantages in their daily lives.

I talked to a young woman early on in my research who asserted very firmly:

> "Their [Beatfreeks] priority is young people. It always comes back to (the) young
> person. And, and I think that for them, in terms of who they employ and stuff,
> everyone seems to have the priority of young people as their priority as well."(F/y2)

Later in the same interview, she went on to highlight another aspect of the company's work which I had not identified at that point in my research but which, on reflection, I believe plays a key part in the strategic vision for the company and that is a vision and commitment to the longterm.

> "...What's also really nice is that they see the bigger picture. They're not just like,
> 'we're here for you now'. I'm saying, we're here for you now but how do we make
> sure everyone else is there for you in ten years' time as well? Yeah, that's really
> important". (F/y2)

In addition , I have observed how this open style of leadership together with Anisa's passion for building young people's self- confidence sets the tone for the 'informal learning' (Stigendal, 2018) which takes place in the company. This seems to be a key element in the company's culture in which her thinking and planning with members of the team and encourages them not only to ask questions but also to continue to discuss amongst themselves what she has put forward and to feedback their ideas. Two members of the team told me:

> "We're encouraged and almost needed to be non-conventional I think because, if we
> are to pursue something which is creative, we have to be able to be self-sufficient in
> that venture." (F/y2)

> "Here, I've never had a "No" – it's more like - let's try this." (F/y1)

This also reflects a commitment to enabling young people to have the knowledge and critical awareness to gain access to the dominant structures of power and authority and bring about a positive change in their circumstances.

Sense of belonging

Several of my interviewees offered another reason for wanting to stay connected to the company. They had the feeling that they had found a community of like-minded others;

that they belonged. A young woman who had dropped out of her degree course explained what Beatfreeks meant to her:

> "I felt very lost. And I felt like, I don't know what the career is that I want. I don't have to get to that point. I don't have to embed myself in this region, when I don't feel like I love it. And almost immediately Beatfreeks sort of placed me. It grounded me. And that was the thing that I was, like, whatever it is that this organisation does, I need to be involved and I need to learn more. (Pause) And it still does that for me. It still really grounds me in who I am as a person, as a professional, as an artist, and within the community." (F/y13)

Another young woman told me how she had come to Birmingham in the hopes that, as a multicultural city, it would enable her to explore her own culture a bit more, coming as she did from a white mono-cultural home city elsewhere. But she was unhappy from the start at her chosen university and said to me:

> "I was the only black female in my entire year at university. Yea, – so I was a little bit shocked at that – seriously I guess that drove my need to find people I could relate to on a different level in the city of Birmingham".......(F/y3)

Another young woman, also a university graduate returned to Birmingham which was her home city to complete her Masters Dissertation but was keen to do something else as well. She said:

> "I came across a spoken word mentoring programme in the summer of '16. I did that for five weeks. And I just felt it... I felt it, I felt it. For me, I guess like, it's all about the feeling, and I felt that power. And I, um, loved the people that I met and continued to meet and I felt a real sense of community in Poetry Jam."(F/y7)

In this core community of Beatfreeks, I have often caught a glimpse of their shared passion for wanting to see young people develop and move forward. A team member put it this way to me:

> "I love the moment that a young person becomes engaged - I love that moment. I love their acknowledgement that they've done something that they didn't think that they could do before." (F/y6)

Working environment

I draw on Freire's concept of shared learning whereby 'knowledge is co-constructed and co-investigated between participants' (Magee and Pherali, 2019) to discuss my findings on Beatfreeks' working practices. By creating a relaxed working atmosphere in which reflective 'informal learning' can take place, the company has been able to support young people who may have found school or further education unsatisfactory and help them engage with fresh opportunities to learn and think for themselves. There is no formal code of behaviour imposed in the work spaces but team members, associates, interns and casual visitors are all expected to take personal responsibility for their actions and share in the care of the areas in which they work and socialise. The learning takes the form of one to one conversations or informal open group discussions. Whilst some are focused on specific projects, others often arise as spontaneous responses to what is happening in the city and/or wider world. Whenever I have been in their work space, I have been struck by what seems to be an insatiable thirst for knowledge and desire to tease out the challenges facing themselves and other young people in society today (conscientization).

Freire argues that open dialogue amongst equals with its possibilities for better insights into the issues which concern young people in today's society should then lead to further reflection and then action (praxis). I have participated in conversations in the Beatfreeks office- often over lunch - in which young interns' comments and ideas are accorded the same attention as those expressed by experienced team members. As one of the most experienced team members told me:

> "So lunch time we all stop and we sit down together, (but) we don't take a break from thinking and talking about social justice and social issues and what's wrong and what we can do about it. We don't stop. We actually sharpen each other. And we will be challenged and people bring questions and sometimes about more questions about different topics, because I know there's people with different interests ....people of different faiths, different backgrounds, but we all coexist and we're all transparent and open." (M/y10)

The openness of conversation between whoever is in the office at the time is made easier by the layout of the space in which they all work. One room is set out with tables and connections for laptops but with no permanent physical demarcation of individual places.

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At least half the other room is taken up with sofas, soft armchairs and bean bags. The other half has a long table down one side at which anyone can work and opposite there is a 'kitchen' area. It is more flexible in its configuration and can be used as a space for participatory activities (see image below) or as a more formal workspace as and when necessary.

These rooms are perceived as a safe space not only for honest debate but for being able to relax and be yourself. As one creative practitioner told me:

> "It's a safe place to explore (anything), which creates this like very accepting and very open and forever developing and changing atmosphere." (F/y13)

Indeed, more than one company member talked to me of the importance of being able to offer a space which is always open and welcoming, particularly for young people who may not feel comfortable in a formal office environment; a space where a young person can be independent but at the same time not be alone.

> "Beatfreeks are always open to young people. For example, this office is open to young people. They can come here to work (it's) a safe space and relationship building takes place." (F/y5)

Certainly, during my time in the office, I have observed young individuals dropping in without prior notice to sit quietly working or to speak to someone and there's always a team member willing to provide support or advice.

Creative practices

When Beatfreeks started out in 2013 it was as a youth engagement enterprise which used different art forms including music, dance, spoken word and video making to develop the personal competences of individual young people in local communities. The company also used creative practices as a colourful alternative approach to facilitating workshops and meetings. Combined with an imaginative presence online via its website and social media content, these activities soon attracted the attention of both private and public sector influencers. Beatfreeks also attracted and engaged young arts practitioners to deliver an expanding programme of activities. In 2018, Anisa emphasised the importance of creativity in the company's work with young people in a blog on Beatfreeks' website:

> "Beatfreeks is a community of people who believe in the power of creativity to do the incredible. The companies in the Beatfreeks Collective then make spaces for that creativity to be unleashed: We help young artists tell stories. We help brands involve young people in their stories. We help organisations tell stories about their work."

In the early days of Beatfreeks, the company set great store by the use of arts and creative practices as routes to engaging and developing young people. One of the freelance associates who has been connected with Beatfreeks almost from the start gave me his thoughts on her approach:

> "Her passion and interest is a lot about people, and how much she cares about people - how much she cares about young people and the creative arts. And I think that's the reason why Beatfreeks is what it is......" (M/y10)

More recently, however, I have noted a change in Beatfreeks' approach to the role of creativity in the company, seeing it more as a tool for drawing the attention of public or private sector decision makers to young people's inequalities in addition to being a means of developing young people's individual competences. I sensed that the organisation was moving away from a focus on empowering individuals through creativity and leaning more towards young people's collective empowerment to contest the power of policymakers. Nevertheless, creative practices continue to be a key component in Beatfreeks' interactions

with both the private and public sectors not only for engaging with young people but for shaping the tone of the dialogues between young people and decision makers.

So far, I have discussed my findings on the structure, aims and culture of Beatfreeks as an organisation, how they have changed over time and how they are influenced by the leadership style and values of its founder, Anisa Morridadi. I have also begun to explore the relationship of concepts of power and activism these findings. In the sections which follow I seek to answer the questions: "Who are the young people who get actively involved with Beatfreeks? "What are their motivations?" and "How do their actions contribute to the balance of power between young people and policymakers?"

Beatfreeks and young people

The distinctions between different categories of Beatfreeks, are quite blurred because there is often movement from one category to another. An individual may, for example, regularly 'volunteer' for Beatfreeks events but then undertake some form of occasional work paid within the company because they show a desire to learn and 'have a go'. A few may follow this journey even further and eventually become paid members of the team; others work on the team but as freelancers on a project by project basis.

Members of the Beatfreeks team

One young female student who made the complete transition from occasional to team member explained her journey to me:

> "Then I randomly, like, went to Poetry Jam. I was walking round town (literally) and saw 'Urban Coffee' and then I went inside and saw it was FANTASTIC! I went back to Uni and emailed info@Beatfreeks to say 'Hi I really loved PJ'. I just really wanted to see what I could do and get involved with them. That was it really. …." (F/y3)

She then went on to list a series of opportunities she had been given to work on different kinds of projects till one in particular made her realise, in her words:

> "It was exactly what I wanted to do – so I saw Anisa and said I'd like to do an internship with you and she said 'Yes, let's see what happens'. It was supposed to last one month and it lasted for nine and then I got offered a job – just before I graduated." (F/y3)

For her, the chance to use her arts practice to develop young people's potential was the incentive to get involved and progress. She described the way in which Anisa created a new role in the company for her which matched her interests and skills with the needs of the organisation and told me:

> "Anisa finds people before projects and she brings out the best in people and really pushes them to excel in that way."

Perhaps this is why some young people are drawn into a closer relationship with the company. Another gifted young woman endorsed this saying:

> "Beatfreeks takes risks on young people – giving them responsibilities early on."
>
> (F/y1)

Young people who engage with Beatfreeks

Modifying a typology of young people put forward by Sirovatka and Spies, (2018) in relation to interventions to improve youth (re-)entry into the labour market, I argue that there are two main types of young people with whom Beatfreeks engages: a) individuals motivated by their own life experiences to find 'alternative' ways to get on; they have social capital but lack support and b) individuals who lack social competences and support but are interested. These young people are mostly in the mid to late twenties and have mainly – but not necessarily been educated beyond eighteen. Some may have gone down the wrong career or work path and are looking to try something different whilst also possibly helping others deal with similar issues to theirs. Others may have creative skills which they are able to apply and are open to taking on new challenges as long as they feel supported. Beatfreeks offers them opportunities to 'test the water' whilst facilitating engagement activities with young people and they are able to develop their skills, build their personal competences and potentially address their resource and vital inequalities (Therborn, 2015).

From outsiders to insiders

I have used the concept of outsider/insider to explore how some young people, like several current team members, are able to move on from a first connection with Beatfreeks through, for example, a chance encounter with Poetry Jam sessions and go on to become more closely involved in its community. They might simply have engaged with the performances of others, but from my observations of these Poetry Jams, there is a strong

sense of young people finding joy in a shared experience and an opportunity to talk in a safe space to people who might be like themselves. They seem mostly to be in Higher Education but differ in terms of ethnicity and family background and can just grab a coffee, sit down and listen or can sign up to perform as they arrive. In this way, they might get information about what else Beatfreeks does and choose to pursue it or not; there is no pressure. They are free to attend any event and can stay or leave whenever they want but again I became aware of a feeling of belonging and trust amongst these Poetry Jam attendees. Thus young people coming to a Poetry Jam from outside the regular circle of participants may be made to feel welcome and that they too can belong to this group.

Other routes for young people into the Beatfreeks community have been through its own projects or through the commissioning of the company by the public sector or other agencies to deliver specific youth activities. In this section, therefore, I draw on my notes from a focus group of young people convened by Beatfreeks in which I participated and had consent to use anonymised quotes from all those present. These were young people who got involved in activities organised by Beatfreeks but not necessarily on a regular basis. They were a mixed group in terms of gender and ethnicity and I estimated that they were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. They were brought together to discuss issues emerging from the Brum Youth Trends Survey of 2018 and to act as a 'check' on what the Beatfreeks team were thinking were the key issues that concerned young people in the city. They were given a choice of topics to discuss and the one that elicited the most discussion was Social Action.

They clearly cared about their city, its facilities and the problems facing themselves and their peers. So in this respect they shared concerns which resonated with those of the Beatfreeks 'core' group.

> "We are still battling this thing that we are not actively engaging in our political and social environment at all – we're not," said one young person (F/fg1).

But for some, the problem was the fact that they had not had opportunities through their schooling to access the skills needed to cope with everyday life beyond their schooldays.

As one of these young people pointed out:

"We don't know - have the know-how - to look for work. We don't have the skill sets to do it which means we get left in this little downward spiral – losing out and losing out without no real er ….like no-one having that knowledge to get to bring everyone to connect……" (M/fg3)

Through their lived experiences of inequality, these young people seemed less 'resilient' than those who had, for example, already become actively engaged with Beatfreeks. Most of the young people who did speak up, however, clearly cared about similar issues to them but they were still at the 'we know the problem but we don't know how to do something about it' stage rather than 'Why don't we try this? ' They seemed to lack self-confidence and appeared reluctant to take the first step inside the Beatfreeks' community. Yet, I noticed last year that one young man from this particular focus group had become a member of the Beatfreeks Youth Steering Committee two years after it had taken place.

Background and education

One of the criticisms of Beatfreeks which I discovered during my fieldwork was that the educational and socio-economic backgrounds of most of the young team members of the company frequently appeared to be very different from a lot of the young people with whom they were working. Team members were well-educated at least up to A Level, with a number having undertaken – if not always completed – a university degree. Some observers of Beatfreeks, therefore, have questioned how an organisation run by seemingly 'high flyers' can possibly relate to young people who may be disadvantaged in so many ways: gender, ethnicity, poverty, education, family or neighbourhood.

A very experienced youth and community worker who has been involved with young people for most of her working life explained her reservations about Beatfreeks:

> "From most of my touch with it - I felt that it was a different kind of young people… it wasn't about the young kids I grew up with in Sparkhill and Sparkbrook[17]. They (*Beatfreeks)* were often a bit more middle-class, bit more hipster, you know, a bit more sexy, you know, all of that kind of stuff." (F/cp5)

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[17] Two deprived inner-city neighbourhoods in South East Birmingham

She went on to challenge the notion that Beatfreeks represents the young people of the city:

> "You have these smart, brilliant, savvy, interesting, engaged, talented, articulate young people who are representing the Voice (*of young people*). That's not the real story of youth experience in this city or in this country or even globally."

Yet, my findings show that the young people who are inside Beatfreeks (the core members of the team) are closer to some of the young people with whom they work than this youth worker and others might think. They may have experienced a range of individual inequalities including those of colour, ethnicity, family background, neighbourhood and education but they also share (in different combinations) an enthusiasm for the arts; a certain level of determination to take charge of their own lives; and a concern for social justice. One young person, for example, whom I met early on in my collaboration with Beatfreeks had had a disrupted childhood which resulted at one point in her moving to another council estate where she felt an 'outsider' even though she shared a similar working class background. Others had been brought up in deprived areas of the city or had had a disrupted or poor quality education but the majority understood how hard it was to find a decent job without appropriate qualifications and to earn enough to make an easy transition to independent adulthood.

In her efforts to raise awareness within political, business and educational institutions of the problems such young people were facing, Anisa had already turned her attention in 2017 to the gathering and interpretation of data about young people's everyday experiences of living and working in Birmingham. Having described how this information was collected in Chapter 3, in the following section, therefore, I examine the ways in which this data was undertaken and how the findings were used.

Beatfreeks and data

The activities of this youth engagement organisation revolve around two key areas of activity. The first, which led to Anisa's decision to set up her social enterprise was the idea that through creativity young people could develop their individual competences and resilience. The second stemmed from a concern over what I call the 'disconnect' between institutions and young people. One of the first observation sessions which I undertook with

Beatfreeks in late 2017 involved joining the person responsible for preparing the company's first survey about the everyday lives of young people in Birmingham. He was in conversation with several young people in their late teens and asking for their views on the topics which should be covered and the questions which could or should be asked. As the discussion progressed he invited them to reject, modify, accept or add to them according to how important the subject was and how effective a particular question might be in gaining useful information. Thus, the Brum Youth Trends Survey, 2018 was constructed without recourse to digital data or technology and began life as a paper survey delivered and presented by members of the team to students in secondary and higher education institutions. The questionnaires were completed by hand and returned to the team members but they were also made available for completion via online platforms and returned electronically.

The Survey findings were targeted at those in positions of influence in both the public and private sectors. In particular, they sought to attract elected members and officials within local government mainly in Birmingham and the surrounding city region and leading figures in the business community. Data was collected over almost three months from young people aged 14 to 25 from as wide a range of postcode areas as possible in the city. It was sorted initially by members of Beatfreeks using a basic software programme and then analysed by a small group of team members who used non-digital means such as 'post-it' notes. These were stuck on one of the office walls and arranged and re-arranged as themes and patterns from their discussions began to emerge. This meant that anyone else present in the room was able to read what was on the notes and they were welcome to drop into the small group's conversations and offer their thoughts.

Questions covered practical issues relating to young people's everyday experiences of living in Birmingham such as the city's infrastructure and services. Concerns about transport came high on the list of young people's problems with navigating the city. More than half indicated that public transport was unsatisfactory in some way and 31% complaining specifically of the high costs of travel.

As an 18 year old student pointed out in one of the company's follow up focus groups:

"Buses cost me too much to get to college and trains are just as bad. Need a cheaper, faster alternative" (M/fg3)

Almost a fifth of respondents raised the difficulties they experienced travelling across the city with special mention of the problems of not being able to get home late at night. This may also be linked to concerns about personal safety in the city with 73% expressing a general concern about their safety and 19% worrying about travelling around alone. A number of questions in the Survey, however, were aimed at eliciting information about young people's attitudes and concerns which might not be acknowledged or visible to policymakers. Thus, questions were designed to obtain information not necessarily easily found in official data. For example, the survey revealed that only 11% of the young people who answered the question 'Where do you go for careers advice?' stated that they used the official careers service. And yet, the Survey revealed that, whilst 68% felt they had the skills for the future, 39% were not sure what those skills actually were and many more turned to their family for advice rather than use the official careers service.

The Survey also addressed political and more general social issues. Here, questions dealt, for example, with youth unemployment, use of the internet, safety in the city, and city planning; all of which have a social dimension and all of them are matters of concern to young people. They do not feel safe moving round the city. They think transport is too expensive and feel that too much attention has been paid to the city centre to the detriment of the areas in which many of these young people live. As one young participant observed:

"Europe's youngest population and yet the city looks like it's been designed for boomers, office workers and their cars exclusively" (Brum Youth Trends Report, 2018: p.17)

The most significant of the political questions asked was: 'Do you feel heard by those in power?' Not surprisingly in the light of the above, only 3% answered 'Yes'. To another question on political participation only 13% said that they had voted in the election for the first Mayor of the West Midlands region.

Although Beatfreeks' data activities were initially on a small relatively local -scale when compared to national government and major companies' data collection, they have grown

and developed over time, reaching young people across the country. Nevertheless, the findings from this first survey in 2018 became the basis for the first Brum Youth Survey Report which was targeted at influencers across the city and made widely available beyond the city region via social media. This has enabled Beatfreeks to move into a more political space (Ruppert et al., 2018) as the company continues to collect and sort their analogue data by human agency and has deployed it to open up new conversations with policymakers about youth in Birmingham and more recently in other parts of the UK. It has also used its own analogue data findings to contest what they perceive to be the negative effective effects of digital data-driven decisions made by public policymakers. Anisa has also been able to build on one of the original pillars of her fledgling company which involved the offer to business to use creativity to "humanise data to tell better stories and facilitate better decisions".

During my observations of the Beatfreeks' approach to information gathering and communication I noted the increasing mix of 'humanised', analogue (non-digital) and digital data in the company's methods. On the one hand, Beatfreeks' surveys of young people's everyday lives collected small, analogue datasets and analysed them without recourse to advanced digital technologies. On the other hand, however, these surveys were promoted using online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Moreover, during the pandemic, surveys were increasingly conducted online but still continued to be analysed by human intervention.

In exchanges between myself and Anisa at the end of my fieldwork, we discussed how her conceptualisation of 'data' had moved on from the company's early forays into the gathering and visualisation of information through physical installations with which the public could engage using more than just seeing or hearing.   She based her comments on her experiences of Beatfreeks' initiatives such as the monthly Poetry Jam held in a local coffee shop in Birmingham, the experiments with physical and the BYT Summits of 2018 and 2019 at which young people expressed their views through singing, rapping or passionate speech-making.

