

# Connected Communities

## Performing Abergavenny: creating a connected community beyond divisions of class, locality and history

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Executive Summary  
Executive summary text here (max 200 words)

Performing Abergavenny is a project that used arts and humanities methods to enhance community cohesion in the Welsh market town of Abergavenny. A previous research project undertaken within the same town, investigating the use of the concept of microsociality (Walkerdine and Studdert, 2013; Studdert, in press; Walkerdine in press) to understand community, provided the backdrop to this research. The concept of microsociality understands community as produced through the act of communing, to produce social community meanings in common. We found this approach very useful in the project and in the process of undertaking arts and humanities-based work using a mixture of microsociality and small performance acts for this project. The project addressed the enhancement of community cohesion within a class-divided town together with a variety of project partners, comprised of local people, organizations and councils. Using a co-design, co-creation framework, the project developed a number of research strategies, that included a Facebook page, a local song, a performance evening in the local theatre, a treasure hunt and a festival. The project showed what can be achieved when local people feel empowered and how such work might contribute to the agenda on community cohesion and local (self) governance.

## **Key words**

microsociality, performance, cohesion, class, community, meaning-in-common, co-design and co-creation

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in press) to understand community undertaken within the same town, provides the backdrop to this research. The concept of microsociality understands community as produced through the act of communing, as an outcome of meaning-in-common. We found this approach very useful in the project and in the process of undertaking arts-based work for this project, began to understand that Abergavenny, despite its peaceful and conflict-free appearance, did have historical divisions that were class and geographically based. In particular, work with residents of the council estate in the north of the town led to an understanding that they felt excluded and discriminated against within the town, felt unwelcome and unsafe in the centre of the town and work with residents in other areas confirmed that the estate was often understood as the source of crime, drugs and was considered by some to be a no-go area. In one arts-based intervention, local people from the estate created a play detailing the move from the centre to the estate in the 1950s because of slum clearance. This move to a better standard of accommodation, while creating a sense that social problems had been shunted from centre to periphery, brought its own serious issues for a politics of inclusion and cohesion. Monmouthshire, the county in which Abergavenny sits, is a comparatively wealthy one. Thus, we set out to address issues the possibility of enhancing cohesion within the town using the Arts and Humanities, given that the previous project had been so successful in this respect.

### Co-Design Phase

The project was part of a co-design, co-creation approach, with the idea being that it was to be planned and executed with project partners from design to execution. This was a new style of research for us but one that turned out to be exciting and innovative, bringing results that were important. Our project partners were a mixture of local councils and local community groups. We began by forming a project steering committee of local people who were prominent within the local partner organisations. These people were all Abergavenny residents. As the project grew and developed, we were able to co-opt new people onto the committee as needed.

The aim of the design phase was to find the questions about community cohesion that the second phase of the project would attempt to answer. To fulfill this brief, the steering group decided to use actors in role engaging in street theatre in the main shopping area one Saturday. The characters were taken partly from our previous research, but they were characters who could ask passers by about aspects of the town that were important to them: a woman from the slum street (demolished when the estate was built), from 1956 who was asking passers-by about the street; an extrovert and fey 'street-sign artist' who asked passers by to point out the significant aspects of the town and a 'radio presenter' who was supposedly compiling a guide to the good and bad aspects of the town. This exercise produced over 150 responses and interactions from townspeople within four hours. The most important areas of concern as raised by this exercise were mistrust of town and county councils, lack of facilities and the loss of the open-air swimming pool (that had been closed in 1996). When the steering group put these concerns together with issues stemming from the previous project, we were able to formulate questions to be addressed in the co-production phase.

These were:

Can community cohesion be improved by enhancing micro-Performing Abergavenny is a project that used arts and humanities methods to enhance community cohesion in the Welsh market town of Abergavenny. A previous research project investigating the use of the concept of microsociality (Walkerdine and Studdert, 2013; Studdert, in press; Walkerdine in press) to understand community undertaken within the same town, provides the backdrop to this research. The concept of microsociality understands community as produced through the act of communing, as an outcome of meaning-in-common to produce social community meanings in common. We found this approach very useful in the project and in the process of undertaking arts-based work for this project, began to understand that Abergavenny, despite its peaceful and conflict-free appearance, did have historical divisions that were class and geographically based. In particular, work with residents of the council estate in the north of the town led to an understanding that they felt excluded and discriminated against within the town, felt unwelcome and unsafe in the centre of the town and work with residents in other areas confirmed that the estate was often understood as the source of crime, drugs and was considered by some to be a no-go area. In one arts-based intervention, local people from the estate created a play detailing the move from the centre to the estate in the 1950s because of slum clearance. This move to a better standard of accommodation, while creating a sense that social problems had been shunted from centre to periphery, brought its own serious issues for a politics of inclusion and cohesion. Monmouthshire, the county in which Abergavenny sits, is a comparatively wealthy one. Thus, we set out to address issues the possibility of enhancing cohesion within the town using the Arts and Humanities, given that the previous project had been so successful in this respect.

