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FESTIVALS AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Bernadette Quinn

Introduction

Researchers are turning to investigate the social dimensions of festivals in an unprecedented way (Andrews & Leopold 2013; Jepson & Clarke 2015a,b; Roche 2017). Historically, social impacts were a strong preoccupation, but Deery and Jago (2010) argue that this body of work has come of age. The literature can now be seen to be growing in size and developing in its conceptual foundations, methodological underpinnings and research questions. New directions are emerging as researchers negotiate a wide array of theoretical perspectives, concepts and approaches, emanating in fields of study that range from narrow domains like event management through to broader areas of cultural studies, anthropology, human geography and beyond. More critical questions are being asked about the kinds of social change that festivals are associated with (Sharpe 2008), and this is prompting more awareness of the need to fully grasp and articulate the profound social significance of festivals.

However, while the body of work investigating the social dimensions of festivals is hugely interesting and growing strongly, it could, at this point, be said to be quite uneven (Quinn & Wilks 2013) with several disparate realms of enquiry (Ziakas & Costa 2010). Much knowledge seems to have built up along parallel lines with only partial insights shared across disciplinary boundaries. In addition, the terminology employed across the literature to refer to the social dimensions of festivals varies widely to include terms like impact, value, meaning, change, benefit, outcome and several more. Sometimes, the indicators used to denote these dimensions, e.g. cohesion, inclusion, equity, community building and connectivity, are attributed different meanings. Meanwhile, researchers are increasingly asking critical questions about the nature of the contribution that events (Hall 2012) and festivals (Mair & Duffy 2015) make to society. In light of this, this chapter suggests that a useful way forward might be to think about the social dimensions of festivals in terms of sustainability. Sustainability is widely accepted as an important, overarching, conceptual framework within which to analyse all kinds of human development. While it has risen up the festival research agenda in recent years, Pernecky and Luck (2013) suggest that work on sustainability is lagging behind and that more breadth and volume of research is needed. Social sustainability as a specific concept is as yet little applied in festival studies.
The chapter begins by briefly reflecting on developments in the literature on the social dimensions of festivals before reviewing definitions of social sustainability and discussing how festival research might be advanced in light of broader social sustainability debates. While cultural sustainability and its concern for cultural diversity, cultural heritage and cultural vitality (Soini & Birkeland 2014) would add a very useful dimension to this discussion, it is largely excluded as it is simply beyond the scope of this chapter.

Research into the social dimensions of festivals

As Mair and Duffy (2015) remind us, festivals are predominantly a social phenomenon with the potential to provide a variety of social outcomes. Not surprisingly then, when social questions began to be asked of festivals there was a strong focus on identifying social impacts. Among event management researchers, there was a keen interest to measure such impacts, with Delamere (2001) initiating a strong and clearly identifiable body of ongoing work that uses empirical scales and quantitative tools to measure resident attitudes towards events. Gursoy, Kim and Uysal (2004), following a brief overview of the literature on residents’ perceptions of festivals and special events, suggest that they are likely to generate economic benefits for the local community, build community cohesiveness and produce social incentives for residents and businesses. Small (2007), in a study of community festivals specifically, identified six underlying dimensions of the social impacts of community festivals as inconvenience, community identity and cohesion, personal frustration, entertainment and socialisation opportunities, community growth and development, and behavioural consequences, with the latter including underage drinking, delinquent behaviour and vandalism. Deery and Jago (2010) reviewed social impacts, identifying an extensive list of both positive and negative impacts relating to, e.g., employment, living standards, entertainment, socialising, community pride, skills, facilities and infrastructure building in respect of the former; and crime, overcrowding, delinquent behaviour, noise, environmental damage, litter and congestion in terms of the latter. Their summation of the literature found three dominant lines of enquiry: the development of scales to measure social costs and benefits, the influence of residents’ perceptions on residents’ support for events, and policy recommendations for enhancing social impacts. Social exchange theory, which examines how interaction patterns are influenced by the structure of rewards and costs in a relationship (Molm 1991), was widely employed throughout this body of work.