She maintains that these forms of human expression are also 'data' since they offer insights into how young people feel about their everyday lives and their relationships with influencers and decision makers in society. My findings reveal, however, that there are few

opportunities for young people to engage directly with policymakers since they are seldom in a situation where they can meet and talk with them. For example, the policymakers whom I interviewed acknowledged that young people rarely got involved in public consultations, even when invited. Yet, the 2018 Survey showed that 22% of respondents identified that what mattered most to them about living in Birmingham was 'having a voice'. I return to this particular issue in Chapter 6 when I discuss the effects of young people's voices on decision makers during the BYT Summit in Birmingham Town Hall in 2018.

Discussion

Positioning Beatfreeks in youth engagement work

The concept of youth engagement has been an enduring, yet evolving feature in the landscape of community-based youth development work. It has been called many things over the years: youth leadership, civic engagement, youth participation, youth voice, to name but a few. Until relatively recently, local authorities supported a range of youth clubs, youth activities and employed a considerable number of dedicated youth workers. Cuts in government funding to local government have, however, led to the closure of many publicly funded youth centres and the subsequent loss of experienced youth workers (BirminghamLive, 2019). Nevertheless, some youth engagement activities continue as part of wider national or international youth movements. They tackle a variety of 'wicked' issues but this can mean very different things to different people. For some, the focus of youth engagement is on ensuring that young people participate in high quality programmes. For others, youth engagement is about helping young people find activities they are passionate about. Another notion of youth engagement emphasises the value of youth voice and input into activities, or having a say in matters that affect them (Sullivan, 2011). This can be seen in organisations such as 'UpRising', founded in London in 2008 in the wake of the global financial crisis. It is a registered charity which aims to support young people to become more socially and politically aware and enable them to be 'powerful change-makers' (https://uprising.org.uk). Although Beatfreeks was established later in the 'years of austerity', it has a similar aim of empowering young people, as its current website states: "We're invested in young people getting their share of power" (https://beatfreeks.com). Whilst the company is an organisation committed to supporting and developing young

people as part of a social justice agenda, however, it is also run as a business consultancy. I suggest, therefore, that this 'duality' of aims and activities reflects the continuing influence of neoliberalism as well as growing concerns for a more equitable society. In the next section, therefore, I draw on my findings to consider how to position an organisation like Beatfreeks in today's world.

Situating Beatfreeks in a post-austerity economic and socio-political climate

My findings suggest that Beatfreeks is an organisation which reflects the society in which its founder and the current generation of young people have transitioned from youth to adulthood. I argue that their lived experiences have been influenced by structural inequalities arising from the neoliberalism of Thatcher (Jessop, 2003) and what I consider to be its influence on the policies of the Labour governments of Blair and Brown between 1997 and 2010 and the Conservative/Lib Dem coalition (2010-2016) which followed. Beatfreeks' founder and a number of the young people involved with the company would thus have either been still in education or looking for work in a context of uncertain or limited paths to employment. In addition, my findings suggest that their life chances have also been affected by the years of austerity following the global financial crisis of 2007/8 which led to youth unemployment peaking in the West Midlands at 22.3% in 2013 (Annual Population Survey, ONS[18]) .

In order to understand the impact of these policies on the lives of these young people I have turned to Therborn's theory of inequality as it considers both individual inequalities and what he refers to as 'resource' inequalities in which I include income, housing, education (Therborn, 2013). I link this with a theory of Social Generation as modified by Bronwyn Wood who brings together concepts of Citizenship with Youth Transition theories (Wood, 2017). I have also drawn on Political, Urban and Cultural Policy Studies to examine the changing nature of the labour market in cities like Birmingham. They have highlighted the decline in traditional industries, the continuing challenge of unemployment and the efforts to replace them with the development of professional services, hospitality and retail sectors. This included policies in post-industrial European cities such as Birmingham aimed at the development of the 'Knowledge Economy' (www.makingknowledgework.eu) such as

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[18] ONS – Office for National Statistics which is the largest provider of official statistics.

the establishment of innovation hubs like, for example, the Innovhub in Milan and Brainport in Eindhoven.

Linked to the above was a growing enthusiasm for the 'Creative Economy'. Whilst working for Birmingham City Council, for example, I became involved in transnational collaborations on Creative Industries Strategies to harness 'creativity' not only in science and technology but the arts to stimulate economic growth. These strategies included the provision of low-cost, short-term rental work spaces for both knowledge and creative workers. Spaces for the latter were often in renovated former factories such as the Custard Factory in Birmingham and the Cable Factory in Helsinki. This made pursuing a career as a self-employed creative practitioner a possibility for young people who were faced with the challenge of getting a job in the 1990s and early 2000s and even more so after the global financial crisis of 2007/8. On the other hand, I contend that the uncertainties surrounding employment prospects may also have played a part in fostering a 'go-it-alone' or entrepreneurial attitude amongst some young people, leading to the setting up of their own business enterprises. It is against this backdrop, therefore, that I consider the factors which may have influenced Beatfreeks' structure, culture and ways of working.

Organisational culture /Ways of working

The openness of the culture of Beatfreeks lends itself to honest reflection and has been one of the key reasons why I drew on interactive research theory to underpin my study. This culture had been fostered by the founder of the company (Anisa) and made it possible for the two of us to establish an open and trusting working relationship. Hence, I have had opportunities throughout my involvement with the company to exchange ideas with various members of the team and share my thinking on their work and its implications. It has included, for example, reflecting on what kinds of young people are drawn to Beatfreeks and how the company establishes relationships of trust with both them and policymakers. I have also been able to consider how its ways of working and its activities contribute to combating their inequalities. For some observers I have interviewed, the company has begun to fill a serious gap in policymakers' knowledge of young people in today's cities through its own data collection activities, particularly as the number of local authority youth workers has been seriously reduced (BirminghamLive, Aug 2019). Yet, for others there are questions still to be answered about how it has achieved a position within

both the public sector and business arenas as a trusted commentator on youth issues. Again, I have identified a sense of unease amongst youth and community practitioners who remain in the city and express concerns over exactly who the young people are whom Beatfreeks claims to represent and who may fall through their particular net. Thus, I have to ask myself the question: "Should we be worried about the legitimacy of the role that organisations like Beatfreeks can play, given the entrepreneurial nature of its leadership and its relationships within the business community?"

In considering the culture of Beatfreeks itself and the young people who have become involved with the company in some way, however, I have identified the influence of the concepts of belonging, openness and trust in their relationships with Anisa and with each other. I have also reflected on the importance of a 'safe' physical space in which they are able to talk freely about the issues which concern them and the young people whose everyday lives they wish to improve. In addition, having observed and participated in exchanges between members of Beatfreeks in this kind of working atmosphere, I have drawn on the work of Paolo Freire to understand the nature of these conversations and how they may influence the dynamics between the members of the Beatfreeks team themselves and between young people and policymakers.

Leadership style

Earlier in this chapter, I drew on literature on leadership from business and management and human resources to assess Anisa's leadership style. Here, I add my own observations of traits which I consider to be intrinsic to her management style. Whenever I have dropped by to see the team – no matter what space they happen to be in, I get the sense of a very open, relaxed, informal but focused working culture amongst the core members of the company.

This clearly comes from the leadership of its founder (Anisa) who told me:

> " I try to build in the open as a leader, working with the team to say, this is what I think, where I think we're going and kind of get that collaboration."

From my perspective as a former secondary school teacher in a different era (1970s/80s), however, it sometimes feels that it could easily lead to everyone doing their own thing but somehow it never does as that's the style of engagement we see on the surface.

Underneath, however, I can sense that there is a carefully thought-out structure and a clear view of the direction in which she wishes to take the company.

In another of our reflexive conversations midway through our collaboration, we talked about what drives her and, after an initial pause to collect her thoughts, she was very clear about her goals:

> "........there's two key things, I think, that run through our work: one is creativity. (pause) And I don't think it's about art. And increasingly, I don't think it's about art. But I do think it's about creativity."

She paused again before continuing:

> "And the second driver, is I think everything that we do has something about shifting power to young people. So whether that's empowerment: so getting them to take the power that they already have but to own it, or whether that's shifting the power between, like, businesses and young people, or shifting the power between the system - and obviously, we're moving more into that space."

Use of creativity

As I referred to earlier, Beatfreeks was initially very much centred on the use of arts and creativity to build young people's social competences and support them in their efforts to deal with their personal experiences of inequality, particularly those at the margins of society. This was following a line of other arts-led youth engagement activities from the 1990s onwards in Birmingham and elsewhere to address the needs of disadvantaged young people. For example, in Birmingham, Gallery 37 which was originally set up in 1998 to offer creative training to young people not in education, training or employment has recently been revived and newer companies like Musical Connections are using music to attract youth previously excluded from education back into a learning environment.

Several of the members of the Beatfreeks team whom I interviewed, talked about being drawn to the company precisely because of its use of creative practices in its youth engagement activities. Some of these young people have then proceeded to realise their early aspirations through being able to use their creative skills to turn their early negative experiences into positives as young adults within the supportive environment of Beatfreeks.

For some team members, however, the enthusiasm for being part of Beatfreeks seems to have arisen from their experiences of being marked out as different during their earlier life and creativity was a form of escapism.

One of them talked to me very openly about his experiences of being the only black child in his local school:

> "And you know, people who didn't know me would just run out and be like, Oh, you're the black kid, aren't you? Do a rap for us. Do a rap for us. And I'm like, No, I'm just, I'm just, like, out shopping or sat in the park. Like, I don't want to be that. I don't do that. And so I was bullied for that." (M/y10)

Other members of the Beatfreeks community whom I interviewed also spoke of being 'othered' by being treated as a failure and then being prepared to use this to spur them on to prove people wrong. A young woman now in her early twenties told me of how she felt empowered in school when she liberated herself from a member of staff's negative views of her through her own agency which was fuelled by anger and frustration. She wanted to be an actor:

> "I said I'm going to be an actor and my SENCO[i][19] told me 'you can't be an actor because you can't speak properly'. From that I got really annoyed and from then, I said, like, 'Yes I will!' So I started taking acting lessons – to prove a point - nothing serious." (F/yp3)

The collection, interpretation and communication of data about the lives of young people plays an increasingly significant role in the work of Beatfreeks as it continues to make the case for greater attention to be paid to both to young people's potential and their inequalities in the 21st century. In its pursuit of information about young people's lives and their concerns and aspirations, Beatfreeks turned to the collection and processing of alternative forms of data to counter the effects of policies shaped by the normative narratives of public sector decision making. This has been combined with the development

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[19] SENCO Special Educational Needs Coordinator

of the critical awareness of young people so that they might be better able to understand the implications of political decisions for their future lives.

Anisa, however, has taken a much broader approach to the meaning attached to the term 'data' compared to the definitions advanced and used by the private sector and public institutions. Her conceptualisation of 'data' embraces not only digital data and the use of digital technology to interpret it, but (in her words) 'humanised data', meaning analogue data which is collected and analysed by human intervention. In the chapter which follows, therefore, I examine more closely what she means by this and how it may disrupt current conceptualisations of 'data'.

CHAPTER 5: POLICYMAKERS, DATA & YOUTH INEQUALITIES

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the nature of the data that might be available to decision makers; the ways in which they might be deployed in policymaking; and how these actions might affect young people's everyday lives.

I begin by considering the evolution of Big Data from its roots in the business world to its adoption and use in the public sector. Having reviewed debates in the academy over how to define key terms such as Big Data, Small Data and Datafication in my Literature Review, I take a Critical Data Studies approach to their definition for the purposes of my investigation. I then move on to reflect on the significance of the temporal, spatial and socio-economic context in which my research took place. I suggest that it may be relevant to other city regions in the UK and Europe; as will the consideration of the political landscape in which local policymaking happens.

Having set the context for this discussion, I then consider central government's interest in the potential of digital data and it use in policymaking and the consequences for lower tiers of government and citizens. Confronted by the need for more efficient deployment and management of resources, infrastructure planning and communication with citizens, governments have looked to Big Data to improve decision making and achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of services to citizens (Policy Exchange Report, 2015).

This has become more important in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007/8 because of the need to make major cost savings across the public sector whilst also mitigating the economic and social impact of austerity on business and civil society. The issue was highlighted by Oxfam GB in 2013 in its '174 Oxfam Briefing paper' (Cavero and Poinasamy, 2013) and for more than a decade, UK governments have sought to reduce expenditure by encouraging the greater use of digital technologies to speed up the gathering and analysis of the information required; improve its accuracy and lead to better policy decisions. Yet, according to a recent Report, 'Policymaking in a Digital World' published by the Institute for Government (Lloyd, 2020), central government's use of data and new technologies still leaves a lot to be desired. Its authors highlight a continuing 'silo' mentality which inhibits data sharing and thus more joined up and better informed decision

making. Amongst other failings, they also point to the inability to capitalise on the large volume of data now available; caused partly by a lack of appropriate in-house expertise. Of particular interest to my research, however, is the identification in the Report of policymakers' failure to be "more responsive to external events and to the views and experiences of those it affects" (2020:4). Evidence from my own small-scale study of one major local authority's deployment of data reveals similar issues, notably in relation to young people and I argue that these may contribute to their inequalities.

Following this, I discuss the barriers to the effective collection, analysis and application of data-driven policymaking. These include issues related to the governance and administrative customs and practices of local government; constraints on realising the potential of data, such as cutbacks in central government funding of local authorities and a lack of experienced staff to interpret data and inform policy decisions.   I also examine the influence of institutional 'bias' and individuals' personal belief systems and values on datafied policymaking and how they might determine what information is required and what is left out. Using the lenses of Critical Policy and Critical Political Studies, I go on to explore the ways in which political priorities may intervene in decision making at both local and national levels of government. Finally, I reflect on the impact on young people and their inequalities of the deployment by decision makers of information derived from digital data in the context of the continuing disconnect between them. In particular, I consider how the application of such information may reinforce existing or create new inequalities such as those associated with policymakers' negative refiguring of young people online as 'problems'.

My research into the use of data in urban policymaking and its effects on young people's lived experiences of inequality is set in the context of the rapid growth and application of Big Data and its associated analytics within business, government and civil society. This has led to what has been described as a data revolution which is "reshaping how knowledge is produced, business conducted and governance enacted" (Kitchin, 2014:2). Digital technologies have come to play a hitherto unexpected role in the constitution of the social (Beraldo and Milan, 2019) and datafication processes and datafied policymaking within the public sector now have an integral and increasingly significant role in the governance of citizens (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger, 2013). The growing interest in the application of

data practices by public institutions has led, however, to scholars expressing concerns over the social, political and cultural implications of datafied policymaking for governance (Giest 2018; Katzenbach and Bächle, 2019) and wider society (Hintz et al., 2019; Redden 2015; 2018). For example, questions have been raised over the human, technological and institutional capacities of governments to benefit from the presumed potential of data-driven policy making (Poel et al., 2018) as well as the nature of their contribution to policy formation and their subsequent impact upon citizens (Durrant, Barnett and Rempel, 2018).

Yet, although the literature deals with a range of practical and theoretical issues relating to data-driven public policymaking and its effects on citizens, I contend that comparatively little attention has been paid thus far to policymakers' use of digital data on the inequalities experienced by young people in particular. Yet, they have been amongst the most adversely affected by the global recession (Young Foundation, 2011; Eurostat EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) Survey, 2011; EU FP7 funded Citispyce Final Report, 2016) and have experienced not only an exacerbation of existing inequalities but the impact of new ones such as those associated with their use of social media. Therefore, I suggest that there is a gap in knowledge regarding the ways in which: "Data has become a social and political issue not only because it concerns anyone who is connected to the Internet but also because it reconfigures relationships between states and citizens" (Ruppert et al., 2017: 1). Findings from my study, however, may help to bridge this gap through adding to our understanding of how policymakers collect, select and apply data in their decision making.

Contextualising this discussion

Defining terms: Data: Big Data, Small Data, Analogue Data

Governments and their national agencies have long been accustomed to producing 'statistical data' to inform policy-making on issues ranging from health care and social welfare planning and provision to demographic and economic forecasting and national security and public safety. For much of that time local government has been able to benefit from the intelligence provided by traditional governmental information gathering and dissemination activities such as the Decennial Census and ONS datasets. With the advances in computational sciences, however, and their use to digitally capture, store and analyse ever-increasing volumes of data, the business world has embraced digital

technologies and has quickly been followed by the public sector. Over the past decade a number of attempts have been made to define and operationalise this Big Data.   For the purposes of my discussion, however, I initially turned to the description from a UK government paper *HM Government Horizon scanning programme emerging technologies: Big Data* (2014:2):

> "Big Data refers to both large volumes of data with high level of complexity and the analytical methods applied to them which require more advanced techniques and technologies in order to derive meaningful information and insights in real time."

It qualified this, however, by pointing out that there is "a fundamental assumption about the power and importance of new techniques and technologies, which are often called 'analytics' " and that "the real value of analytics is that it can draw out new meanings, insights and value from bringing together individual datasets, which on their own might have limited value" (2014:2). When I discussed Big Data in terms of this definition, however,   and its role in policymaking with the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, he maintained that what we had been talking about was <u>not</u> Big Data:

> "None of this is Big Data because Big Data is about looking for lots of individual pieces of data and drawing the trends between them."

As I discussed in my review of the literature around Big Data and datafication, there has been an ongoing debate in the academy over how best to define the concept of Big Data and to determine the extent to which they play a part in governance and policymaking at national and subnational levels (Giest and Ng, 2018). Yet it seems that there is still no generally accepted definition within the academy of the term Big Data. Scholars, notably Cowls and Schroeder (2015), Kitchin and McArdle, (2016) and Connelly et al. (2016) have sought to move this particular debate forward by refining this basic definition. Kitchin and McArdle in their article '*What makes Big Data, big data?'* (2016) proposed that what distinguishes Big Data sources from Small Data is 1) their volume and 2) the speed at which they can be gathered and analysed. Whereas Connelly et al. (2016) have looked at what might constitute these sources and have highlighted the repurposing of data which has been collected originally with different objectives in mind. Both of these interpretations illustrate the challenges of finding a 'one size fits all' definition of Big Data.

So should researchers be focusing more on particular types of data that might qualify as 'Big' through a range of attributes which have been variously used to define 'Big Data'? Or is it unnecessary to distinguish certain data as Big or Small in order to assess their contribution to policymaking? Recent literature indicates that scholarship in this field is moving away from debates about the nature and scale of digital data towards a focus on the ways in which it is being used. As Helen Kennedy points out: "It is not data's size but its power that matters in contemporary society" (2016:10). I, therefore, accept the definition of the UK government paper referred to earlier but throughout my discussion I shall use the term 'digital data' to describe any digitally collected and processed data.

The socio-economic and political context

The site of my investigation is Birmingham which is the commercial, industrial, retail and cultural hub of the West Midlands region and one of the largest, most diverse and youthful cities in the country. Thus, policy decisions taken by the City Council and now also the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) are likely to have a major impact on the citizens not only in the city itself but those living in the wider region. They have been taken against a backdrop of economic, social and political uncertainties in the region arising from the effects of the global financial crisis of 2007/8.

Birmingham, in line with other major UK cities, has suffered significantly from the economic, political, economic and social consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008 with local authority budgets in particular being placed under ever more pressure. Between 2010 and 2020 Birmingham City Council, one of the largest local authorities in the UK, saw its funding from central government cut by £700 million (Birmingham Live, 19 /12/2017). It is no surprise, therefore, that there have been major reductions in the number of employees across all departments (almost half the workforce) since 2010.

Thus, the few remaining specialists in certain statistical and analytical functions have mostly been transferred to the relatively recently established WMCA and there is very limited capacity left within the City Council itself to analyse, let alone gather data. As one of the few remaining data analysts pointed out:

> "We're pretty much reliant on official data – ONS stuff and other government data
> sets with some other data from think tanks and academic institutions such as Centre

for Cities, Joseph Rowntree - the big ones......The team now is me and my colleague. Other bodies have picked up stuff but we're just not doing the sort of things we used to do – like quite a lot of bespoke reports." (M/p07)

Together with the reduction in budgets and the creation of this regional tier of government between central and local levels, the decision making powers of the local authority have been reduced and its ability to initiate and implement policies limited (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016).