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These were:

- Can community cohesion be improved by enhancing micro-sociality through the participation of diverse elements of the Abergavenny community in arts-based projects?
- What kinds of performance work enhance community cohesion?
- How can we engage people across divisions within the town in historical projects and performances?
- How can we access hard-to-reach groups and involve them in these projects?
- Can arts-based performances offer councils and residents pointers towards a new way of relating to each other?

Our theoretical assumption was that cohesion can be achieved as an outcome of enhanced small acts of micro-sociality or small performance acts. Our proposal is that increased recognition of commonality across difference should lead to increased communal cohesion.

On the basis of these questions we formulated the following Objectives:

- Co-led by community representatives, hold regular meetings to direct Phase 2.
- Together, develop performances and other activities which acknowledge divisions but which seek to go beyond them to enhance community cohesion, making sure that all kinds of citizens including hard-to-reach groups are included.
- Together with the local history society and local museum, develop research with community members to uncover and re-view the history of divisions in the town and the memory of its traces in particular sites.
- Facilitate an engagement between the community and the councils that productively allows new forms of relationships to be considered. Feed these into the evolving county council 'Total Place' project.

The activities that we went on to develop were:

- Local history groups culminating in a town treasure hunt.
- A performance evening featuring work with a local fathers' group from the estate, a senior citizens choir, a piece designed with Platform youth theatre, a senior citizens' choir, Abergavenny Futures focusing on ideas about how Abergavenny could be different and interactions with the council.
- A performative festival on the site of the old swimming pool in the local park.

### Co-Production phase

It is worth documenting that these envisaged events did change considerably in the production phase. As the project became better known (we received excellent publicity via the local paper) more and more people sought to help. Some ideas had to be modified other schemes were enhanced. For example, the senior citizens choir was set to involve mostly senior citizens from the estate, but after further discussion this was felt unfeasible. The envisaged local history groups did have an enthusiastic attendance but fell short of the numbers required; a Facebook page was suggested as an alternative. This was hugely successful producing massive participation from all sections of the community. This in turn developed and extended the project and involved more people. For example, we were approached by the local paper that wanted to work with the Facebook page as it recognized the power of the sharing taking place. The Facebook page also carried content that went viral at one point and spawned a successful subsidiary project (Studdert, 2014).

The final line-up was:

\*Forgotten Abergavenny Facebook page, leading to town treasure hunt, with sustainable trail handed over to Monmouthshire County Council. Facebook page continued by local people ( As of August 2014 the Forgotten Abergavenny site had:

3021 'Likes' and an average of 3,100 views per post. Was viewed in 49 countries, 79 cities and in 27 languages. Between its inauguration in September 2013 and June 2014, it has been viewed 300,000 times and averages 7,500 views per week. Each post draws an average of eighteen comments per post and 1,200 active viewers per week. Measured across all platforms for inter-linked social media, it has achieved a combined total of 400,000+ views across all Forgotten Abergavenny channels: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, You Tube and Blogger.) (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Forgotten-Abergavenny/401704133264837>)

\*Town song: 500 miles by the Proclaimers (Abergavenny version), filmed and screened at the Borough Theatre event (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EX1PMrt18Uk>); went viral on Facebook: 10,000 views in the first 24 hrs).

\*Abergavenny Voices at the Borough Theatre, featuring verbatim play performed by local amateur players and based on stories told by local care home residents; play by Platform youth theatre featuring excluded youth and telling the story of aspects of their lives about exclusion in the town; play about unseen night workers in Abergavenny performed by local professional actors; improvisation by local youth improvisation group on community/council relations; Mock the Abergavenny week performed by improvisers and council members; premiere of the 500 miles film (see documentary below).

\*Picnic at the Pool – a performative festival held on the site of the open air swimming pool, with paddling pools filled by the local fire service, a mural designed and painted by local people, duck races, bathing hat competition, site-based performances, tea and ‘jam crusts’ from the Friends of Bailey Park, a jazz band. People brought their own picnics and a local housing association paid for picnics for those families who could not afford to supply their own.

All events were recorded and a 20 minute documentary about the project was made (<https://vimeo.com/103892683>).

### Discussion

By any reckoning, the project was an enormous success. As it developed, it created a snowball effect; more and more people participated and the councils became increasingly involved. Of course there were problems – some activities did not work as well as we had hoped and integrating the commuter population was more difficult than we imagined.