Concurrently, numerous other researchers less intent on measurement were being inspired by a range of social sciences questions as they undertook studies identifying how festivals can be implicated in developing a sense of community (Reid 2007), place identity and pride in place (De Bres & Davis 2001), a shared sense of belonging and identity (Gibson & Connell 2005; Duffy & Waitt 2011) and social cohesion (Duffy & Waitt 2011). Researchers were also noting that festivals are highly politicised affairs that serve to reproduce social relations along gender, sexual and social class lines (Waterman 1998; Browne 2009), and thus generate contested meanings. Other researchers were problematising processes of commodification (Greenwood 1989) and authenticity (MacLeod 2006; Matheson 2008), while many more were highlighting the ability of festivals to generate economic-related benefits, which feed into positive social and cultural change (e.g. Gibson, Waitt & Walmsey 2010). This long-standing body of work is very disparate in its conceptual underpinnings and methodological approaches. Perhaps this is partly what led Carlsen, Ali-Knight and Robertson (2007) to argue that the cultural, community and social benefits of major festivals had not yet been systematically studied.
More recently, there has been an increase in researchers investigating social interaction in festival settings using social capital ideas. Arcodia and Whitford (2006) were some of the first to investigate the social interactions between festival attendees using social capital, as was Wilks (2011). Finkel (2010) approached the topic from the standpoint of community residents, while Mykletun (2009) approached it from the perspective of festival organisers. There is now a small but steady stream of studies using social capital to understand festivals (Rao 2001; Finkel 2010; Wilks 2011; Wilks 2013; Black 2016; Wilks & Quinn 2016). As Lundberg, Ambrecht, Andersson, and Getz (2017, p. 5) explain, ‘events can be regarded as facilitating and catalysing social interaction and social networks among individuals as well as groups of people’, and so they lend themselves to analyses that use social capital ideas. The rise of interest in studying the value of festival and event networks, sometimes in the context of co-creation (e.g. Van der Zee & Olders 2016; Richards & Colombo 2017), has close parallels.

Many festival studies deal with community-run festivals; however, recently there has been a marked rise of interest in expressly studying community festivals (Jepson & Clarke 2015a,b). This recent work shows an intensified interest in investigating how festivals are linked to the creation of identity and community building (Curtis 2011), the development of community resources including volunteers (Whitford & Ruhnanen 2013), as well as to social cohesion and inclusion (Chew 2009). Sometimes, these enquiries draw on social capital ideas. In this respect, Pedrana (2015) makes a helpful contribution by distinguishing between social capital in societies and in communities, with the former being comparable to an institution with formal rules and organisation, and the latter characterised by interpersonal and informal networks and relationships. This research is not, however, unproblematic. There is a need to define more clearly what is meant by the term ‘community’. Furthermore, the question as to whether the social dimensions of community festivals differ from those of other kinds of festivals remains to be addressed.

There has also been a growing acknowledgement of the need to investigate rural festivals to balance the strong preoccupation with urban festivals (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz 2011; Stevens & Shin 2012; Quinn & Wilks 2017). Gibson, Connell, Waitt and Walmsley (2011) highlight the exceptional importance of festivals to rural communities, emphasising their transformative effect, as well as their role in reflecting the collective identities of place and people. Meanwhile, Ziakas and Costa (2010) briefly synopsised a number of studies showing that rural events produce an array of social values, including building social networks (Rao 2001), strengthening social capital (Derrett 2003; Arcodia & Whitford 2006) and enriching the quality of small-town life (De Bres & Davis 2001; Picard & Robinson 2006). Much potential remains to study urban and rural settings comparatively to see whether and how the social significance of festivals varies accordingly.

All of these interconnected developments bring a more critical studies perspective to the study of festivals, with researchers moving away from asking if impacts occur to investigating the processes involved in shaping how and why they occur (Smith 2009), as well as to what end. This is leading to more probing of the roles that festivals play in reinforcing and reproducing existing social structures and social relations. In some of the recent literature on community festivals, a critical perspective has been adopted to problematise social dimensions like social justice (Mair & Duffy 2015), community engagement (Bostock, Cooper & Roberts 2016) and social networking (Van der Zee & Olders 2016).

At this point, Hinch and Holt’s (2017) argument that the concept of place needs to be part of this discussion seems relevant. Several earlier studies have pointed to the role that festivals play in creating place identities, and more recently, place has been shown to be implicated
in shaping social capital (Quinn & Wilks 2013). While festivals are always grounded in place, they are strongly shaped by much wider social and material networks and flows of interactivity (Weller 2013). As festival activities unfold, space becomes transformed in ways that disrupt and temporarily suspend social relations (Waitt 2008), alter routine mobilities (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz 2011), modify how spaces are used (Quinn & Wilks 2017) and revalue the symbolic capital of the place (Weller 2013).

While all of these different, often overlapping developments are very constructive in advancing understanding, they are unravelling more complexities that call for comprehensive investigation. In this context, the main suggestion made here is that incorporating the concept of social sustainability into the literature might be a useful development.

**Defining social sustainability**

It is 30 years now since the Bruntland Report first introduced and defined the concept of sustainability (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Countless researchers and policy writers have turned to the concept in the intervening years to advance developments in all spheres of human activity in the attempt to safeguard, respect and nurture the earth’s resources. Sustainability is widely understood to incorporate economic and social as well as environmental dimensions; however, huge complexities exist in trying to interweave these three sets of dimensions together into one concept. Accordingly, there has been a tendency for sustainability to be articulated most often and most obviously in ecological and environmental terms. Certainly, the social dimensions of sustainability have received lesser attention than the other two, although a very sizeable literature on the topic now exists in several fields of study including urban studies, rural studies, geography and sociology.