Thus, although Birmingham City Council has retained responsibilities for a range of services to citizens as well as infrastructure planning and maintenance within its boundaries, it has much reduced financial resources available to deliver them all effectively. It is, therefore, faced with difficult policy choices about spending priorities and certain cohorts of young people have been disadvantaged as a consequence. Data do not exist independent of the context, values and experiences, of the actors involved (Gitelman and Jackson, 2013). So, the attitudes and policy objectives of those responsible for the selection, analysis and manipulation of data may influence what is collected and what is left out, and policy decisions informed by this data may be to the detriment or advantage of particular sets of data subjects such as young people.

Policy choices have long been subject to public influence as well as to the resources available and the priorities of those with the power to decide but the years of recession post 2007/8 have imposed greater burdens than ever upon policymakers seeking to juggle competing needs of citizens, business, public services and the voluntary sector. As one of the largest local authorities in the UK, Birmingham City Council has been amongst the most seriously affected by "austerity" with some of the most pressing economic and social challenges in the country, particularly around structural issues such as poverty, unemployment and social welfare. Such pressures have contributed to national and local levels of government and partners in the community seeking to use digital data to improve policymaking and achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of services. Evidence from my research, however, has highlighted not only a range of barriers to achieving these aspirations but also the continuing inequalities affecting young people's lives.

UK cities' concerns over the disadvantages facing young people have been shared by politicians and officers within Eurocities, the transnational network of major European

cities aimed at sharing information and good practice between politicians and officials in city administrations across the EU (www.eurocities.eu). I participated in discussions within this network on how to improve our understanding of the causes of young people's inequalities in a time of economic and social change and how to design more effective interventions to tackle them. Yet finding the information we required was not easy; it was often incomplete, missing altogether or gathered and measured according to different criteria which made comparisons more difficult. Yet, these exchanges of know-how and the resulting recommendations for improving practice were the best we could do with the resources available. This example at the local level may serve to illustrate why there appears to have been a growing enthusiasm within the public sector, particularly at city level, for the application of Big Data and digital technologies to problem solving and policymaking.

Policymaking, data and young people

During my study I have examined young people's relationships with data-driven policymaking from the perspectives of young people themselves, organisations engaged in youth work and politicians and public officials. I have drawn particularly on scholarship in Critical Data Studies to understand the part played by data and digital technologies in tackling practical issues relating to the management of cities and to identify wider societal and political implications of the use of data in urban policymaking. The connections between governments, data and citizens are also of interest to scholars within Critical Policy Studies (Cairney, 2018) where there has been increasing attention paid to the different ways in which data is selected and used as evidence for policymaking. This brings into consideration both the spatial and temporal contexts in which policies are made and the influences of institutional bias and individual belief systems and values in policymaking.

In the previous chapter, I showed how a locally–based youth engagement company may be able to bring the concerns of young people to the attention of decision makers in order to achieve policy change. Thus, although it is a small-scale study, I maintain that it may enable valuable insights into the effects of the attitudes and data practices of policymakers on young people and their inequalities not only because of its size and its location but also the positionality of the researcher. For example, I am familiar with the recent history of economic, political and social change in Birmingham, having lived and/or worked in the city

from 1982. I also have extensive experience of how policy decisions are reached, based on my 20+ years' service in local government and many conversations with fellow officers as well as with politicians not only from Birmingham but other major cities in the UK and the EU. All these have enabled me to look critically at the ways in which data are collected, analysed or interpreted and at assumptions of, and possibly misplaced confidence in, their accuracy and validity. It has also been possible to probe more deeply into the administrative and political challenges with which local policymakers have to deal, including their relations with national government.

I argue, therefore, that a close focus such as I have described may enable researchers to gain deeper insights into the ways in which policymakers' data- influenced perceptions of young people contribute to their inequalities and to their disengagement with the formal political processes of consultation and decision making. On the other side of the coin, my study also shows how these inequalities may be challenged through the collection and analysis of alternative analogue data by young people and informed by their own lived experiences. I suggest that their findings may be effective in countering the harms which they feel they have received from institutional policymaking through the use, for example, of algorithmic data analysis which produces or reinforces their inequalities (Robertson and Travaglia, 2017).

Barriers to the effective use of data in policymaking

Organisational and administrative barriers

Data as an object as well as the capture, storage and interpretation of what is presumed by some to be Big Data have become an integral part not only of the business and public sectors' but also of people's daily lives, whether they realise it or not. The optimism expressed by senior civil servants, however, over the potential of Big Data to improve governance and public service delivery for the general good (Manzoni, 2017), is countered by scholars in Critical Policy and Critical Data Studies who have identified a number of barriers to achieving these laudable goals. For example, many no longer have the internal resources necessary to review, select and analyse data effectively since departments are under-resourced in terms of personnel, skills and funding.

Nevertheless, I was able to interview two of the few remaining Birmingham City Council officers involved in the gathering, analysis and application of data on the local economy, labour market and demographics. They told me that they now rely mainly for these statistics on national government sources since they are limited by the loss of experienced staff together with the loss of funding to collect much data themselves. One of them explained what types of data were still usually available for economic analysis:

> "In terms of data on actual need, it's not actually very sophisticated. We get on a monthly basis, figures around unemployment and youth unemployment.....on a less frequent basis, some information around – it's described as a poll – a door to door (survey) at SOA[20]/neighbourhood level – not always accurate." (M/po5)

He then went on to illustrate some of the challenges of how to make the best use of data whilst working within a political climate of limited financial resources. He referred in particular to a situation in which he was asked to identify areas of the city for possible investment according to needs around young people's skills levels, unemployment rates and the Index of Multiple Deprivation. There were far too many options for the monies available. Thus, the decision on the areas eligible for assistance was determined by their political priority but not necessarily on the levels of unemployment and skills attainment at ward level[21]. He acknowledged, however, that these statistics were not the only indicators of deprivation but resources were not available to examine the problems in more depth:

> "We were well aware that the ward statistics did mask some issues, particularly around some of the outer city estates where wards are reasonably average for levels of skills and unemployment position but … there were obviously much more barriers, much more issues."

A senior City Councillor also described a number of administrative challenges facing the Council in order to gather and analyse data on citizens. One problem, for example,

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[20] SOA is an acronym for Super Output Area which is used to describe the aggregation of base level geographical areas used OA (Output Areas) used to define geographical areas for Census purposes. It is also used to obtain data for planning purposes.

[21] A 'Ward' is an electoral area within a local authority. There are 69 wards in the City of Birmingham

concerns the skewing of data from public consultations because of the age profile of respondents:

> "When we do public consultation, at the very simplest level, in terms of what we get back in data, they are almost always heavily skewed towards older people, and they don't reflect the city in any way you would ever choose." (M/c2)

He went on to tell me that, although there is quite a lot of data that's "not unhelpful", they are unable to drill down and obtain a detailed understanding of the individual 'customer'.

Policy officers from several different departments in the City Council also expressed their own frustrations about this situation. One of them said:

> "How do you get the resources to resolve what the issues are? ....It's a vicious circle isn't it? We don't have the resources to be able to do the proper research and, even if we did, we don't have the resources to deliver activity that's going to resolve some of those challenges." (F/po4)

Hence, there are issues over a lack of resources whilst at the same time a need to invest in more sophisticated IT infrastructure and to secure the necessary levels of expertise and institutional capacity to maximise the potential of Big Data (Malomo and Sena, 2016; Poel, Meyer and Schroeder, 2018). Without them, it is likely that data collected to inform policies which may have an impact on young people's lives may be incomplete and/or out of date.

There are also limitations to policymakers access to data because of the ethical requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and the treatment of data capture and use arising from these restrictions on the acquisition and storing of personal data. A councillor with a financial background told me:

> "As soon as you get into the world of data, you get into this whole GDPR scenario. And then it's data that's collected for a purpose. And then, for us to use it for a different purpose is very difficult, even though that, in purely practical terms, that data will be hugely beneficial, useful to us. But the restrictions or at least the understanding of the restrictions by GDPR kind of limits the amount we interrogate that data." (M/c2)

Added to these concerns is the problem of sharing data between departments, because individuals may be re-identified once the merging of such sets has been completed. These all contribute to the departmental silo mentality and policymakers' ability to take a cross-cutting approach to policymaking and address what the late Professor John Stewart (INLOGOV[22]) used to call the 'wicked' issues facing local government.

Apart from the internal organisational issues surrounding data young people are also affected by structural changes instigated by central government. These are often outside the control of local government but must be enacted by it. For example, the re-organisation of post-16 education provision and support for young people who are unemployed. Further barriers to local government's effective use of data are central government's policies which have to be enacted at the local level influences over their choice of data collection methods and the unit of observation which may be imposed by national reporting requirements.

To the issues discussed above, must be added the restructuring of local government which has created an extra layer of government at city region level, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). Thus, there are now three tiers of political interest in the management of the city of Birmingham (central government; West Midlands Combined Authority for the city-region; and Birmingham City Council for the city itself) whose citizens are still coming to terms with the changes in responsibilities for policymaking and service provision. This may be further complicated by potentially competing political agendas – with a Labour run City Council and a Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands and national government. Moreover, there has been a growing involvement of independent think tanks and contracting of external academic research institutions to provide expertise in data collection and analysis at local level. A long serving local authority officer observed:

> "We used to have probably a community of about 20 or 30 of those sort of data experts who would do all this stuff. And I remember, every time the census came, it would be a big operation because I would be given the job of running that corporately, making sure that we planned the analysis and everybody shared it and applied it to policy work. But all of that's gone now. There seems fairly random activity. But having said all that, outside of the City Council, you've got new things

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[22] INLOGOV: Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham

like City-REDI[23] at the University. So they do regular analysis. And then at the Combined Authority, we're part of one of the Devolution deals, so we've got an office of data analytics and we've got some funding." (M/p02)

The influence of institutional 'bias' and individual values on policymaking

According to Christine Borgman (2016: 29), the term data "varies by context and by user" and their importance lies in the nature of their relationship to something else. Thus, I situate my discussion of the shaping of young people's inequalities by urban policymakers' use of data in the context of the social, economic and political issues which influenced urban policy priorities post 2007/8 and also the potential influence of the culture of the organisation. For example, when asked about the level of attention paid to young people in his local authority, a senior policy officer replied:

> "I would say that it's been pretty woeful over recent years. Yeah. Well, probably not just over recent years, I think, I think, as a whole tradition of, yeah, the City Council is probably a bit paternalistic, or a lot paternalistic, depending on your point of view. I think, whilst it's been forced to open up in terms of categories, like, particularly ethnicity, it's been less forced to do so on categories like age and gender." (M/p01)

Other members of the authority also acknowledged that, whilst they comply with their statutory responsibilities for young people, they do not necessarily prioritise expenditure on their issues when faced with major cuts in funding from central government and other statutory obligations. As a Councillor pointed out:

> "We've still got to do education, we've still got to do street cleaning and bin emptying as well as social care and everything else. So you can't just have one policy that we're gonna do. You've got to have a whole range of policies." (M/Cc2)

These organisational problems are often compounded by entrenched institutional cultures and practices such as departmental data silos whereby data cannot be shared because of a tradition of departmentalism in which each department manages and stores its own data "in diverse ways and formats", making them difficult to access (Ford, 2016).

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[23] CityREDI – City Region Economic and Development Institute

One policy officer illustrated the challenges around departmental silos by highlighting the problem of data sharing:

> "It's apparent that the sharing of data is a big issue....There doesn't seem to be one place where everyone knows they can go to find out what data has been collected, how you access that data and store it one place. (F/po6)

There are also less visible barriers to policymaking caused by both institutional 'bias' and the personal values and belief systems of those involved in policy development. Early on in my study of Beatfreeks, I had a discussion with the director of a social enterprise in the West Midlands about the use of data in local government. Based on his experiences, he commented that data is:

> "Only as good in the end as the people who have decided what to collect, the algorithms that are developed and the people who then manipulate it." (M/cp2)

During the course of my research I have found evidence to support his observations of the influence of the people involved in the policy process and its outcomes. A senior policy officer pointed out to me in one of our conversations that "older" policy officers in local government now make up a higher proportion of the workforce than before as there are fewer jobs available which in the past would have attracted younger applicants.

He said:

> "We're not recruiting young people so there is a disconnect anyway but you've got people who are not living in that world of young people – unless they've got kids of their own." (M/po2)

Decisions such as these may, therefore, add to the distance between young people and those in authority. From my own experiences as a policy officer, I recall an institutional tendency to label issues which policymakers wished to address as 'problems which needed to be solved'. I suggest that this internal discourse has thus reflected and reinforced this institutional 'bias' and contributed to a negative framing of young people. Behind this broad categorisation of young people as a 'problem' lie an array of terms which have been

used to describe the type of problem they represent such as: 'hard to reach'; NEETS[24]; troubled youth; unemployed; or living in deprived neighbourhoods.

Findings from my Case Study of Beatfreeks, show how this negative attitude may influence wider society. In a discussion about how gatherings of young people in public spaces are regarded by 'the authorities', a young creative practitioner observed:

"Officials just don't get it how young creatives work" (F/y7)

One 19 year old respondent to the BYT Survey of 2018 is quoted as saying:

"......there are some youths that have good thoughts but adults only focused on troubled youth and decide not to trust us all together (Anon)."

Algorithmic bias

Bias is also to be found in the construction and application of algorithms to datafied policymaking. Algorithms used for the sorting and analysis of digital data are also subject to institutional 'bias' and the values of individual officers involved in setting the criteria for the programming of the algorithms. These then determine the categories into which data are to be sorted and then applied to particular policies. It leads to a 'flattening' of individual variations into aggregated 'types' –with no room for individuation in analysis, only in data collection (Ayre and Craner, 2018). Officers working at the centre are unlikely to have the 'on the ground' intelligence to provide an alternative narrative to what the results of the algorithms are telling them and young people are, therefore, 'seen' through the lenses of the officers responsible for the algorithms. In Birmingham the reduction in specialist youth workers out in the community means that there is little information coming from the grassroots in the city to reinforce or challenge the findings from data analysis driven by these algorithms. It is possible that the latter's application in policymaking may thus reinforce structural and individual inequalities experienced by young people. Drawing on the work of Beraldo and Milan (2019), I regard the ability to influence data by institutional and individual values prior to their application as a form of agency. It not only empowers the institution and individual officers involved but also then

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[24] NEETS is acronym for Not in Education, Employment or Training

gives their interpretation of the findings agency to shape the lived experiences of their subjects for better or for worse.

Misrepresentation or absence from data

The literature also highlights how the datafied categorisation of young people into certain types may add to their inequalities by creating digital 'data doubles' or 'imaginaries' of young people for the purpose of policy intervention in their lives (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Threadgold, 2020). They discuss how these then may misrepresent young people's existence in the real world. Moreover, although it might be supposed that institutional and individual bias may also play a role in determining what data to call on, administrative constraints upon the institution's capacity to do this may make this less likely. As I mentioned in the previous section, the cuts in funding to local government and the loss of analysts to assess the potential value of particular data sources are likely to have increased the likelihood of relevant data sets being missed by officers without the necessary expertise (Giest, 2020). This then may render findings incomplete and analysis inaccurate.

Evidence from my research shows that these might not be the only reasons why potentially relevant information may be missing from policymaking. Even though Birmingham City Council has established relationships with external organisations such as universities and independent think tanks to assist in the gathering and analysis of data, individual departments may have missed opportunities to capitalise on data from the third sector. In an interview with a senior member of a long established community engagement organisation in the city, I was told how offers to collaborate in serving the interests of young people were declined by City Council officers because they felt they did not need any assistance:

> "There was this belief that all things that sat with a local authority was what should be protected and preserved, as opposed to standing back and thinking of ourselves as a city.... and I put forward the ideas to the local authority about how we might - when the crisis was hitting - how they might utilise, work collaboratively with a third sector organisation." (F/se2)

F/se1 went on to say:

> "See these are really smart offers but completely no take up at all. Absolutely, like literally <u>NO</u> take up. So for me that said something about the commitment and will to really address the challenges facing young people's lives."

In the spirit of the Open Data movement, F/se1 was willing to make data accessible to the City Council (subject to GDPR[25]) and confessed to being perplexed at the reluctance of these officials to engage in dialogue. This leads me to wonder whether their unwillingness to access and incorporate this data into their policymaking processes stems from individual as well as institutional attitudes such as those discussed above.

Political influence over policymaking and its implications for young people

Policymaking is bounded by the political realities within which decisions have to be taken and any serious change in the external socio-political environment can shift the balance of priorities for politicians as the Covid-19 pandemic has continued to show. The legacy of economic and social uncertainties arising from austerity combined with the pandemic has increased demands upon the public purse to address competing societal challenges and has compelled policymakers at all levels to make difficult policy choices over which problems to prioritise. In the case of Birmingham and the WMCA, the overriding political imperative has been to improve the economic performance and competitiveness of the city and surrounding region.   This focuses on improving connectivity through investment in transport and communications infrastructure and the application of digital technologies to streamlining and delivering more efficient front facing services targeted at service users.

Two of the most notable political priorities for local government have, therefore, been the Smart Cities initiative which involves the use of new technologies (usually ICT) and datafication as the means to solve the city's economic, social and environmental challenges (Centre for Cities, 2014) and the implementation of an ICT and Digital Strategy (2016 – 2021). One of Birmingham's stated objectives of Smart Cities is to use real-time transportation data and personal data to support more efficient transport planning. This includes "a trial software platform built into Birmingham's existing Commuter App that

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[25] GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

uses real-time transportation data and personal data to support more efficient transportation planning" (www.birmingham.gov.uk, accessed 2020). As findings from a focus group with young people in my study show, however, transport actually remains a constant source of frustration for young people who are amongst the most frequent travellers in and around the city:

> "As someone who used to go to college on the opposite side from where I live it was completely difficult because it was out of town. [Getting a bus] was seven o'clock in the morning for like an 8 o'clock start, because if any later I'm not getting in and that's down to buses running late. They're packed. They're slow because of traffic coming into the centre blocking things up. Trains are overcrowded because there's not enough, there's not enough running." M/fg1

Historically, Birmingham's transport infrastructure has been largely influenced by the priority given by city planners to the car in 1950s which led to the creation of a 'concrete collar' of roads and tunnels to take traffic round and under the city centre. The City Council has wrestled with increasing congestion arising from this legacy and a series of major projects have been and continue to be undertaken to improve traffic flows. The views of this focus group's members may not always be accurate but they are based on personal experiences such as the comment below:

> "There are no dedicated bus lanes, no dedicated cycle lanes" (F/fg2)

Nevertheless, these 'on the ground' perceptions of transport in the city are 'data' which could be useful to planners but remain missing from their deliberations because they carry little weight within a framework which prioritises the rollout of digital technologies to support the city's key economic priorities. Thus, it is top-down policymaking driven by this political imperative which determines what information is counted and what is left out (Durrant et al., 2018).   It would appear in this case that taking account of the views of young people is not useful in this context and so they continue to be disadvantaged by the lack of opportunity to influence decisions on issues that matter to them such as route planning, fares and traffic management.

In contrast to this top-down policymaking to press ahead with what is regarded as a priority critical to the city and region's recovery from recession, however, certain decision makers in

my study have been seeking to take a more inclusive approach to policymaking through public consultations on future spending priorities.

A senior Councillor told me:

> "One of the things I've actually been quite proud of is that while I've been a Councillor, seven years, every budget we have done we've gone out to consultation and we have changed something as a result of that consultation – so it works." (M/c1)

This traditional practice of consultation, however, has its flaws and particularly with regard to young people; and Councillors admit that there is a problem of connecting with them.

This same Councillor said:

> "The people I see at public meetings are like me – older. And they're good people and they know what they should be doing. They're engaging with the local society. That's brilliant. But I don't see any young people there." (M/c1)

He continued by saying that Councillors expected young people to come to them and there are plenty of ways of finding/getting hold of them if you know how to use it: "You've just got know where the routes are" (M/c1.) And that is the problem. It links to the discussion in the previous section about institutional 'bias'. Councillors in the past expected citizens to know how to contact them but communication patterns and technologies have changed. If young people are not aware of whom to contact and how, then they are unlikely to be very visible to policymakers. Moreover, if they do participate in information gathering initiatives of public institutions, they may be reluctant to answer certain questions. A fellow Councillor (M/c2) also commented on the challenges of obtaining data from citizens:

> "It does very much depend on what you're, what you're asking - whether people feel it's relevant. The classic example being, you know, the equalities questionnaire that we attach to consultations. Inevitably, you will always get a pushback on every consultation we do. It says, Why do you need to know about my sexuality? If you're asking me about that as well........ So the contentiousness of data collection is probably a thing we have to come to terms with as much as the politics of using data."