The process of co-design, creation and production was by and large, a joy. This was the first time that this team had worked in this way and the difference between this and a standard research project was very marked. In particular, what was important was that we were researching WITH others, rather than on them. There is no doubt that having partners as co-researchers and decision-makers is a vastly more effective method for producing valid research. Having said this, the project team found it difficult to imagine how developing such intimate work would have been possible with a group of partners and in a location which we did not already know. Building up trust in this kind of work is vital and takes time. In addition, this was much more work than a normal research project as it involved constant liaison with community members and organisations. The research team worked far longer hours than those stated in the proposal and it should be borne in mind by funding bodies that budgets and timescales need to reflect this if work of a high enough standard and impact is to be achieved.

In this project, we envisaged that we could take a micro-social approach to community cohesion using the idea of small performance acts.

Our work has led us to perceive the close relationship of this micro-social approach with the co-design and co-creation ethos. In particular we came to understand how difficult it is for working class people to feel safe and empowered enough to develop their own agenda (Walkerdine, in press). Typically, they are the target of agendas decided elsewhere; agendas developed on the basis of someone else’s perception of a lack or problem among the working class community. Our project shows that giving people the means to produce something experientially, has a dynamic effect on their health, sense of communal confidence and ability to make themselves heard. On the ground, professionals have consistently reported to us that narrow issue-driven agendas prohibit the

necessary prior building of trust and communal enhancement; yet paradoxically, building communal trust is absolutely crucial for fulfilment of desired policy outcomes. This project did manage, in a fun way, to inaugurate and develop a sense of possibility for self-direction and empowerment, which could serve as the basis of a different relationship between people and government. For this to happen, for people to be able to set and develop their own agenda, a relationship of trust has to be developed. In Abergavenny the councils did over time come to fully support the project and offered considerable support in kind for the project. We believe that what was achieved is a fraction of what could be achieved in this respect. Using Arts and Humanities as research tools in co-production framework offers a profound method for community research.

Did cohesion in Abergavenny improve? It has to be said that the people from the estate as well as those who commuted and work outside Abergavenny were hardest to get involved. We never quite reached the commuter belt but the people on the estate did become involved when events were initiated from someone within the estate itself. Thus, the most crucial element in enhancing involvement appears to be the development of trust and a sense of belonging. This was achieved most productively with the Picnic at the Pool and the Facebook page. Both left legacies that were sustainable, with the Picnic being set up as a regular yearly event by a group of local people, the Facebook page continuing and local people starting a community kitchen providing cheap wholesome lunches.

The attitudes of the councils did also change throughout the life of the project (Studdert, in press). The project provided a framework through which community development and governance could be understood, in a way that is appropriate to the current times. The project also left tangible legacies in the form of a local treasure trail, a sense of self-direction and empowerment and a sense of possibility of what could be achieved with a bit of effort. Members of the steering committee saw the project as an unqualified success.

### Impact

Because of the research team's commitment to deliver impact to the people of Abergavenny, bearing in mind the tremendous help from volunteers, we designed regular step by step public events producing increasing knowledge of the project, increased joining in of activities, with a lasting legacy and a greater council willingness to listen to community voices. We also hoped for a solidified cohesion.

We did deliver all public events as planned and were aided by considerable publicity in the local press.

In addition to this, our Facebook page involved a very wide cross-section of people not only from Abergavenny but also across the world. The 500 miles film also involved local businesses, who appeared in the film, which went viral via our Facebook page. (Local businesses became quite strongly involved with all our events and donated prizes for the Treasure Hunt and materials for the mural. This shows the reach of simple ideas using social media in relation to a community cohesion agenda.



We also sought to make a submission to the local council's Total Place initiative to demonstrate how our approach could feed into their work in this regard. This submission outlines the significance of the project approach and what it can deliver cheaply and simply to the idea of self-governance for local people, the development of community cohesion and the improvement of council-resident relations.

Academic impact via conferences and publications is underway, with conference presentations held in 2014, journal and book publications currently being written. A website to house the Abergavenny research is currently under construction ([www.abergavennycommunity.org](http://www.abergavennycommunity.org)), a 20 minute documentary about the project is made and is being sent to all local councils. A further media release via Cardiff University's PR department is planned when further publications are ready.

### Recommendations

1. Extend and develop the co-design, co-creation approach to community research, but recognise that it is a complex endeavour that requires building trust and an extended timeline.
2. Recognise that much of the most effective research crosses discipline boundaries , especially across arts, humanities and social sciences and that this creates issues of different theoretical and methodological approaches that need to be addressed sympathetically.
3. Recognise the central importance of partnerships with local people for the delivery of community support and empowerment and think about an impact agenda that is more open to understanding the complex and subtle changes that research can make in people's lives.

### References

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Walkerdine V (in press) Working class communities and microsociality, Sociological Review special issue on community, (ed Studdert and Walkerdine)





## References and external links

List of references goes here (max two sides of A4) - in alphabetical order by author surname – titles in *italics*

Example:

Cross, Charles R. *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix*. New York: Hyperion, 2005.

## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)