Thus, although policymakers might express a desire to consult young people and co-create policies with them, evidence from my interviews shows that, the intention is there but they find it difficult to put into practice. This may not only be because of the limits on local government budgets but because young people are less visible in their data collection. It might also explain why young people are low down in the list of local political spending priorities.

This comes back to politicians' and officers' approaches to classifying and then prioritising the 'problems' with which they have to deal. These are all political but not necessarily 'party political' concerns. The role of politicians as well as officers in initiating consultations and policymaking places them in a relationship which gives them power over young people. The officers collect, analyse, interpret data (however incomplete or influenced by institutional, personal and political belief systems) and then apply the findings to the problems. But, as a senior Councillor quite firmly asserted:

> "Consultations themselves don't determine policy. That's the important point. They inform policy. But our policy is based on our understanding of the challenges in the city." (Mc/1)

This confirms a well-established maxim: 'officers advise but politicians decide', whereby officers may provide information and offer advice but the final decisions rest with the politicians. In my experience of working with fellow policy officers in a number of major cities in the UK and the EU, however, there is often a close relationship between a politician and officers with specialist knowledge in the fields in which he /she is seeking to intervene. This makes it possible on some occasions, therefore, for an officer to 'encourage' the prioritisation of one option over another. Nevertheless, my colleagues and I acknowledged that, although the technical affordances of digital technologies could sort, categorise and prioritise data in ways which make the policy choices easier, it did not mean that this would change the politicians' policy decisions.

Effects of datafied policymaking on young people's inequalities

Drawing on Critical Political and Policy Studies, therefore, I discuss the effects of politicians and officials use of data in policymaking in relation to young people's inequalities. Researchers have expressed concerns over the consequences for citizens from the ways in

which digital data are interpreted and applied to policymaking. This in turn may create and reinforce inequalities and divisions through practices that are frequently obscure to those affected by them (Hintz; Dencik; and Wahl-Jorgenson, 2019). Hence, policymakers' decisions play a significant role in the shaping of young people's inequalities through their interventions   such as, for example, officers' interpretation of data derived from in-house or external data sources which leads to the negative representation of young people and their daily lives. I argue that when combined with the consequences of successive cuts to local government budgets, these institutional imaginaries may widen the disconnect between these young people and policymakers. In addition, findings from my interviews with policymakers suggest that there continue to be significant institutional barriers to the effective deployment of datafied decision making and so we may be in danger of overestimating the influence of digital data itself in shaping young people's inequalities.

Local authorities in major cities like Birmingham experienced swingeing cuts to their budgets as central government sought to reduce public expenditure as part of its austerity measures post 2007/8. This had a major knock-on effect on the ability of local government to deliver even existing services to citizens. Thus, for example, the ruling Labour Group on Birmingham City Council, like others councillors across the country, had to make difficult political choices over where to make savings. In a wide ranging conversation with two senior officers, we discussed the implications of budget cuts for their work across the city. I could hear the frustration in the voice of one of them as he reflected on the continuing funding crisis and its effects on services:

> "And I use the word crisis, because I'm also talking about schools, and also talking about public services, etc. and the demand on public services. So the old adage of more for less is wearing quite thin at the moment, and the pressure on officers that I see across the authorities is quite challenging, actually". (M/p03)

He also referred to youth services in particular:

> "The other challenge is disinvestment in youth services. And it was only last week when it was announced, investment has gone down by 80%. And in some areas now (they're) non-existent." (M/p03)

Young people's use of data

My research, however, covers not only the part played by data in public policymaking and in shaping young people's everyday lives but also explores the responses of young people towards these policies. Beatfreeks' growing interest in the potential of data to enable young people and policymakers to engage in more informed dialogue has been one of the key focuses of my study. Young people who may want to make a difference often lack self-belief and feel that they have neither the knowledge nor the skills to challenge those in authority. They talk about the problems they face but they do not necessarily know who to contact or to get their attention; hence, Beatfreeks' decision to generate their own data sets about the everyday lives of young people in Birmingham.

During the first year of my research with Beatfreeks, I observed the preparation and conduct of the company's first attempt to provide insights into the everyday lives of young people in Birmingham, Brum Youth Trends Survey, 2018. The survey had been devised and developed to give young people across Birmingham an opportunity to express their views on the city's infrastructure and services together with their lifestyles, aspirations and what issues mattered to them personally. This was a joint undertaking between members of the Beatfreeks core team and members of the wider Beatfreeks' community. Led by the then Head of DOINK[26], a small group of young people were tasked with helping formulate the questions and shape of the survey.

The Survey itself, comprising more than 60 questions was promoted and distributed in schools, colleges and universities across the city as well as via Beatfreeks' own networks of young people and social media. Around 1,500 responses were received by April 2018. From Survey design to collection, the process took at least 6 months. The data sorting and analysis was undertaken largely by one team member who worked long hours to get it into shape. I acted as a critical friend in the analysis of the survey responses and then participated in reviewing the writing up of the report. I also observed the lead up to, and conduct of a 'Summit' to share the results. This was a flagship project for the company with potentially the credibility of its founder and her company at stake. She was the driving force behind it as she saw it as a key vehicle for enabling young people to speak 'truth to

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[26] DOINK: Do and Think Tank

power' and a significant development in the work of the organisation. She and her team involved young people in all stages of the project from shaping the content of the Survey - suggesting issues, testing out questions and how they might be presented - to distribution and collection of questionnaires and helping run the final event.

The team members were very clear that the Survey questionnaire was "for everyone, particularly young people" and that it must take their voices into account as "it's important to get their perspective" and "we cannot assume what young people are thinking and feeling". Thus, the design of the questionnaire included looking at the language used to frame the questions and multiple choice responses to appeal to potential respondents. For example, certain questions offered a list of responses using urban youth slang such as meh for don't really care/ not bothered, yasss for being very positive about something, eeesh for feeling exasperated. This is in marked contrast to data gathering activities on young people as described by a senior local government authority officer:

> "The City Council is doing majority of its consultation online and wondering why they don't get much of a response. It's because people don't like online: a) because it's insensitive in a way and b) a lot of people don't have access to do stuff on the (*web*) site." M/p01

Responses to Brum Youth Trends Survey 2018

The Survey findings were also aimed at those in positions of power, with the publicity for the 2018 Survey on Beatfreeks website including challenges to the 'establishment' as well as young people such as: 'How long do we have to wait until someone stops to listen to the future of the city?' implying that young people feel their voices are not heard by those in power (www.beatfreeks.com). The published report, Brum Youth Trends 2018, contained themed summaries of the findings, each of which was accompanied by short commentaries from external practitioners/ researchers in the various topics addressed in the Survey. I believe they were intended to give the Report greater credibility in the eyes of decision makers and influencers across both public and private sectors as well as to raise its profile with the media.

The Report and certainly the Summit which followed later in the year did succeed in attracting the attention of political, business and cultural leaders. The Survey seemed to

catch the mood of the time, as cities in particular continued to be under pressure to make savings and yet were being expected to find additional resources to deal with growing social and other problems. This may explain the interest of Councillors and some officers in Birmingham City Council in the Beatfreeks' Survey as it had obtained more detailed, fine-grained data about young people's sentiments about living in and navigating the city compared to what was already available. It seemed to have resonated with one senior Councillor who expressed his concern that:

> "If the government disinvestment in communities continues, we are going to see more social deprivation, more social isolation, more social unrest civic ...." M/po3

The Survey also offered alternative insights for policymakers into many different aspects of young people's lives which were unlikely to have been obtained from the City Council's own often first-hand but often out-of-date data.

He also talked about the frustration of not having the funds to be able to get more and better data to inform decisions about where to invest other precious resources and told me:

> "Even if we were given the money, we're not the right people to do that work because we're not trusted, you know, white, middle-class male that, you know, doesn't, doesn't talk the same language." M/po3

Getting the right people to read a report is one thing but getting them to engage with its findings and discuss it, however, is quite another. This is where Beatfreeks used their creative and communication skills to devise an event to capture the attention of policymakers and influencers and bring them into direct contact with young people whose feelings, needs and dilemmas were reflected in the Survey. They set up a conference in Birmingham Town Hall in October 2018 called the Brum Youth Trends 2018 Summit and staged it as a 'happening' rather than a typical formal conference. I describe it in detail in the next chapter (Chapter 6: Voice, Recognition and Young People) and show how it plays to Beatfreeks' strengths, using creativity to 'humanise' the data and its findings and generate responses which involved the heart as well as the head.

An independent cultural practitioner gave me his impression of the Summit:

> "There was something evangelical about their event – a bit like a Billy Graham rally but without the religion." M/cp1

Certainly, I found myself affected emotionally by the young women in particular who got up on the stage to express their feelings in speech, poetry or song of what it is like for them to be young and dealing with the problems they face in their daily lives. Their brief impassioned performances about their reasons for wanting to make Birmingham a better city for themselves and their peers made a deep impression on me and on many other adults in the hall.

By the end of the Summit, Beatfreeks appeared to me to have secured the attention of a number of public and private sector influencers who were new to them as well as having cemented existing relationships such as those with the Mayor of the West Midlands and Cabinet members and Councillors of Birmingham City Council. Shortly afterwards, I discovered that the Summit and Report contributed to the decision by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to create a Young Combined Authority in 2019. I later learnt that Beatfreeks had been tasked with making this happen and that one of the company's young people who had made the journey from 'occasional' to 'team member' had been engaged to help the WMCA put together the Youth Board of thirty young people for this new body.

Forging these relationships and placing young people amongst decision makers is a sign of the shift of emphasis in the priorities for Beatfreeks which has taken place over the past two years. From being 'outsiders' they have become 'insiders', accepted by policymakers in local and regional government as valuable intermediaries between themselves and young people and the Voice of Beatfreeks has achieved recognition by those in positions of power. (See Chapter 6: Voice, Recognition and Young People).

This has set them up to take the next step in the journey towards empowering young people beyond Birmingham and the surrounding region. When I interviewed Anisa in early March 2020, she reflected on what she felt underpinned Beatfreeks work seven years on from its foundation. She said:

> "There's two key things, I think, that run through our work: one is creativity- and increasingly, I don't think it's about art. But I think it's about creativity. And the second driver is, I think, everything that we do has something about shifting power to young people."

From my most recent observations, her networking skills combined with the track record of the company's creative youth engagement plus Beatfreeks' ability to provide 'thick' data about young people have expanded the potential for Beatfreeks to move into that space around power relations with policymakers beyond Birmingham. Thus, the annual Brum Youth Trends Survey became the National Youth Trends Survey in 2020 and Beatfreeks has also undertaken a national single issue survey (Taking the Temperature) to capture young people's reactions to Covid-19 which was released in May 2020. I suggest that this latter activity is further evidence of the entrepreneurial ability of Beatfreeks' founder to seize the moment and enhance the company's reputation with 'the establishment'. I am left wondering, however, whether the growing interest in working 'inside' institutions and gaining a national profile will change the ethos of Beatfreeks and affect its relationships with young people.

Beatfreeks and public sector youth engagement activities

Local government budget cuts arising from the Labour government and carried on by the Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition government post 2010 fell particularly harshly on youth services. There are only a few detached youth workers left; youth clubs and other youth activities supported by public monies have dwindled in number. There have also been major cuts to the cultural budgets and services, as an officer from Birmingham City Council explained to me:

> "So already when I joined (2010), it was the first iteration of restructuring the funding portfolio, etc. And then the real fit. Yeah. A few years later. So the last five years have been the worst.......So the budget has reduced by - support for the arts - by 70%......" (M/p05)

This officer also pointed out that the number of members in the team had been severely cut:

> "It's actually three officers who are working on a sort of part-time rota. Yeah, basic, which is interesting, because we used to be fifteen." (M/p05)

He and his colleague are clearly very concerned about their continuing inability to deliver the kind of cultural services they would like to provide for young people – particularly the disadvantaged. They acknowledged the need for policy interventions in engagement

activities and cultural services for young people in the city in spite of the cuts. Yet, even if they wished to recruit external agencies to gather information about areas of greatest need, they do not have the resources to do what they consider to be a good job.

It appears, therefore, that Beatfreeks has been well positioned to fill some of the gaps. In 2013 and 2014, Anisa and her friend and colleague, Amerah, had already been developing a reputation for running creative youth engagement projects on behalf of local authorities and other organisations. I recall asking a member of the Culture Team in Birmingham City Council at that time to recommend a youth engagement company which could help me connect with hard- to-reach youngsters and being told that she had had excellent reports of the work of a relatively new company working with young people called Beatfreeks.

The positive feedback from projects about the company led to an increasing number of public sector commissions and reinforced the impression amongst policymakers that Beatfreeks was a 'go to' organisation for connecting with young people. Thus, its growing reputation as a creative youth engagement company opened up other opportunities to connect itself and young people to decision makers.

When I questioned one experienced third sector community youth practitioner about Beatfreeks, however, she was concerned that they seemed to have acquired too much access and influence to the exclusion of others:

> "What I kept on hearing was, well, that's gone to Beatfreeks, that's gone to Beatfreeks and that's gone to Beatfreeks as if, and literally it was almost as if there wasn't anyone else in the city that the others could invest in to support transition in changing the lives of young people". (F/cp5)

She was clearly not impressed with the ways in which policymakers have approached youth work. She told me:

> "During the time that I've been involved in Birmingham, it's almost like we're always trying to rethink the system. Instead of looking at what's wrong, and looking at how do we fix it, we just kind of go, Okay, we'll disinvest here and we'll reinvest there." (F/cp5)

She went on to say:

> "Now, one of the things that I think also I felt was featured when you started look at the agencies that were brought to the table, was there was always a bit of exoticism."

Reflecting on these observations, I presume that she included Beatfreeks in this category of 'exotic agencies' because the way they have portrayed themselves on line, for example, is as a highly energetic, eclectic and colourful group of young people having fun and doing crazy things. Their imagery is informal as is their language. Yet their aims and objectives, their core values and projects are clearly set out and supported by more formally presented documentation. So it seems as if the company has tried to position itself to appeal not only to young people but to policymakers and members of the business community; all three groups, I suggest need an approach tailored to their specific values and needs. In the next chapter, therefore, I examine in more detail the ways in which this youth engagement company combines its own collection and analysis of data with creative practices in order to draw the attention of institutional influencers and decision makers to the voices of the young people whom it seeks to highlight.

CHAPTER 6: VOICE, RECOGNITION AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the relationship between young people and policymakers from the perspective of young people themselves, particularly those who feel distanced from current political structures and marginalised in mainstream society. This is within the context of what Poulantzas described as "a series of rituals and style of speech, as well as structural modes of formulating and tackling problems that monopolises knowledge in such a way that the popular masses ……. are effectively excluded" (Poulantzas, 1978; 2014:60). It is a counterbalance to the last chapter in which I focused on what might be called 'institutional voices' and the use of data in decision making, particularly at the local level, which may have potentially adverse effects on young people's lives. Government officials or employees of other public agencies make use of digital data to assist them in determining the nature of the problems which they face and the interventions to address them. Who, however, considers what effects these interventions might have in practice on the intended – or unintended – subjects of their policymaking? What opportunities are there for such subjects to challenge or reshape them?

Thus, I have sought to examine how young people who – often unwittingly – are affected by such policymaking might be able to contest policies which they consider unfair or unreasonable or which they feel show a lack of awareness of what really matters to them in their daily lives. I suggest that some might be accepting of their situation – 'it is what it is'. On the other hand, however, my findings indicate that others are really frustrated about what seems to them to be unjust or stigmatising and are keen to find ways to make those who are in a position to bring about change to take their concerns seriously. They want to know how they can engage in a more positive dialogue with key influencers and decision makers, one which, in the words of Anisa is:

> " fuelled by data and stories, that intends to raise the voices of young people but also make policymakers listen."

I suggest that these concerns relate to wider debates around the political, economic and social consequences for young people growing up in the 'years of austerity' in a neo-liberal

context: Generation Z[27] (Rue, 2018). They have been amongst the hardest hit by the exacerbation of existing structural inequalities. For example, following the global financial crisis of 2008, the labour market became increasingly precarious and changes in welfare provision further disadvantaged young people. In addition, new resource inequalities (Blackburn, 2008) emerged such as those around access to data and use of the internet for many economically underprivileged young people (Robinson L., 2009). Together with individual disadvantages arising from their age, gender, ethnicity or locality, these have helped to fuel young people's disillusion and distrust of policymakers and deepen the divide between them (Citispyce Final Report, 2016; Guentner et al., 2018).

In the first part of this chapter, therefore, I give a brief resume of the issues which have contributed to this divide and the political, social and cultural environments in which young people seek to be acknowledged and find their place. I situate this in literature on citizens' participation or engagement in political and civic life and on the position of youth in a post 2008 environment (Sloam, 2007; 2016).   For young people in the UK who have experienced the increasing levels of resource inequalities during the years of austerity, neoliberal economics have continued to play a significant role in their feelings of disenchantment and disengagement with electoral politics (Hart and Henn, 2017).   Indeed, the cohort of young people on which my research has been focused, the 15 to 29 year-olds of 2017/20, continue to be adversely affected not only by cuts in spending on social welfare provision and investment in public services but also by increases in the costs of daily life.

These are, however, only a few of reasons which have been advanced for the reluctance of young people to participate in established democratic practices and structures (Sloam, 2014). They also include the increasing gap between those who have been elected to represent citizens, whether at national or subnational level, and those whom they represent, particularly young people. I would add to these: not being able to relate to the priorities of conventional political discourse and the plethora of organisations, expert bodies and interest groups which compete for ordinary citizens' attention. Moreover, there is the longstanding issue affecting political participation in the UK concerning the first-past-the –post voting system which favours the major parties at the expense of the smaller ones.

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[27] Generation Z or Gen Z is shorthand for the generation reaching adulthood in the second decade of the 21st century, perceived as being familiar with the internet from a very young age.

The latter tend to attract more young voters who then feel that their votes are wasted and their voices go unheard when their candidates fail to get elected.   It is linked to the highly centralised nature of government in Britain, where, in spite of the attempts to devolve decision making to the individual countries within the Union and to the regions in England, the reality is that most power remains with central government and its bureaucracy. Thus, there is little incentive for citizens to participate in local political or indeed civic activities and it may add to a growing distrust and disillusion with established institutions of government and current political processes (Norris, 2011).

The other side of the coin, however, is that politicians and officials may take the low numbers of young people exercising their right to vote as an indication not of problems of democratic structures but a problem of young people themselves. Yet this may be because they view their world and their opportunities within it differently from their parents' generation since they have grown up in a time of shifting social, political and economic contexts (Woodman and Wynn, 2012). These differences in generational values and attitudes are also relevant to the analysis of the relationship between policymakers and young people since, as Woodman and Wyn point out,   "Youth policy may be based on the understandings of youth held by policymakers who themselves grew up as part of a different generation" (2012: 271). Yet it may not be confined solely to youth policy but applicable to policymaking more generally. Previously in my thesis, I have given an example of a policy initiative to help young people improve their employment opportunities which had a low take up rate because of policymakers' lack of awareness of barriers to their participation. This underlines the problem some young people face: policy interventions which are well-intentioned but which may be inappropriate or inadequate because their voices have not been heard. Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2017) make the point, however, that all young people have a wealth of resources and experience which they can bring to bear in their engagement with the world. They suggest that young people's 'restorying'[28] of their situation can play a key part in countering 'normative and deficitizing frameworks' of youth through drawing on their own and their peers' experiences of

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[28] I understand 'restorying' in this context to be the creation by young people of their own alternative narratives of the world in which they live based on their personal experiences.

everyday life. But how might this be done? And, as I pose in the first of my research questions:

> How might the collection, creative use and communication of alternative forms of data enable young people to challenge negative policy interpretations of their everyday lives?

For Beatfreeks, the answer lies in enabling the voices of young people to be heard, listened to and acted on by those with the power to make the decisions that may shape their life chances.

The Voices of Young People

In this century, national and local government and public sector agencies have characterised youth in a variety of ways in order to enable them to gather data and inform the construction of economic, social and cultural policies which may be broadly applicable to young people across the country. They may thus have rendered young people knowable in all their diversity but it is from a perspective influenced by institutional political and policy objectives which may determine what data to collect and their application to policymaking. It may not, however, generate a narrative of young people's lives which accords with the one which young people construct for themselves.

The literature on young people's participation includes references to the voice or voices of young people as do field notes from my observations of the activities of Beatfreeks. Therefore, I now seek to explore how young people are able to give 'voice' to their particular needs and concerns but, more importantly, how the language they use and the manner in which they express themselves also play a part in convincing their audience to sit up and take notice and respond to them. In order to do so, I draw primarily on Nick Couldry's exploration of the concept of Voice whilst also referencing Leah Bassel and her work on Listening.

In his seminal work, *Why Voice Matters* (2010), Couldry posited that Voice is the process of giving an account of the world in which we act and that it is "a process of exchange between self and others" Couldry (2010:92). If we are denied that possibility, then it is as though our voices have no significance; they do not matter. He situates his argument in a critique of neoliberalism in which he maintains that the discourse around economic life and

market forces does not value voice. I regard this as particularly relevant to decisions taken by government at both national and local levels that may contribute to young people's inequalities: for example, in areas such as employment, education and training. In Couldry's view, however, Voice is much more than a description of the process of speaking; it has to be in a form that may enable it to be effective. In other words, it must be able to capture the attention of its intended public(s) which means it must be recognised as having value and being worth listening to.

Young people – unequal and unheard

The deepening divide between young people and the state (in this case politicians and officers within national and government) has long been the subject of critical debate amongst scholars and political and social commentators. Similarly, there has been continuing research interest in the UK and across the EU into the causes and symptoms of inequality in society and more specifically amongst young people. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, however, there has been a significant increase in both young people's reluctance to be involved in the current political structures and in youth inequalities (Hart and Henn, 2017; Stigendal, 2018). Therefore, I argue that there is a pressing need to gain greater insights into the challenges that young people face in seeking to be acknowledged by decision makers.

Moreover, according to Nick Couldry in his inaugural: 'A Necessary Disenchantment: myth, agency and injustice in a digital world', published in the Sociological Review (2014), the ability to gather masses of information through the internet and to process this Big (and small data) risks missing out the voices of individuals. In his words: "the single story - your story, my story – really doesn't matter" (2014: 889). As I highlighted in the previous chapter, algorithms used to interpret data may, for example, fail to take into account certain traits because of their programming. Hence, policies based on such algorithmic analysis may not meet the needs of the subjects – intended or unintended – of their policymaking and the reality of their situation may remain misrepresented or even invisible (Ayre and Craner, 2018). This, for me, is why investigating how young people are able to speak directly to others about their own lived experiences is so important.

Reflecting on this, I wonder if I have been motivated to interrogate the role of Voice in this relationship between policymakers and young people because of my own experiences of

how the voice is an expression of oneself but also has the power to affect others. From as far back as I can remember I have loved reading and the sound of the spoken word but also the combination of words and music together in song. Both speaking and singing have a power to evoke emotion in the intended listener(s) - at the very least to catch and hold their attention. Over the intervening years, I have used my voice in a variety of circumstances such as in classrooms, conferences, concerts and on stage and radio, and in different ways: to instruct, to persuade, to question, to assert authority, to restore calm and to affect emotions. But Voice is not just about sounds. As Couldry points out in his book, *Why Voice Matters*, Voice is also an expression of an opinion about the world. It is, therefore, more than a process or tool for verbal communication, it is "the means whereby people give an account of the world in which they act" (2010:91).

Couldry situates his argument in a critique of neoliberalism in which he contends that market-driven politics have become the new norm and that capital and finance have a greater influence over national economies than their governments. He argues that as a consequence of this, national democratic systems are less likely to be able to enable 'voice'. Political systems, however, that require some level of democratic legitimacy require for their survival some form of 'voice' and the failure to have these undermines the process of democratic representation of the will of the people. Hence it might appear that voice – even collective voice is not valued. If we are denied a possibility of expressing our views, Couldry asserts that it is as if our voice is of little or no importance. For example, when young people see that the only opportunity offered for them to 'have their say' in society is through voting for a party which is unlikely to win power, they may feel that their voice is not valued and turn to other ways to make it heard.

An attention to Voice, however, "means paying attention, as importantly, to the conditions for affective voice, that is, the conditions under which people's practices of voice are sustained and the outcomes of those practices validated" (Couldry, 2010: 113). This is not only applicable to politics but also to other areas of our lives as we each seek to give an account of ourselves. Yet, how are our voices to be heard and what might be the conditions which enable them to become 'effective' as well as affective? This is a key issue for those who are seeking to enable young people to be heard as well as seen. We need to understand what part Voice plays in our ability to explain the world in which we act.

Andrew Sayer in his book 'Why things matter to people' states, "We are beings whose relation to the world is one of concern" and our voice is a way of expressing our concerns" (2011:2).

Voice is a social resource but, using it both affectively and effectively to attract and retain the attention of others depends on our individual resources such as the range of our vocabulary. The more limited the vocabulary, the more difficult it is for someone to express their feelings and needs adequately when compared to someone who has had the benefit of growing up in an environment where conversation, reading and writing are part of their everyday (Sayer, 2011). Thus, we also need to take notice of the ways in which individual and social landscapes or contexts shape voices and give them meaning and value (Gilligan, 1982). They can be affected by individual characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, disability as well as the political, economic and social structures within which a person has grown up and now lives out his/her adult life. As Couldry highlights, however, drawing on the work of Beverley Skeggs (1997), it is difficult for any individual to marshal and exercise control over the resources with which they can construct their own narratives. Yet these narratives are important because how we portray ourselves to others may be an asset or a barrier to having that effective voice which is acknowledged by others.

Acknowledgement or recognition, however, requires respect from the listener for the person who is speaking and thus, listening is intrinsic to the recognition of voice (Bassel, 2017). How can those who may be constrained by not having a socially or politically valued position or space from which to speak secure that attentive listening without which their voice has no effect?   As Patricia Moy observes in her article *The Promise and Perils of Voice*, in considering the significance of Voice: "it is not whether voice matters but whose voice matters" (2020:3). I contend, therefore, that these two related aspects of Voice: 'recognition' and 'listening' play an important part in what young people perceive to be their unequal relationship with those in authority. To these I should add, however, the power of emotion which can drive a person to want to speak and have their views recognised.

 I have already referred in Chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter to the potential disadvantaging effects of data-driven policymaking on young people's lives. They have contributed to narratives which some young people feel are stigmatising and unjust and

which they consider show no signs of their own views being listened to by policymakers. In my fieldwork, I have identified examples of where local government officers set out to consult young people but only after they had set the terms of reference for the subjects to be included in that consultation. They acknowledged the need to listen to young people's views but the dialogue was based on pre-determined boundaries set by these officials. On the one hand, I suggest that there was recognition of young people's voices by virtue of the fact that they had been consulted. On the other, however, their voices were confined to the topics pre-selected by the officials and they had no certainty that officials would listen to or act on their responses. This example illustrates the issue of whose voices are considered worthy of being acknowledged or not. I consider that a silent response from officials can be as eloquent a message of their opinions as one which is actually spoken and it appears that both are deemed to be of greater value than the voices of the youth participants in the consultation.

Both Couldry and Bassel maintain that effective Voice involves both *speaking* (my italics) and *listening* which Couldry describes as "an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative" (2010:9).   In the next section, therefore, I draw on Couldry's work to help frame my own exploration of the different ways in which young people are communicating their individual or shared experiences of life in 21st century Birmingham with political, cultural and business influencers. Certainly, they are using their physical voices in speech, poetry or song to express their personal feelings and reactions to what is happening in their daily lives. But they are also using other non-verbal forms of communication such as written texts and a range of creative and performative practices to engage different publics in conversation in 'neutral' spaces.

Before I discuss my suggested conceptual framing of Voice, however, I want to share my impressions and reactions to the Brum Youth Trends Summit in 2018. This was organised by Beatfreeks to engage influencers from the public, business and cultural sectors in a dialogue with young people on the findings of the company's Brum Youth Trends (BYT) Survey about their lives. They are based on notes which I made at the time and reflected on later. The event crystallised for me the importance of finding ways to make an impression (Couldry, 2006) on others with whom one wishes to have a meaningful interaction across difference and inequality (O'Donnell et al., 2009).

 "I'm standing at the back of a darkened auditorium in Birmingham Town Hall looking at hijabs, T-shirts, school uniforms, blond ponytails, intricate braided locks amongst the row upon row of young people. But also looking at a colourful backdrop to the stage and some kind of installation across it. It feels like there is a real buzz of anticipation for what is to come. And yes, I can see some white shirts and suits here too. It's running a bit late but now the stage is set, the lights are on and the DJ and compère are ready to go. This is certainly not going to be an ordinary event for this venerable building. Yet it still promises to be one which follows in the tradition of the Town Hall being a people's hall where citizens have gathered over the years to listen to speeches by politicians and civic leaders and take part in debates on the great issues of the day. In this case, young people from across the city have come to hear and question what civic, cultural and business leaders have to say in response to the findings from Beatfreeks' 2018 survey of how young people feel about their lives today. But they also want to have their chance to speak and to ask questions.

Suddenly, the tall, rangy figure of the 'master of ceremonies' strides to the centre of the stage, talking fast and loudly into his hand mike. As he explains what is to happen and introduces key speakers, he raises his voice and the tempo in the hall, urging the audience to greet them with clicks and whoops and clapping. "Louder, louder", he cries,

gesturing with his hands. I noted down that it's beginning to feel more and more like a revivalist rally!

Then the presentations begin. As they progress, I am struck by the contrast between the formal speeches (so carefully crafted and delivered) of invited guests from local politicians to national cultural leaders and the ways in which the young speakers choose to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Their passionate, personal testimonies expressed through prose, music or poetry have a power not only to hold my attention but to move me - and it's a far stronger feeling than I ever expected. And I ask myself the question: "Are other audience members from business, academia, local government or the arts as affected as I am on hearing the views of young people so creatively and passionately expressed?"

Voice and Recognition

Conceptualising Youth Voices

Although much of Couldry's discussion on Voice is situated within a critique of neoliberalism and its limitations on Voice, I consider that the basic tenets of his analysis of Voice and what is needed for it to be effective are applicable in more localised or specific circumstances whether this be within a city, a neighbourhood or a local sports club. Based on my findings from the Brum Youth Trends Summit, however, together with observations of young people made over the course of my research, I felt the need to rethink the kinds of Voice that they deploy to gain recognition from those in power. Hence, in addition to Collective Voice and Missing Voice discussed Nick Couldry and Leah Bassel, I have framed an alternative typology of the voices of young people which I suggest may enable a more nuanced analysis of its role in their relationships with 'the establishment'. They are as follows:

♦ Creative Voice;
♦ Provocative Voice;
♦ Constructive Voice;
♦ Collective Voice;
♦ Missing or Silent Voice.

Creative Voice

I was struck by the creative energy which seemed to be in the auditorium. The staging of the event was itself highly theatrical. The set, the lighting, the compering were all calculated to focus attention on the stage and build a sense of anticipation as if one were in an arena waiting for the headline act to appear. When some of the young participants took to the stage, they used their own creative practice in the forms of spoken word, rap or song to express their thoughts and feelings about their situation. They imbued everything they did with emotion; the vocabulary they used was emotive; their body language showed how much they cared about what they were doing -and they held the audience's attention.

Provocative Voice

The speech of Beatfreeks' founder was couched in language calculated to challenge decision makers to sit up and take notice. In other words, she sought to provoke them through her passionate and emotive presentation to get them to go beyond 'listening' to thinking more deeply about what they could do to tackle the issues raised. I noted how she changed both the tone of her voice and her body language as she sought to stir them into take positive action. She listed some of the Survey's key findings on the inequalities facing young people, pausing for dramatic effect between each one. She then threw out a challenge to members of the audience from both private and public sectors to commit to taking positive action to improve things for the city and its young people. She pointed to a placard in the auditorium and urged them to make their way to the 'Pledge Wall' and post a statement of what they intended to do. These commitments would be there for everyone to see and I got the sense that anyone who signed up realised that they would be held to account if they failed to deliver!

Constructive Voice

None the less, the way in which Anisa organised and delivered her speech seemed designed to appear not too provocative as it was tempered by references to wanting to work together with the public and private sectors to make Birmingham a better place for all. What she had to say, therefore, then came over as measured in tone, implying a willingness on the part of her company to collaborate with those in positions of power and influence. She came over as a responsible citizen who had the ear of young people

interested in having a constructive dialogue with policymakers from which both they and the youth of the city might benefit.

Collective Voice

In discussing the culture of Beatfreeks in Chapter 4, I highlighted ways in which Anisa and members of her team have been able to develop a sense of community and collective solidarity. This manifests itself through having shared aims and values which permeate the different ways in which they express themselves; how they, act, speak and write. Together they make a Collective Voice through which young people involved in their activities may make themselves heard because of the recognition accorded to Beatfreeks by those with influence. I consider that this is due to their reputation for understanding the needs and aspirations of young people and its constructive approach to championing their cause.

Silent Voice or Missing Voice

So far in this section, I have focused on ways in which young people can be enabled to make their voices heard but I have not addressed the problem of the Missing or Silent Voice which has been raised particularly in the context of political participation. Nevertheless, I believe these types of Voice are still valid. The language used by policymakers may be regarded as 'silencing' because young people are unable to understand or are uncomfortable with the prospect of having to participate in a dialogue which disadvantages them through the lack of a shared vocabulary. (Grimm and Pilkington, 2015). In addition, the priorities of policymakers in some cases may render certain young people missing or invisible if they cannot find an effective way to make their voices heard.

This applies to some of the young creatives who are attempting to make a living from their creative practice. They are often freelancers whose lived experiences may involve structural inequalities arising from conditionality of access to welfare and the continuing precarity of the labour market. As self-employed cultural workers they seem to be towards the bottom of the list for any form of government support and nowhere is this more evident than in the Covid-19 period of lockdown of March/April 2020. Cultural practitioners are not regarded as essential to the economy or to the Healthcare System so they have little use-value in a market- driven economy. Although some attention has been paid to creatives indirectly via the media and social media, (largely because of celebrity artists online performances or

fundraising activities), young creatives with few resources and limited profile are mostly ignored. Yet, one of the ways in which they could make their voices heard is through the very exercise of their own performativity. As artists, actors, singers or poets, they have the potential to attract attention from different publics, making use of both on and offline media. The problem may remain, however, as these young people are only single voices amongst multiple voices competing to be heard and so their voices may still go unnoticed and unacknowledged. To be effective, it has to be an extraordinary performance to win recognition (Tacchi, 2018).

Analysing my data

Using the above concepts, I now turn to analysing the data I have gathered on the various activities of Beatfreeks aimed at raising the visibility and voice of young people and creating access for them to decision makers and influencers in both the public and the private sectors. I focus first on the Brum Youth Trends Survey and its purpose which I discussed in detail in Chapter 4. The Survey was aimed at those in positions of power, mainly in Birmingham and the surrounding city region but not exclusively and highlighted how many of those young people who took part feel invisible and of little account in the city.

So what does the Survey signify in terms of a counter-narrative to policymakers' datafied interpretation of young people and their issues? For some, it might have raised practical concerns over infrastructure planning but for others, including me, it highlights the continuing frustration of young people at policymakers' apparent failure to seek out or acknowledge young people's views on issues which they feel need addressing in the city.

In exchanges between myself and Anisa at the end of my fieldwork, we discussed how her conceptualisation of 'data' had moved on from the company's early forays into the gathering and visualisation of information through physical installations with which the public could engage using more than just seeing or hearing.   She based her comments on her experiences of Beatfreeks' initiatives such as the monthly Poetry Jam held in a local coffee shop in Birmingham, the experiments with physical and the BYT Summits of 2018 and 2019 at which young people expressed their views through singing, rapping or passionate speech-making.

She maintains that these forms of 'voice' are also 'data' since they offer insights into how young people <u>feel</u> about their everyday lives and their relationships with influencers and decision makers in society. My findings reveal, however, that there are few opportunities for young people to engage directly with policymakers since they are seldom in a situation where they can meet and talk with them.   For example, the policymakers whom I interviewed acknowledged that young people rarely got involved in public consultations, even when invited. Yet, the 2018 Survey showed that 22% of respondents identified that what mattered most to them about living in Birmingham was 'having a voice'. The findings from this first survey became the basis for the first Brum Youth Survey Report which was targeted at influencers across the city and aimed to be permanent representation of the 'voices of young people' because the information gathered from young people had been sorted and analysed by young people themselves. Beatfreeks' data activities, however, were then on a tiny scale compared to national government's and major companies' data collection but have developed and expanded over time. The company continues to collect and sort analogue data by human agency and has used it to open up new conversations with policymakers about youth in Birmingham and more recently in other parts of the UK. This has enabled Beatfreeks to move into a more political space (Ruppert et al., 2018) as the company has deployed its own analogue data findings to contest what they perceive to be the digital data-driven decisions made by public policymakers. Anisa has also been able to build on one of the original pillars of her fledgling company which involved the offer to business to use creativity to "humanise data to tell better stories and facilitate better decisions".

So, why has this particular Survey and associated Report become so significant for my research question? On the one hand, they provide evidence to support the findings in the literature on the reluctance of young people to participate in existing democratic processes and on their continuing disconnection from the priorities of those in power. On the other, it appears to show that some young people care enough about issues affecting their daily lives to take part in this particular survey conducted by Beatfreeks who claim to be able to get the attention of the people who make the decisions. There are, however, other organisations in Birmingham which work with and for young people and could make similar

claims e.g. Uprising[29], Bite the Ballot[30], The Prince's Trust[31] and BRAP[32]. So why are Beatfreeks able both to convince young people to engage with them and then to connect with decision makers and influencers? I sought to answer this question in more detail in my Case Study of Beatfreeks (Chapter 4) and focus here on the ways in which Beatfreeks Surveys and linked Reports may enable the Collective Voice of young people not only to be heard but actively listened to. I begin with the Survey and the role it plays in enabling the Voice of young people.

The Brum Youth Trends Survey as Collective Voice

The development and use of the Survey illustrates several ways in which Voice is deployed and may be effective. Firstly, it makes a claim to be a channel through which the Youth Voices can be heard by the gathering of analogue data from young people by young people. Secondly, the Survey makes it clear that young people have been directly involved in the interpretation of this data as well as in the writing and presentation of the Final Report itself. Hence, their voices were visible in written form on-line and in print for their peers to read. Both the style of publication and the language used were calculated to catch the attention of 'establishment' but were also intended to challenge more young people to consider their needs and issues and what the City Council and others could and should do to resolve them. The question is whether this was effective as a means of getting the views and feelings of these young people not only seen but read, thought about and possibly, acted upon. What else, however, might be needed to secure recognition for their Collective Voice and its message?

I maintain that the Summit presented the physical embodiment of the Collective Voice of young people to those with influence in the worlds of business, local government, academia and arts and culture. They probably outnumbered the adults by about three to one and they had shown enough interest in the Survey to be willing to turn up at the Summit. They might not have been interested in 'Politics' per se but they were still

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[29] UpRising: a youth engagement organisation based in London which aims to encourage young people to become 'change-makers'.

[30] Bite the Ballot ceased activity early in 2020

[31] The Princes Trust: founded by Charles, Prince of Wales in 1976 to help young people aged between 11 – 30 to build confidence, do courses and start careers, helping them to achieve their full potential.

[32] Birmingham Race Action Partnership: a charity working to improve equality in today's society.

interested in what affects their daily lives and may have wanted to find a way to let others know what they think and feel without having to get involved in existing political processes. These things matter to them as individuals but may not be to the extent that they lead to political action with a capital P. They can, however, be expressed as part of the Collective Youth Voice represented by Beatfreeks and its founder. She spoke with confidence about the problems of young people and what 'young people' want. Her 'demands' were met with signs of approval such as finger clicks from the young audience. They appeared to trust in her voice to speak for them on the day and there was very little reluctance amongst the youthful audience to put their hands up in order to comment or pose questions from the floor to speakers.

Provocative Voice and Constructive Voice

In her opening speech at the Summit, Anisa presented the 'adults' in the audience with a number of provocations including the question: "Who runs Brum (Birmingham)?" and an instruction: "Don't just ask its young people to speak up. Afford them the respect to sit down and listen." She also went on to say:

> "Last year we were shocked to find no non-sector or non–issue-specific research into youth in Birmingham. It simply didn't exist ------so we made it!"

At this, I noticed questioning looks being exchanged between some of the 'adults' in the hall and whatever they were thinking, her statement had certainly provoked a reaction and caught their attention. She went on, however, in a different style, using the language of what I conceptualise as Responsible Voice referring to the Survey, saying:

> "We opened it up as our gift back to the city; a tool of collective intelligence, pulling as much rich insight together on, frankly, a lot of good will, passion and belief."

She went on:

> "We're creating a pioneering report for this city...which asks young people what they feel about themselves, about each other and Birmingham.........We want to get to know the city's reason for being, its under-25 population, and we want <u>you</u> to get to know them too."

Her tone is measured and her offer is one of collaboration for mutual benefit. From my involvement in conversations within the Beatfreeks team prior to the Summit, I realised that her objective was to secure access to policymakers and influence in policymaking processes for representatives of young people or young people themselves, hoping that their Voice will then be listened to and recognised.

Creative Voice

The Summit, as I highlighted in my observations above, also brought to the fore the potential of young people's creativity to offer alternative ways in which to get their feelings and concerns heard and acknowledged. Thus poetry, rap or song offers other forms of Voice which, through their power to affect and stir up people's emotions may win and hold the attention of those who hear them. In the Summit, one young woman sang about her experiences of life in the city in such a way that it elicited more clicks and murmurs of empathy from the audience than anyone else. Creative Voice can also apply to visual as well as vocal 'narratives' of people's experiences. Data visualisation whether in digital or physical form has been a key part of Beatfreeks' toolkit for facilitating the interrogation of data and gaining more and possibly better insights into their meaning. Thus, they created a physical visual installation relating to the Survey data for use in the Summit. It enabled them to engage members of the audience in dialogue and capture their responses to what they had heard and seen. Enabling them to 'play' with the data and ask questions had the potential to reinforce its value and increase recognition.

Discussion

I set out in this chapter to answer the following question from the perspective of young people: "In what ways might young people be enabled to make visible their concerns and their aspirations in order to counter perceived disadvantages arising from policymakers' data-influenced interpretations of their lives?" Politics and economic and social resources play a major part in determining the landscapes in which young people live and make meaning of their lives. If their needs are not acknowledged or their circumstances are misrepresented by policymakers, then they may feel unvalued and ignored. This, in turn, may lead to disillusion with the polity and a disconnection from political institutions and

processes as well as mainstream society (Hart and Henn, 2017). Their voices, therefore, are frequently missing from any consideration of issues which may affect their everyday lives.

Through my empirical findings of my research with Beatfreeks in Birmingham, I have identified ways in which it is possible for such young people to draw attention to their concerns and aspirations through enabling their voices not only to be heard but listened to and acted on. In order to interrogate my findings, I have drawn on concepts of Voice as proposed and discussed by Nick Couldry and Leah Bassel. I have also suggested my own interpretations of Voice to help me to achieve a more fine grained understanding of the transactions between young people and those in positions of authority and reflected on the role of Beatfreeks in making manifest the voices of young people. I argue that the founder (Anisa) and her team exercise agency in bringing young people's voices to the attention of policymakers. Yet, they also give these young people agency to counter the often disadvantaging policy narratives of their everyday lives by opening up opportunities and space to tell their own stories with creativity and passion. In the following chapter, I consider in more depth the power dynamics at work in what I regard as the unequal relationship between policymakers and young people.

CHAPTER 7: POWER, RESISTANCE AND DATA

Introduction

My research has been situated in the context of neoliberalism as enacted in the years of austerity following the global financial crisis of 2008. This has seen an increasing distance and distrust between those who govern and the governed (Sloam and Henn, 2019), which has become particularly apparent amongst the current generation of young people. Many of them face both existing and new forms of inequality. They feel ignored and misrepresented by those responsible for policymaking and powerless to bring about change (Brum Youth Trends Report, 2018). In this study, therefore, I have explored how young people are challenging what they perceive to be negative institutional narratives about their lives through the use of their own initiatives and through the interventions of youth engagement organisations such as Beatfreeks. I argue that, by acting together to gather and make sense of this data, young people are able to put forward an alternative way of knowing the reality of their situation and thus resist the dominant normative narratives of policymakers.

Where there is resistance, however, there is also a power dynamic as "the struggle for justness and fairness can never be separated from power relations" (Johansson and Lalander, 2012:1085). In this chapter, therefore, I examine ways in which young people may be enabled to resist the effects of decisions made by those in positions of power. For example, evidence from my research shows how Beatfreeks' approach to working with young people may lead not only to their empowerment as individuals but also to their collective empowerment to challenge the institutional assumptions about them. In contrast to this, Beatfreeks uses the power of its own knowledge of young people and insights into their attitudes and concerns to get inside the 'corridors of power' and open up direct access to policymakers and challenge their thinking. I argue that, although power and its antithesis, resistance, may be enacted in different ways, they have the potential to shift the balance of power between policymakers and young people.

I have set my exploration of the power dynamics at work against the backdrop of Critical Political and Social Activism Studies and have turned to scholarship on power that I have found most useful in the context of my particular study. Hence, I have drawn mainly on the

emancipatory pedagogy of Paolo Freire to theorise the unequal power relationships between young people and decision makers in my study. Even though Freire developed his philosophy whilst working with young people in his home country of Brazil, his theories on how to be free to question and able to challenge accepted socio-political norms of those in authority have been adopted and adapted by scholars elsewhere in the world such as Giroux, Macedo and Tufte.

Freire believed that learning should be an experience through which students are enabled to take a critical approach to their situation in society and their relationship with those in power. Hence, I suggest that his work is relevant to my investigation since it enabled me to explore the power dynamics at work both within a youth – led organisation such as Beatfreeks and also between such a company and policymakers. I also draw on Youth Empowerment, Social Movement and Activism Studies to consider how young people might be able to challenge what they perceive to be negative effects of policymakers' data-driven categorisation of their lives. I then examine what characterises Beatfreeks' approach to working with young people and empowers them to disrupt a policy narrative in which they perceive themselves to be misrepresented or ignored. As I discussed in Chapter 4 (Beatfreeks and Young People), I consider three of the most significant aspects of the company's approach to be the style of leadership; the culture within the company; and its use of data and creative practices to gain the attention of decision makers. Thus, my engagement with the young people involved in Beatfreeks projects or as participants in focus groups in Birmingham has enabled me to examine the ways in which they relate to each other and to external figures of authority. Thanks to my contacts with former colleagues within local government, it has also been possible for me to explore the influences at work in the making of policy in general and more particularly in the shaping of policies affecting young people. Drawing on the findings from my conversations with team members of Beatfreeks, I then move on to examine the company's resistance to the power of policymakers. This includes a reflection on the methods which Beatfreeks use to shift the balance of power between them.

Finally, I consider the different forms of empowerment or resistance being enacted and what they can tell us about the possible opportunities for shifting the balance of power between young people and policymakers. I frame this discussion mainly within the thinking

of Freire, my reconceptualisation of Nye's theory of 'soft' power and my concept of 'constructive' disruption. I reflect on the effectiveness of the forms of social activism undertaken by Beatfreeks and how it might be possible for any of them to have more than a short-term, spatially limited impact on young people's lives.

Conceptualising youth power and resistance

Freire's emancipatory pedagogy (Freire 1970;1993) with its dual concepts of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' was developed during a period of a clear-cut binary power relationship between right-wing governments and the Left in the Latin America of the 1960s. His works may, at first reading seem over simplistic in the context of 21st century and as such have been challenged in the academy (Blackburn, 2000.). Nevertheless, Freire has been highly influential in the fields of Education and Youth Studies (McInerney, 2009; Giroux, 2010) and, in recent years, scholars in North and South America and Europe have been reflecting on the implications of Freire's thinking beyond education. This includes its relevance to new social interrelationships and possibilities of resistance and change (Dalaqua, 2018; Suzina and Tufte 2020).

Freire followed Marx in believing that the structures of capitalist societies are founded on the exploitation of certain groups or individuals by others and that these make it difficult for the exploited to become 'more fully human'. It was necessary, therefore, to develop processes of learning that would enable 'the exploited' (in Freire's case – students) to become critically aware of the conditions which kept them in a position of subjugation to those who controlled the structures and regulations of society. This relates to the concerns of young people in my study who feel neglected and even penalised by the decisions of policymakers. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, however, Freire argued that critical awareness (conscientization) was not in itself sufficient to bring about change. It had to be part of a process which encouraged educator and students to be co-constructors of knowledge through a dialogue of equals which enables them to become critically aware of the reality of their position in the world. In my analysis of the organisational culture of Beatfreeks, I have observed the importance attached by Anisa and her colleagues to doing things *with* young people rather than doing things *to* them or *for* them and so treating young people as equal contributors to whatever form of activity they are engaged in. Freire also urges readers of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* not only to become critically aware of inequality and

injustice but to reflect on them and be committed to take action (praxis) to reduce them (Freire 1993:27). For him they are key to citizens' self-determination and active participation in civil society and enabling the 'oppressed' to realise their potential as fully sentient human beings capable of transforming the reality of their lives.

Current social and political structures and values in which power relations are enacted between those who govern and their subjects, however, differ significantly from those which shaped Freire's philosophy. So why have I chosen to draw on his thinking to understand the complexities of the power relationships between young people, Beatfreeks and policymakers in a major UK city the second decade of 21st century? Freire himself urged that "the progressive educator must always be moving out on his or her own, continually reinventing me and reinventing what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context" (1997a: 308). His core philosophy is about a political and moral practice that transcends time and circumstance as oppression can – and does - take many different forms according to the various socio-economic and political systems in place. It is one which provides knowledge and social awareness to enable people more generally to become better informed and potentially more empowered citizens. Thus, recent literature shows a continuing and growing interest amongst scholars in Freire's philosophy and its relevance to young people in today's society. It has gone beyond the realms of education in order to encourage more critical thinking and resistance to the deficitizing effects of policymaking by those in positions of power by giving agency through knowledge to young people (Giroux, 2010). When interviewed in 2016, Ira Shor, who shared Freire's views on the importance of a critical approach to education argued that work with young people must be done "with dialogue, respect for different types of knowledge and ways of knowing, horizontality in human relations and inseparability between theory and practice"(2016:1). Again, the report from a symposium on the work of Freire (Suzina and Tufte, 2020) highlights modern scholars' continuing interest in the relevance to society today of Freire's conceptualisation of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed and the importance of dialogue and the potential for resistance. Yet no discussion of power can take place without attention being paid to its alter ego, resistance or counter-power which, according to Castells (2007: 248), is "the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalised in

society." It is present, therefore, in the relationships between Beatfreeks and the young people whom they champion and the local institutions of government.

Resistance, however, can take various forms and size according to the type of power involved (Scott, 1989) and the purpose and context in which it is enacted. It may be seen as 'a response to power from below' (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018) either as small-scale actions or as larger and more structured collective movements of resistance. It may also be shaped by the exercise of passive or 'soft' power or by the adoption of a more aggressive or 'hard' approach to changing mindsets (Nye, 1990). The concepts of 'soft' and 'hard' power were originally proposed by Joseph Nye in the context of the shifting balance of power in international affairs. Although developed in different socio-political and geographical contexts, there is an element of complementarity between the thinking of Freire and Nye, in that they both speak to concerns over unequal power relationships wherever they may exist in today's world (Suzina and Tufte, 2020). Hence I consider Freire's and, to a lesser extent, Nye's theories of power and resistance to be relevant to my discussion of the power dynamics at work between youth engagement organisations like Beatfreeks, young people and public policymakers in European cities in the 21st century.

Critical Youth Empowerment and Social Activism perspectives

Issues of power and resistance have, however, long been subjects of interest for scholars working in the field of Youth Studies (Johansson and Lalander, 2012; McInerney, 2009). My research, therefore, also relates closely to studies undertaken on youth participation and youth empowerment and particularly to the topics of power, participation, education and socio-political awareness (Martinez et al., 2016). Some young people may, for example, get involved in some form of politicised activity from within the formal structure of a political party (Hart and Henn 2017). The literature on youth engagement in the political process, however, shows that this continues to decline and that young people are more likely to participate in the less formal structures of direct social activism where they may find more personal agency (Earl; Maher; and Elliott, 2017.) These actions may be physical acts of resistance or ones based upon citizens' deployment of digital data to resist governments' datafied policymaking. The former can be expressed through acts of direct aggression against authority and frequently involve mass public protests such as the riots in London, Birmingham and other urban centres in 2011 (The Guardian, 2011). They can also be public

non-violent gestures of solidarity with victims of violence such as 'Taking the knee' as part of the Black Lives Matter movement (BBC news report 12/06/21). The latter includes the use of digital technology by citizens to disrupt the institutional uses of data which might take an active form or a more passive approach through sharing their knowledge with policymakers in order to reshape their data practices (Hintz; Dencik; and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

My study of Beatfreeks, however, reveals two further forms of youth empowerment and social activism which do not fit easily into either broad category. One makes use of non-digital or what I refer to as analogue small data to counter existing digital data-driven policy narratives of young people. The other involves more discreet actions to address the needs of those who are marginalised and feel excluded from society but may be looking for support to develop their competences and build their self-reliance (Spies, 2018). To assist in my analysis of these two particular forms of power, I draw on Joseph Nye's theory of 'soft' power in international relations but which has subsequently been applied to power relations in other contexts (2017). I also consider other forms of resistance which may be present in youth activism which are socially responsible and potentially enduring interventions by or on behalf of young people to combat their individual and societal inequalities. In the following section, therefore, I examine the influences on Beatfreeks' approach to empowering young people and what may distinguish it from other youth engagement agencies and organisations.

Power dynamics between young people and policymakers

According to Freire's theory, young people experiencing inequalities are the 'oppressed' since their lives are controlled by those who determine and/or implement policies and thus have *'power over'* them. It relates to the concept of the state as rule maker and the perceived power of politicians and their officials over citizens/young people through the social, economic and political structures which frame the policies and language of those in authority. For example, young people may be labelled, for the purposes of policy interventions, as 'NEETS'[33], 'at risk' or 'hard to reach' or live in areas classified as areas of

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[33] NEETS is acronym for Not in Education, Employment or Training

'Multiple Deprivation'. Thus, young people may have grown up with and become accustomed to being identified by negative 'dominant syntax' which the powerful use to define them (Freire 1993). They feel ignored or lost in 'the system' and disengaged from existing governance structures at local level.

Young people's perceptions of their power

Evidence from my interviews with young people and policymakers and from focus groups specially convened for the Beatfreeks' Brum Youth Trends Survey, shows that the majority are in a continuing unequal power relationship with government institutions and agencies. Young people closely involved with Beatfreeks, for example, told stories of their own frustrations over the negative narratives produced about them by those with institutional 'power over' their lives.

Participants in a focus group organised by Beatfreeks and run in collaboration with myself talked about the problems of getting policymakers to pay attention to them. One young woman told us:

> "Young people are still battling this thing that we are not actively engaging in our political and social environment at all. But there are not enough of us that are making a stand and saying 'Actually. No, we **do** care about these things and we want these things to change and we are going to get actively involved." (F/fg1)

Another expressed her frustration at not being heard:

> "We still have this massive thing. We need to come together and THERE HAS TO BE A UNITE THING – US SAYING WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OTHERWISE WE ARE BEING IGNORED. That's not to be negative but these social campaigns need a bigger platform, for us to even be in a place that says what we're saying is valid because otherwise they just become these small things that only happen in Birmingham, only happen in a specific area. BUT THE THINGS THAT WE WANT TO SAY NEED TO BE HEARD WAY LOUDER! (F/yp2)

> (NB I have put certain text in capital letters to emphasise the force with which she expressed these views.)

Both these interventions were greeted with whoops and clicks from the other young people in the room. It was clear, however, that, whilst they welcomed Beatfreeks' efforts to get their views taken seriously by those in authority, a number of them still felt that they were powerless to bring about change. They were concerned that, on their own, small-scale acts of resistance such as Brum Youth Trends Birmingham would be insufficient to convince policymakers to change their policies.

I also heard examples of how structures such as the education and political systems and those who work within them may make it more difficult for young people to participate in civil society and politics. This could be through failures to provide adequate or appropriate access to information (Pontes et al. 2020) or the conduct of members of the political establishment themselves. (Grayling 2017).

One young woman reflected on how a lack of knowledge about how government works can lead to feelings of powerlessness and a reluctance to participate in civil and political debate. Based on her own experiences, she criticised her education for failing to provide her with knowledge on government, politics and economics:

> "I think we could do with being taught more about economics. Because I think that is where, if our society is governed by a want to grow economically and we aren't taught the economics to go along with it, there's always going to be a knowledge gap [...........]) It leaves the kind of expectation that you will learn and you'll participate when you're older. By which point more of a mess will have been made under austerity……. " (F/yp4)

So how are young people who are the subject to these institutional categorisations able to contest these deficitizing narratives? They might be aware of their inadequate understanding of the formal processes of democratic representation as the quote above indicates but what alternative means might be available to them to make their views known and bring about change? The following section deals with the power of policymakers over young people.

Policymakers' power over young people

My interviews with young people reveal frustrations with the decisions of officers and politicians based in Birmingham over structural and individual issues that matter to them.

They feel powerless in the face of decisions which they attribute to policymaking at the local level. Yet my discussions with officers and politicians in Birmingham show that one of the major factors in young people's powerlessness may be decisions which are made not by local government but by central government and related governmental agencies which then influence local policymaking. The power of institutions over young people's lives thus manifests in different ways ranging from relatively well-informed actions to doing nothing because of missing, misinterpreted or inaccurate data.

Institutional power

Cutbacks in the finances available to local authorities together with restrictions upon how money is to be spent have imposed priorities on local expenditure which may differ from those identified by local policymakers (Gray and Barford, 2018; Johnson, 2019). According to a Unison[34] survey reported in Local Government News in June 2019, these cuts have resulted in the loss of 25% of the local government workforce between 2010 and 2019. This then limits the discretionary support for other services and leads to the curtailment or withdrawal of services such as those affecting young people. I spoke to several officials who pointed out the limits to the power and agency of cash-strapped local government over young people's lives. These included senior officers in Birmingham City Council who shared their concerns and frustrations over the effects on service delivery during this period:

> "Actually, the cuts have made it a lot worse. Because all the people who used to do (the) joining things together bits have gone and you're left with the statutory services which are incredibly siloed and driven by very much national performance agendas, with interference from government when they don't perform." (M/p01)

> "How do you get the resources to resolve what the issues are? Or to assist people to have better access? Because it's a vicious circle, isn't it? We don't have the resources to be able to do the proper research. And even if we did, we don't have a resource then to deliver activity that's going to resolve some of those challenges."(M/p03)

One officer I interviewed feared that if central government disinvestment in local communities continued, there would be more social deprivation, more social isolation and

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[34] UNISON is one of the UK's largest trade **unions** which represents staff who provide public services in the public and private sector.

possibly more social unrest. Thus, policymaking at the local level is frequently influenced by decisions over which local government officers and politicians have little real control. Yet, they are perceived by young people as responsible for the adverse effects of such policies. So, even if these are mistakenly attributed by young people to local government, the latter is held responsible for them and then becomes a key target for their resistance.

Data power of policymakers

Digital data are part of the policymaker's tool kit and, according to Ruppert, Isin and Bigo, (2017:2) are "generative of new forms of power relations and politics at different and interconnected scales." This applies not only to relationships between policymakers and citizens at the level of national government but also to the relationships between policymakers and young people at city level. Although research shows that local decision makers' use of data may have been overestimated (Malomo and Sena, 2016), my empirical evidence indicates that they may still contribute to policymakers' power over young people's lives.

In my interviews with officers and politicians in Birmingham, I was told about problems with resources and expertise which had limited the types of data available to policymakers as well as the capacity to manage and analyse data appropriately. A long serving senior policy officer highlighted the dramatic reduction in expertise pointing out that, where there once had been between 20 and 30 data experts at work, most data analysis was now carried out by a small unit within the West Midlands Combined Authority. One analyst still working in the City Council explained how he was far more heavily reliant nowadays on data from central government sources than previously because of funding cuts:

> "So it's mainly ONS stuff, and then other government datasets. Yeah, with some kind of data from, you know, think tanks and academic institutions (...) we're just not doing some of the stuff we used to do quite a lot - like kind of bespoke reports and stuff." (M/po4)

A senior councillor expressed his frustration at the inability of the City Council to make more effective use of the information which they were able to access.

> "The difficulty we have is breaking through the thing where we can kind of see the city-level data. So, we know how many benefit claimants are in this area; people on

the housing list over here; number of children accessing the special educational needs services. There's quite a lot of data that's not unhelpful but what we don't then do is drill down. So we're not very sophisticated in terms of the individual customer." (M/Cc1)

Some young people, therefore, may be frequently in a negative power relationship with officials because of policy decisions based on information which may fail to identify key issues, misrepresent or miss individuals by becoming a 'broad brush' approach to their lives (Longo, 2017).

Young people's resistance to the power of policymakers

As confidence in the formal democratic processes to challenge the power of government institutions and their agencies has declined across Europe, young people have turned to alternative ways of expressing their views. These range from individual acts of protest such as those by street artists to mass demonstrations on the scale, for example, of the student protests in England against tuition fees in tuition fees in 2010 (The Guardian, 10 Nov. 2010) . They vary in size and issues of concern but these are not necessarily the only distinguishing features of these activities. They may also be defined by the ways in which such acts of resistance to power are enacted. On the one hand, there is the use of tangible physical force or 'hard' power and on the other the deployment of more subtle methods to obtain results, often conceptualised as 'soft' power (Nye 1990; 2008, 2017). All three may be effective in enacting resistance but I argue that the 'soft' approach of attracting and holding the interest of others may generate a more positive response through gentle persuasion rather than 'hard' acts of aggression. During my research in Birmingham, however, I have observed a number of different forms of 'soft' resistance to the powers of those in authority. Some involve direct methods of engagement with policymakers whereas others may be indirect through first building the competences and resilience of individuals with little social capital in order to develop their personal agency and feel able to participate in other forms of collective resistance.

'Soft' resistance

In the previous chapter, I showed how the use of the emotional power of spoken word and music affected decision makers at Beatfreeks' Brum Youth Trends Summit. It led to a small

shift of power from the 'system' towards young people through the co-creation of the West Midlands Young Combined Authority facilitated by Beatfreeks. Anisa has used the intrinsic power of her personal reputation together with the persuasive power of creative advocacy to give agency to young people to secure constructive and enduring change (Nye 2011). She told me that increasingly she sees an important role for creativity in Beatfreeks' repertoire for facilitating young people's resistance to the dominant power of policymakers over their lives. For example, in order to enable young people to get make their views known and get their points across she has used the 'soft' disruptive use of spoken word, sung interventions and creative data installations in the Summit. These are all intended to provoke an emotional engagement from members of the audience using sound and touch as well as sight. Indeed, spoken word performance is increasingly used by young people to channel and share their feelings not only about themselves but about the world around them. There is not, however, the same physical engagement with audiences as with immersive theatre following in the tradition of Boal such as the Barcelona-based 'Forn de Teatre Pa' tothom' and Birmingham's 'Stan's Café'. Nevertheless, they share a commitment to social justice and a belief in the ability of creativity to achieve a more effective level of engagement with the concerns of those who have no other means of representation.

The Mayor of the West Midlands told me of his experience of this:

> "Some of the people who stood up and told their stories were incredibly powerful and that storytelling, I think, should never be underestimated in terms of galvanising action."

I suggest, however, that these kinds of creative acts of resistance in which young people engage might be described as 'constructive disruption' within the broader field of Social Activism. I turn in the next section, therefore, to consider in more detail the concept of 'creative' resistance.

'Creative' resistance

Beatfreeks has made use of several forms of creative practice to highlight young people's personal and collective concerns. They include one-off activities in public spaces to call

attention to young people's issues such as Flash Mob events. They may also be much smaller scale and more intimate events such as Beatfreeks' Poetry Jams in which young people have the freedom to express their personal concerns. These have become a platform for the sharing of young people's feelings about their personal and collective experiences but they do not necessarily influence the attitudes of those outside these activities. Survey data obtained directly by young people from young people, however, may be communicated to an audience which reaches both young people and influencers through the intermediation of youth engagement organisations such as Beatfreeks. But how effective are these actions at delivering change for the young people they represent? I maintain that a single creative event – unless it attracts a large crowd or the attention of mass media is unlikely to achieve change. It may, however, raise awareness of an issue with certain of the participants or audience by disrupting their pre-existing perceptions of it. Nevertheless, Beatfreeks' Brum Youth Trends Summit may achieve change through its 'Pledge Wall', a board on which participants were able to post a written commitment to take a specific action. This comparatively small data set, therefore, is a key tool of resistance since it might instigate a review by the powerful of existing practices and lead to their doing things differently. The question remains, however, over how long such actions may take to make an impact and how much of this particular approach is replicable in other contexts. During the past 18 months or so, however, it may be that the turn to Poetry Jams online during the Covid lockdowns has meant that Beatfreeks has been more successful in reaching a wider audience for these creative practitioners. Time will tell.

'Insider' resistance

Anisa has attracted the attention of influencers in society locally and increasingly nationally through her multiple persona as award winning young entrepreneur, skilled creative practitioner, passionate campaigner for Social Justice and champion of young people. She has the flexibility and empathy to relate to people in these different areas and has become respected and well connected across the public, private and creative sectors. This may mean that she is able to obtain direct access to power more easily because she may already be known to key influencers. She has, for example, secured the attention of policymakers through using her business persona and her positionality as an expert on the problems of young people in the 21st century in the context of continuing austerity. She has also used

Beatfreeks direct access to data produced by young people in relation to the company's surveys and other direct engagements with them such as Focus groups.

'Informed resistance'

At another level, the development of critical awareness of the precarious realities of working as creative practitioners amongst young team members and freelance associates of Beatfreeks empowers them through 'knowledge' to develop their practice and careers more effectively. The company has attracted them through its values, working culture and learning opportunities. I have observed and participated in conversations in which team members talk about issues that matter to them and seen how they share and learn from each other's experiences.

> "… I think what we do really well here is we know and we keep asking the people that we work with and work for, so that we're not making assumptions and so that we get it right." FYP/4

Beatfreeks empowers them through these processes of building critical awareness and gives them agency to construct their own counter-narratives about the socio-political realities of their world (Dalaqua, 2018).

'Snowballing' resistance

These young creative practitioners draw on the values and knowledge they have acquired during their time with Beatfreeks and apply it to their own practice as they engage on a freelance basis with young people elsewhere. The sharing of this 'learning' between young people increases the number who are motivated by the 'soft' power of persuasion to resist the power exercised over them by institutional policymakers. I liken this carrying over of Beatfreeks' values and working culture into other youth engagement activities to the 'snowball effect'. It is a marketing term to describe the impact of a campaign that starts from a small base but gathers momentum over time, continuing to expand and attract more attention and influence as it grows. Thus, the more widely the original practices to build young people's social capital are shared, the bigger the snowball will become and so enable more direct collective resistance by young people.

Discussion

The leadership style of Beatfreeks is rooted in the personality and particular combination of entrepreneurial skills and personal life experiences of its founder, Anisa, and may make the transfer of knowledge to other organisations or individuals problematic. Nevertheless, Beatfreeks' models of peer to peer learning through a dialogue of equals and reflection leading to action and engagement through creativity may be transferable to other contexts. This has been demonstrated by the 'snowballing' activities of her team members and freelancers who use their 'informal' learning through Beatfreeks to work in similar ways in the wider community beyond the circles of the company. Their practice may have been influenced by the values and the creative experiences acquired whilst with Beatfreeks and so may contribute to building the critical awareness and competences of the young people with whom they might engage.

The other area of Beatfreeks' work which may be transferable is the company's approach to focused resistance through its gathering and processing of alternative analogue or 'humanised' data. Another form of focused resistance is Anisa's use of her networking and communication skills to attract the attention of those she is seeking to influence not only at the local level but more widely across the country. For example, it was reported in the West Midlands press (The Business Desk.com) in September 2019 that Beatfreeks had been appointed as the Secretariat for the APPG[35] on Democratic Participation and Anisa was quoted in the article, saying that "this national platform will allow us to reach politicians and policymakers in the heart of Westminster".

Resistance or Disruption?

Although I have discussed these activities in terms of the familiar 'power' and 'resistance' relationship, the findings from my Case Study of Beatfreeks have prompted me to rethink the dynamics at work in these interactions and reconceptualise them in terms of 'disruption' theory. I suggest that 'resistance' implies pushing back against an object whereas 'disruption' describes altering that object in some way. It is a concept which has

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[35]APPG -All Party Parliamentary Groups are informal, cross-party groups formed by MPs and Members of the House of Lords who share a common interest in a particular policy area, region or country. They have no official status within Parliament and may change their title or remit or cease to exist. The APPG on Democratic Participation has been concerned with reconnecting ordinary people with politics and reforming democratic processes.

developed and been applied mainly in discussions in the fields of scientific innovation (Larson, 2016) and in digital technologies – both the technology itself and in its effects upon social media, digital data, robotics, 'social' algorithms, automation and the arrival of artificial intelligences (Housley and Smith, 2017). The term has also been used in business and within literature on Youth (Gutierrez and Milan, 2018).

'Constructive resistance'

Beatfreeks' annual Brum Youth Trends Survey (BYT) seeks to reveal young people's experiences of living, working and/or studying in a major city, in this case Birmingham. Anisa and her team responded to a need which they observed in their youth engagement work in different communities to bridge the divide between young people and those responsible for decisions which had a negative effect on their lives. The aim has been to contest the official picture of their lives as portrayed by public sector policymakers through the lens of young people's responses to this annual survey gathered and analysed by Beatfreeks. It is then presented as the authentic voice of young people via a 'Summit' to which representatives of the public, private, third sectors and academia, national as well as local, were invited, together with young people from across the city. Findings such as the ones below are also published in a printed report and online:

> "There is a clear divide within Birmingham between those in authority and young people; only 3% of participants feel heard by power." (BYT Report, 2018)

> "We can no longer make the excuse that young people don't want to engage with, participate in and contribute to society…. our current methods and structures of civic, political and societal participation leaves them without a chair, plate or cutlery, let alone anything to eat." (BYT Report, 2019).

Anisa uses her intrinsic power as a respected entrepreneur in Birmingham together with the power derived from her own and Beatfreeks' new knowledge to convince key influencers from these sectors attending this Summit to take notice of young people's concerns. The BYT Survey findings contribute to raising levels of critical awareness of young people's issues which then may lead to reflection and action on the part of those in positions of power. They are challenged to make a signed commitment to taking positive action to effect change and post it on a noticeboard (The Pledge Wall) in the auditorium for

all to read. In this way these decision makers become implicated in the struggle of the oppressed (young people) to resist the sources of their oppression and may be held to account in the future. Their participation in this emancipatory process is, therefore, one which may lead to them to changing their attitudes towards young people because of the new knowledge available to them.

There are, however, two issues that arise from these successes. One is over the possibility that, through increasing her personal engagement with the powerful as an acknowledged and valuable intermediary between them and young people, Anisa risks being seen by those young people as too close to their 'oppressors'. As Freire pointed out: 'Almost always, during the initial stages of the struggle, the oppressed instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.' The second issue is her own and Beatfreeks' credibility as a representative Voice of young people and how long it can be sustained. Anisa herself has acknowledged that every year she and certain members of her team move further away from the age range of the target groups which they seek to support. Whilst working together they also have accumulated social and cultural capital but the environment in which this has been done has changed over the years. She reflected on this in my most recent interview with her:

> "I'm very conscious of not becoming the institution that we're trying to work against. I think there is benefit in having structure and us having the weight in influence that we have. And I think as long as we close that loop back with the young people, it's legit, then it's a different game, because then it's like, yes, it's not that we're this cool little like, grassrootsy - ' See, we're on the same level'. But actually, they start to trust us as an actor on their behalf. And so then it's like, we're going to do the APPG[36] stuff. They're like - that's real. Like it's just a different - it's just a different ball game."

My study of the relationships between young people, data and policymaking has brought to the fore the power imbalance which exists between young people and those in authority in society. In this chapter, therefore, I have drawn on my empirical evidence to identify

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[36] APPG - All-party Parliamentary Group on Democratic participation - see footnote on page 167

factors which may contribute to young people's unequal relationship with power as well as the different ways in which they can be challenged. These include the roles played by data (both analogue and digital) and digital technologies including their deployment by youth engagement organisations such as Beatfreeks and policymakers. I believe that these are both relevant to young people who are experiencing social injustice or "oppression" as a consequence of the policies designed and implemented by those with power. I have, therefore, sought to understand how these power relations work, predominantly through the lens of Freire's emancipatory pedagogy. I have also drawn on Social and Data Activism to conceptualize the form of activism which data generated by young people and Beatfreeks takes and to understand how it might enable them to disrupt the existing balance of power. In addition, I have reconceptualised Joseph Nye's theory of 'soft' power in order to analyse how various forms of resistance deployed by young people and/ or their representatives may make a difference over the long term to young people's experiences of inequality.

Policymakers' power comes from being part of the institutions of government in which the ruling élite set the boundaries to the ways in which ordinary citizens are able to conduct their daily lives. Thus, young people are outside what Freire calls 'the circles of certainty'. They lack the information or access to resources which might give them agency to be able to resist what they perceive as the unjust decisions of those who determine the economic, political and social conditions of their existence. They are on the powerless side of this duality of power but my findings show that they do not have to remain there. Young people do not have to accept policymakers' definitions of them and their problems. It may be possible for them to change the normative narrative of their lives by creating and participating in collective acts of resistance which are more likely to be effective when created with the constructive tools of 'soft' power.

The use of non-digital data, for example, such as the information in the Brum Youth Trends Surveys, may contribute to young people's 'soft' power. They provide fine grained and timely data free from institutional bias in data gathering and algorithmic interpretation and may bring to light issues which may be missing from official datasets. They, thus, present opportunities for the voices of young people to offer alternative views of society and its structures. I argue, however, that their views and actions are unlikely to shift the balance

of power from institutions to young people in the short term but may be part of a much longer journey towards achieving major changes in the distribution of power.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Introduction

My research examines the contribution of digital data and digital technologies to young people's social and cultural inequalities and how young people might be assisted to counter them. It took place in the city of Birmingham, UK in which young people were transitioning to adulthood in a society shaped by the legacy of Thatcherite neoliberalism; the continuing effects of austerity on local authority budgets and the growing influence of datafication. The subject of my research was determined prior to the beginning of my study by an agreement between Beatfreeks, a creative industries company in the city, and Birmingham City University to collaborate on a research project on the role of data in young people's inequalities.

In preparation for this study, I identified existing areas of scholarship to which my research might make a contribution and also possible gaps in knowledge which my findings might be able to address. Thus, my research was aimed at understanding the part played by policymakers' use of 'Big' data in shaping the social and cultural inequalities of young people. It involved examining the lived experiences of young people; investigating the data practices of city politicians and officers and their influence over young people's everyday lives; and exploring the generation and use of alternative forms of data by this particular youth engagement organisation. It soon became clear to me that investigating the company's deployment of these alternative forms of data - particularly analogue data - would be a key part of my investigation since they challenged the accepted definitions of data. They also became central to my research into the role of data not only in shaping young people's inequalities arising from the policies of different tiers of government but also in enabling these young people to disrupt them. Drawing on my investigation of the activities of Beatfreeks and its team of young people and their interactions with policymakers, therefore, I have sought to add to knowledge about the lived experiences of young people in a post-austerity datafied urban environment.

My study, however, has also caused me to reflect upon the research process itself including the influences on the rationale behind my choice of methodology and methods and their effects on my approach to gathering and analysing evidence. As this research was framed within a collaborative research partnership agreed between my university and Beatfreeks before I was accepted as the project researcher, I have had to consider how this might influence the conduct of my study and the collection of my data. This form of collaborative research working encourages the active participation of the partner company's members in the research and joint reflection with the researcher from the partner academic institution over their findings (Ellström, 2020). It has been a feature predominantly of educational and health service research in Sweden but its application in other contexts is still relatively limited. Nevertheless, I found that collaborative partnerships which involve interactive research and stress the importance of thinking, sharing findings and reflective feedback are also encouraged in Cultural Studies. It is an interdisciplinary field of study which enables researchers to consider people's lives from different perspectives and capture the lived realities of their experiences through an ethnographic approach to their investigation and analysis. By becoming closely involved in the lives of research subjects over a period of time, a researcher may be able to gain access to information which a routine interview is unlikely to provide and gain deeper and richer insights into their participants' lived experiences.

In the sections which follow I discuss the contribution to knowledge which I consider that the findings from my thesis can make. I begin by reflecting on the research process itself, drawing on my own experiences as a mature student returning to academia a long time after taking a degree in History and postgraduate teaching certificate. I have asked myself questions such as: How have these and other experiences, both personal and professional, influenced the ways in which I have approached my research? What has influenced my choice of methodology and methods? How have these and my varied experiences influenced my positionality and the interactions between myself and my research subjects? What can be learnt from the potential benefits but also pitfalls of the approach I have taken?

In exploring the role of data in policymaking and its influence on young people's lives, I have drawn on my past experiences as a policy officer working in local government in the UK and

with fellow officers in the EU and have been able to draw on my 'insider' knowledge to inform my research into the use of data in decision making today. Data and datafication have been much discussed by scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives. These have already included debates over what we mean by 'data' and the terminology in use such as: Big, Small, Digital, Analogue data. More recently, however, scholars have sought to focus on the uses of 'data' in society and their effects on citizens (Berry and Anders Fagerjord, 2017; Cairney, 2018; Milan and van der Velden, 2018). I argue that findings from my study may enable a better understanding of the extent and effectiveness of the part played by data and datafication in public policymaking in cities.

Data has also featured prominently in the Case Study of my collaborative research partner, Beatfreeks, through my observations of and participation in the company's information gathering activities which sought to find out about the daily lives of young people directly from the young people themselves. By generating their own analogue data from surveys about young people initially in Birmingham and the surrounding region, Beatfreeks have produced alternative narratives of young people's lived experiences. They have then presented their survey findings in a public space familiar to policymakers and influencers and used emotive speeches and performances of poetry and songs on a stage set up as if for a show rather than a conference to get them to pay attention to their Voice. Based on my experience of events such as these and evidence from interviews with policymakers who were present, I argue that there is a gap in our understanding of the role of Voice in the interactions between young people and policymakers.

Finally, I suggest that, though comparatively small, these surveys and their affective presentation have enabled Beatfreeks to move into a more political space and challenge the dominant policy narratives of policymakers. I also maintain that young people's creative use of alternative forms of data and their constructive disruption of the often negative policy imaginaries of young people and their everyday lives may give them agency and reconfigure the power dynamics between them and policymakers.

Contribution to Knowledge: 1

Research Process

The research location

For me, the research process begins with understanding the environment in which the research is to take place since this may influence my positionality as well as shaping the lived experiences of the subjects of my investigation. My research, as mentioned earlier, was undertaken in the city of Birmingham, the home of my collaborative research partner, Beatfreeks. It is, however, also the city in which I lived and worked for more than thirty years. During that time I was involved in various transnational initiatives relating to urban regeneration as well as in my home city and learnt from urban regeneration specialists in UK and the EU to appreciate the particularity of individual cities in terms of their population and the significance of place and space to citizens' lives. Thus, I believe it is important for researchers to familiarise themselves with the location(s) in which their investigation takes place. For example, knowing that Birmingham is a 'young' city with almost half of its population (46%) being under the age of 30 (ONS, 2019); that it is ethnically diverse; and that it has high levels of deprivation whilst also having the largest city economy in the UK outside London (ONS, 2019) helps inform my data gathering and contextualise and interpret my findings.

The societal context

My study is set against the backdrop of the ever- increasing role of digital data and datafication in society and the continuing influence of neoliberalism and the austerity measures taken by central and local governments following the global financial crisis of 2007/8. These have all changed the cultural, socio-political and economic landscape within which young people have to live and work (Fuller and Geddes, 2008). For example, the current generation faces an increasing gap between rich and poor; continuing inequalities in education and pathways into employment; and more uncertainties in social welfare provision. Although my findings relate to a specific physical site, I contend that they may be relevant to other cities dealing with similar issues.

Approaches to research - Mixed methods

As detailed in Chapter 3: Methodology, I used a suite of qualitative methods to collect my data and then situated my analysis within Cultural Studies because of its interdisciplinary approach to the creation of knowledge. I drew on both interpretivist and critical paradigms as these enabled me to view the interactions between young people and policymakers from two contrasting perspectives. For example, I used the qualitative data from my interviews and observations of young members of Beatfreeks to find out how they viewed themselves and the environment in which they lived. I then explored the socio-political and economic context which then framed their current everyday experiences and raised, inter alia, issues of exclusion, misrepresentation, injustice and powerlessness. Thus, I also incorporated Paolo Freire's concepts of critical awareness, reflection and 'praxis' together with Joseph Nye's theory of 'soft' power' into my methodology to analyse the relationships between the different protagonists in my study.

Cultural Studies interdisciplinary approach

Reflecting on the value of my knowledge of the urban landscape in which my research participants live, I argue that taking time to become familiar with, or to re-assess, the context in which my research has taken place enables me to ask better-informed, more pertinent questions. This approach to gathering information about the lives of the participants in my study has been influenced by the interdisciplinary approach of Cultural Studies to research and its emphasis on the value of ethnography in the gathering and interpretation of information from participants. It enables researchers to consider the lived experiences of participants from the perspectives of different disciplines through an empathetic but dispassionate approach to their acquisition of knowledge. It requires a researcher to reflect upon their own ontology and positionality and how this may affect their interactions with participants. It may also, however, relate to the social, political and economic contexts in which research has been carried out, since, as Saukko highlights "unless we pay attention to social structures of inequality, we have no basis for arguing why certain experiences are more worthy of attention than others" (2003: 58). In conversations with young people in my study, for example, I have observed how aware some of them are about external factors which affect their life chances such as the cost of living; the labour market; or feelings of being ignored or misrepresented by those in authority. In discussing

an interviewee's lived experiences, therefore, I argue that a researcher needs to be aware of the possibility that it may bring up sensitive or contentious issues. This calls for the interviewer to be empathetic in order to tease out these narratives and gain deeper insights into their lives. It is important, however not to confuse empathy with sympathy.

My personal experiences of interviewing highlight similar problems that can occur within researcher/participant relationships when a researcher is embedded in the organisation which he/she is investigating. Whilst this may be invaluable in gaining access to information which a routine interview is unlikely to provide, I have become increasingly conscious of how easy it can be to identify too closely with the young people whose lived experiences I am studying. It would be so easy to become a 'fan' rather than remain distanced and take a more dispassionate and critical view of their actions. I have, therefore, tried to engage in joint self-reflexive analysis with the founder of Beatfreeks over what I have perceived to be happening within the interactions between policymakers and young people to gain another perspective on what is taking place before finalising my analysis of my evidence.

The themes which emerged from my interviews and observations, however, relate to several different disciplines and thus, by situating my research within Cultural Studies, it has been possible for me to take an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of my findings. Furthermore, in thinking through the management of a collaborative research partnership with its expectations of active participation by both parties, I have been able to reflect not only on the potentials and pitfalls of such a methodology but also upon my own positionality within this particular research project. Hence, I suggest that the very action of a researcher reviewing their own positionality and how it has affected the different encounters they have had, either as interviewer or observer, may contribute to knowledge about the research process itself and its effects on both researcher and participants. I also stress the importance of having an ethnographic awareness of the contexts in which a researcher is working and of their interactions with participants as these may allow a richer and deeper narrative to emerge.

Collaborative action research

My research has been framed by a collaborative research partnership in which an interactive action research approach was initially agreed between the founder (Anisa) of a

creative industries youth engagement company, Beatfreeks, and myself, a mature research student at Birmingham City University. It had, therefore, to meet two separate but potentially related objectives. For the company, this was most likely to be about enabling it to engage in foresight activities in order to sustain or grow its business activities by providing fresh insights into its current working practices, markets and business model. For myself as the researcher, it offered an opportunity not only for a close study of an organisation whose activities were relevant to my own area of interest but also the potential for joint reflection with members of the company and for acquiring new knowledge.

In order to meet the objectives of both, I contend that a collaborative partnership of any kind requires the creation of a close working relationship based on mutual trust as well mutual self-interest between the main participants involved; in this case, between the founder and members of Beatfreeks and myself as the individual researcher with whom they are seeking to co-operate. Based on my previous experiences of partnership working in local government and in the Arts, I also consider that a successful collaboration requires a willingness in partners to take time at the start of a project to get to know each other and to be flexible in how to approach joint working. This is particularly important when the study – as in this case - involves several different participants and/or research objects. In my research, these include a company owner who is also an activist for social justice; young people who may experience economic, social and cultural inequalities in their journey to adulthood; and politicians and officers within local government whose decisions may influence those inequalities. Inevitably, there can be a few hiccups along the way but, as Nancy Duxbury points out in her commentary on various collaborative research designs, researcher-practitioner exchanges are "by their nature, messy and largely open-ended" (2018:12). More encouragingly, she goes on to say that "discussions among researchers and practitioners are moments of co-learning through sharing different perspectives and knowledges" (ibid.2018:13).

Interactive research

My research design was framed not only by a combination of 'collaborative action research' and 'research-practice knowledge exchange' but also by 'interactive' research which is a development of 'action research'. The former aims to encourage a partnership between a

researcher and a group of people who have a vested interest in the research to be undertaken as, for example, the relationship between my own position as researcher and the team members of Beatfreeks, company which is the subject of my investigation. It is also essential for the success of an interactive approach that participants from the organisation involved are able to share in the research process and reflect honestly on its progress as well as on the findings as they emerge (Nielson and Svensson, 2006). This requires an atmosphere of openness and trust and, as an 'outsider', I considered it essential to become a 'familiar face' within the organisation and its activities in order to be accepted as an 'insider'.

Interviews and Observations

Cultural Studies stresses the importance for a researcher to be able to empathise with their interviewees but also to remain capable of taking a critical look at their own positionality and how it has shaped transactions between researcher and participant. By becoming a trusted 'insider' embedded in the work of Beatfreeks, I have been able to get to know team members as individuals and share my motivation for undertaking my research. They have been able to reciprocate by sharing their personal stories of how they came to be involved in the company. Thus, having become an accepted member of their community with a clearly defined role, I was able to drop into Beatfreeks' work space whenever it suited me or was convenient for the team and could observe, question and get involved in group discussions and engage in activities as and when I wished. This enabled me to deepen my understanding of Beatfreeks' ways of working and the culture of the company and to gain thicker and richer information about the lives of my research participants than would have been possible as an 'outsider'. Moreover, I suggest that my particular experience of being embedded in such a collaborative, interactive research project as this and being able to view my situation from an ethnographically informed Cultural Studies perspective has given me fresh insights into how to approach the acquisition of information. It has, for example, prompted me to reflect on how I have been able to build a working relationship with young people whilst also being able to gain access to elected members and senior officers in local government – not necessarily an easy task.

This balancing act, however, does not come without a certain personal cost since it involves an emotional investment by the researcher in managing these different kinds of

relationship (Commane, 2012). It has required me to be an empathetic listener but also one who is capable of 'standing back' and reviewing the interactions taking place between myself and the participants in my study as well as between the participants themselves. I consider, therefore, that by combining an empathetic approach towards interviewing with the ability to take a critical view of the process I have been able to arrive at a better understanding of the lived experiences of young people. I argue that this has, in turn, brought both a richness and a robustness to my findings. Nevertheless, a researcher needs to consider not only the benefits of this kind of investment of time, emotion and intellectual work but also the challenges it presents in thinking through an appropriate methodology. In my case, I adopted an interdisciplinary methodology which I thought to be appropriate for the collaborative and interactive nature of my study of young people. Reflecting on this, prompted me also to consider my positionality in relation to the young people whom I was studying and to question how it had been possible for me, an older, white, middle-class woman, to be accepted within a diverse youth organisation brimming over with youthful energy and ideas.

Positionality

In considering my own experiences of developing my research methodology and methods for my collaborative research project, therefore, I stress the need for researchers to pay attention to their positionality in their interactions with the participants in their study.

Personal and professional experiences

From as far back as I can remember, my father and uncle were involved in the running of local sports clubs and helping children from four upwards not just to learn how to play a particular sport but to develop their social skills including respect and concern for each other. Their sense of community responsibility and interest in the progress of the young people they encountered left its mark on me as did my first career as a secondary school teacher. During this time, I was struck by the gulf between the quality of the learning experiences of pupils in a fee-paying all-girls school in an affluent London suburb and of girls in a large comprehensive school serving some of the most deprived areas elsewhere in the city. Later, when working in local government as a policy officer collaborating with counterparts in other EU cities, I became involved in transnational projects seeking to assist

marginalised youth into employment and became well acquainted with the individual and structural challenges they faced.

These different experiences have influenced how I see the world and how I am able to act within it (Sayer, 2011). For example, my first degree was in History and I continue to be conscious of the need to situate current accounts of people's lives in their historical as well as their socio-political context. Whereas my work on projects involving marginalised young people has given me insights into their world and an empathy with their situation. Again, my varied teaching career and my dealings with politicians and officers in post-industrial cities in both the UK and the EU have given me a repertoire of people management skills. These have enabled me to adapt to different working environments such as facilitating multi-national meetings, talking to a wide range of people from youngsters on a job creation scheme to city leaders and European Commission officials.

Outsider/Insider

I have conceptualised this developing relationship between myself and members of the Beatfreeks team as Outsider/ Insider. I began as an 'outsider' but as the team members came to acknowledge me as part of the team, my positionality in the company changed to that of an 'insider'. Being an 'insider', however, is a delicate path to tread for a researcher and I have been made aware of times when I have been in danger of becoming too much of a 'fan' of my collaborative partners rather than a critical analyst of their activities. Yet, I believe that the age gap between myself and my research subjects together with my background and different experiences of life enabled me to stay grounded as someone who remains capable of independent analysis and reflection. This meant that I could step back from this participatory environment in order to examine other relationships in which the company and its members were involved, including those with city policymakers and influencers and young people in the wider community and the part played by data in these interactions.

 I, therefore, argue that being able to reflect on all these experiences means that even as an 'outsider', I can find ways to connect with participants in my research and to embed myself within a youth engagement organisation as part of a collaborative approach to my study. By contrast, I am also able to access public institutions and the policymaking arena because, as a former 'insider', I understand how they work and the language they use.

Drawing on these various experiences, I argue that anyone embarking on qualitative research needs to understand how to 'read' the context in which an encounter with an interviewee takes place and also how to identify and respond to the emotional and physical signs which indicate how such an individual may be feeling about it (Ciesielska, Boström and Öhlander, 2017).

As I explained earlier, my interest in these issues stemmed from my earlier experiences first as a secondary school teacher and later as a local government policy officer engaged in projects aimed at tackling youth inequalities in cities such as Birmingham. I became interested in this collaborative research partnership not only because it concerned young people but it also aimed to investigate the contribution of Big Data to their inequalities. Thus, I embarked on this collaborative research partnership because I wanted to contribute to broadening the debates around the symptoms and causes of their inequalities by examining the contribution of digital data and related technologies to young people's experiences of living in a major post-austerity city like Birmingham today.

Contribution to Knowledge: 2

Data and young people's lives

Early on in my collaboration with Beatfreeks, I realised that my research would involve not only investigating the effects of data on young people, but the characteristics of data itself: how it is produced; how it is interpreted and by whom; and how it is then used to tell different stories of their lives. Thus, I sought to examine the ways in which 'data' might affect young people's lived experiences but also address issues around the key question of 'What do we mean by the term 'data'?'. By using an interdisciplinary methodology to frame my investigation, I have been able to view the term through different lenses and offer alternative perspectives on the contribution of 'data' to young people's experiences of inequality in a datafied society and their potential to counter them. I argue that my findings highlight the significant role that 'data' play in shaping how we perceive and are perceived by others and how the ways in which 'data' are interpreted and presented matter to the everyday lives of young people and influence their future life chances.

Data confusion

I suggest, however, that there continues to be some confusion over what is understood by the term 'data' in today's society. Previous qualifying adjectives (Big, Small) have largely dropped out of common usage and I argue that this has led to a lack of clarity in discussions about the concept of 'data' and its uses in society. Early scholarship on 'data' focused on defining its meaning (Anderson, 2008; Gitelman and Jackson, 2013; Kitchin, 2014; Borgman, 2016) in order to distinguish it from what had been referred to as 'data' in sciences, statistics etc. Critical Data scholars have since continued to broaden their fields of inquiry from what we understand by the term 'data' to the breadth of data, its networks and the impact of digital data on the lived experiences of citizens (Kennedy, 2018). From information in the press and social media, it would be easy to assume that young people's lives are dominated by data whether from the private or public sector. Certainly, private companies gather data about their customers from their interactions with their websites or use digital technologies to search for potential customers online. Yet, my empirical evidence shows that young people's lives may also be influenced by non-digital (analogue) data such as that generated from direct human interventions in their lives. Findings from my study of Beatfreeks, for example, show that young people's use and experiences of data still involve non-digital as well as digital forms in spite of the fact that the current generation of young people have grown up in an increasingly datafied environment. There is, however, often a blurring of which is which, as analogue or non-digital forms of data are frequently digitised for archiving purposes or uploaded as digital files for sharing online.

Digital vs non – digital

I suggest that digital technologies have now become so ubiquitous that we take them for granted and are often unaware of their influence in our daily lives. Nevertheless, I argue that researchers still need to pay attention to analogue/non-digital often small-scale datasets since they offer insights into the lived experiences of young people without the intervention of algorithmic interpretation. Hence, my interest in how the founder and team members of Beatfreeks are making use of non-digital sources of data to counter the datafied assessment of their problems and the policies needed to address them. This alternative conceptualisation of 'data' includes information gained from non-digital activities or interactions such as data derived from young people's performances at live

events such as Poetry Jams and how they are received by those attending the event. These everyday experiences are thus being shaped by the increasing entanglement of digital data with analogue non-digital data acquired and sorted by human beings. I suggest that this may be becoming the new normal but that it needs more research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes involved and the implications not just for young people but for policymakers and wider society as a whole.

I have found, however, that comparatively little attention has been paid by researchers to the effects of these other non-digital forms of data /information on the current generation of young people's inequalities even though they are already accustomed to the use of both the digital and the analogue in their daily lives. I argue that there is, therefore, a gap in our knowledge concerning the increasing interrelationships between digital and analogue forms of 'data' and how they affect young people's life chances. There is also a need to re-examine the existing interpretations of 'data' to take account of the imbrication of digital data and technologies with data derived from human interactions in the 'real' world. This has become ever more evident during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic when so many young people's lives, out of necessity, have been shaped by a combination of digital and human interactions.

Small (Analogue) Data

From my reading, I have found that that there are examples of the use of openly available comparatively small datasets by civil society NGOs to support specific campaigns but I suggest that comparatively little attention has so far been paid by researchers to the work of this 'small data'. My creative industries partner Beatfreeks, however, has demonstrated that small non-digital data in the form of its BYT Survey of 1,240 young people (Birmingham, 2018) can offer potentially more fine grained/nuanced insights into issues than Big Data. As I have shown in Chapter 6 (Voice, Recognition and Young people) young people in Beatfreeks have taken a creative approach to the communication of their findings in order to open up dialogue with decision makers and influencers about young people's needs and concerns. Small data sets and small-scale initiatives on their own, however, may not be sufficient to achieve change on their own but I argue that they can open up constructive dialogue between young people and those in a position of power and disrupt the normative policy narratives of their lives.

Contribution to knowledge: 3

The Voice of Young People

Politics and economic and social resources play a major part in determining the landscapes in which young people live and make meaning of their lives. If their needs are not acknowledged or their circumstances are misrepresented by policymakers, then they may feel unvalued and ignored. This, in turn, may lead to disillusion with the polity and a disconnection from political institutions and processes as well as mainstream society (Hart and Henn, 2017). Their voices, therefore, are frequently missing from any consideration of issues which may affect their everyday lives.

Through the empirical findings of my research with Beatfreeks in Birmingham, however, I have identified ways in which it is possible for such young people to draw attention to their concerns and aspirations through enabling their voices not only to be heard but listened to and acted on. I have drawn on concepts of Voice as proposed and discussed by Couldry (2010) and Bassel (2017) to interrogate my findings but have also proposed my own conceptualisations of Voice to offer a more fine-grained interpretation of the transactions which take place between young people and those in positions of authority. I have also reflected on the role of Beatfreeks in making manifest the voices of young people. The company exercises agency in bringing the voices of young people to the attention of policymakers but, by giving them opportunities to tell their own stories with creativity and passion, they also give young people agency to counter the often disadvantaging normative narratives of their everyday lives.

Contribution to Knowledge: 4

'Constructive' disruption – a new form of social activism for 21st century?

Is Beatfreeks' practice of social activism more subtle/more socially responsible than others? My evidence highlights how Beatfreeks has adopted a non-confrontational approach to challenging power by using the creative presentation of information and by developing consultative and collaborative ways of working with those whom it seeks to influence. It is non-party political but it is still political in that it is seeking to change the ways in which

young people are perceived and treated in society. I argue that the methods used are less about resistance which implies pushing against something to remove it and more about disrupting existing behaviours. In the case of Beatfreeks, it can be seen in their willingness to share knowledge (in the form of their own collection of data) and gain access to those in authority. As the founder of the company stated in her speech about the BYT Survey at the Brum Youth Trends Summit, 2018 - "we made it as a gift to the city.   I argue that this is a form of 'constructive' disruption of the status quo as it is about maximizing influence by getting 'inside power' on the basis of mutual self- interest rather than resisting from the outside. It could also be seen, however, as the exercise of 'soft power' which, according to Joseph Nye, "is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017:1). In this case, Beatfreeks' offer to share insights into young people's everyday lives has opened   up opportunities for dialogue between policymakers and young people who are seldom recognized in official consultations. I suggest that it is a new kind of activism for a neoliberal post austerity age in the context of young people who are seeking a different form of engagement with power and should be seen as an approach for the medium to long term. It is in contrast to activism which is directed at a specific issue by young people who feel disconnected from existing democratic structures and practices. Whilst they may hope to achieve immediate change by their resistance to a particular policy or set of actions, I suggest that they are more likely to meet with resistance from those they are seeking to influence.

It is not only the actions of Beatfreeks which can be disruptive, however, but also its organisational structure. Whilst embedded within the company, I had a number of reflective conversations with Anisa about her motivation not only to become an entrepreneur but a socially aware entrepreneur. So, she is driven both by the desire to create a sustainable business model and by her commitment to the idea of social justice for young people. By combining her business skills with the creativity of young people to bring about social change, Anisa has created a hybrid organisation with potentially conflicting objectives with its mix of 'for profit' and 'not-for profit' activities. Yet, she has shown how these two ambitions can also be complementary and capable of generating   income from both. It is not necessarily unusual for cultural and youth organisations to balance loss-making cultural projects with guaranteed income generating activities but, based on my

personal experiences of working with 'grant-aided' cultural organisations, their creative activities take priority and tend to drive their values and activities.

Thus, I suggest that Beatfreeks differs from other creative youth engagement organisations by taking the long view regarding the potential of young people to shape the decision-making processes of government and its agencies. While some youth engagement companies focus on the use of creative practices to build individual competences to negotiate the system but no more, Beatfreeks aims to give young people the skills, knowledge and opportunities to go further if they wish and to help them gain their own access to the structures of power. Having observed the company's youth activism at work, I believe that its approach has lessons for other youth organisations. It has elements of traditional activism in its values and language but also reflects the neoliberal interest in entrepreneurship and innovative business ventures and what I believe to be the zeitgeist of Gen Z: entrepreneurial but responsible in business; committed to social justice; and creative, disruptive but constructive social activism.

These experiences have contributed to shaping Beatfreeks' business structure and actions which, in turn, illustrate how it is possible to disrupt existing models of entrepreneurship at the same time as that of socially engaged youth work on the basis of a mutual interest. My findings show, for example, how data gathered by members of the company for a social justice purpose can then be reused to meet the business objectives of another. The commodification of the latter then supports the costs of acquiring the data in the first place and in this way helps to sustain both sides of the business. I maintain, however, that Beatfreeks' socially responsible entrepreneurial approach to youth engagement highlights the continuing legacy of the years of austerity and the continuing influence of neoliberalism on society in which the official structures of youth work have been reduced or have disappeared altogether.

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