As yet, the term ‘social sustainability’ tends not to be as well defined or as uniformly understood as environmental sustainability, and this is key topic of discussion in the literature (Griessler & Littig 2005; Dempsey, Bramley, Power & Brown 2009; Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017). There has also been something of a debate as to whether social sustainability is an actual goal in itself or merely a tool to achieve environmental sustainability (Åhman 2013). A number of researchers have identified indicators that define and help to operationalise the concept. McKenzie (2004), for example, pointed to a number of mechanisms, e.g., for fulfilling community needs through community action, collectively identifying its strengths and needs, supporting cultural integration when that is desired by groups and individuals, and supporting political advocacy. Following a review of the urban social sustainability literature, Dempsey et al. (2009) produced an extensive list of factors thought to contribute to social sustainability. These covered areas like education and training, health, quality of life and well-being, employment, fair distribution of income, as well as social inclusion, community, social interaction and cohesion, local democracy and social justice. Åhman (2013), meanwhile, thought it useful to cluster criteria: basic needs and equity, education, quality of life, social capital, social cohesion, integration and diversity, and sense of place. For several researchers, including Knox and Mayer (2013), sustainability is strongly allied to the ideal of ‘liveability’, with social sustainability relating to social well-being and social equity.

From even this very brief discussion, the definitional problems are clear. There are a great many indicators that include institutional as well as social factors. Some of these are themselves difficult to define. Some, like social capital, are strongly theoretically underpinned as a concept, while others are not. Several seem closely related, while others, like education, seem quite distinct and enormous in their own right. In an attempt to impose some structure and to tackle the ‘conceptual chaos’ that ‘compromises the term’s utility’, Vallance, Perkins
and Dixon (2011, p. 342) have suggested thinking about social sustainability in three ways: as ‘development sustainability’ – addressing basic needs, the creation of social capital, social justice, etc.; ‘bridge sustainability’ – behaviour so as to achieve environmental goals; and ‘maintenance sustainability’ – preserving and sustaining sociocultural characteristics in the face of change. This categorisation groups individual criteria into clusters, but it also helps to focus attention on what stage a societal group is at in respect of social sustainability, given that social processes are dynamic and that social sustainability cannot be understood as a ‘one size fits all’, fixed idea. In turn, it prompts thinking about what priorities are most relevant and through what vehicles they might be addressed. It links to McKenzie’s (2004) understanding of social sustainability as a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition. Eizenberg and Jabareen (2017) propose a new conceptual framework premised first on tackling social sustainability’s definitional problems by considering all three pillars of sustainability while trying to define each separately and, second, on foregrounding risk as a key organising concept and focusing on how societies cope with or ignore risks as a deterrent (though not solely) of social injustices.

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Getz (2009) has written that sustainable events are not just those that can endure indefinitely but those that also fulfil important social, cultural, economic and environmental roles that people value. Pernecky and Lück (2013, p. 26) similarly note that ‘events are an important means of socio-cultural sustainability and have the potential to promote equality, cultural diversity, inclusion, good community relations, and human rights’. Li, Moore and Smythe (2017, p. 23) argue that in urban areas, community festivals are a means for ‘collective action, community building, and multi-literate meaning-making’. However, while sustainability is now a key and growing theme in festival and event studies, there remains a gap in knowledge about what constitutes a sustainable festival (Zifkos 2015). Most of the literature to date deals with the environmental pillar (e.g. Mair & Laing 2012), while very few studies overtly consider ‘social sustainability’. Fewer still rigorously interrogate or problematise the concept with reference to festivals as social practices, or situate festivals in the context of the broader social sustainability debates discussed in the preceding section (although see Black 2016). Thus, while a lot is known about the social dimensions of festivals, there still remains an urgent need to address Whitford and Ruhonen’s (2013) question about how the benefits arising from festivals contribute more broadly towards sustainable community development.

Finding answers to this admittedly complex question could be advanced by deeper engagement with broader social sustainability debates. Already, even a cursory knowledge of the latter reveals obvious connections and overlaps, with themes and terminology being extremely familiar to festival researchers. One key lesson to be heeded here is that while sustainable development is ultimately change-oriented and has an applied dimension that is critical, if it lacks solid theoretical underpinnings then its effectiveness may be compromised. Much could be gained by drawing on the conceptual resources of this wider literature to more rigorously define and review the terms that populate the festival literature, e.g. community building, sense of community and social cohesion. Such factors are said to be among the benefits that festivals can generate, but more needs to be known about how exactly they are to be recognised, how they relate to each other and how they come to be produced through festival activity. Rather than focussing on the broad array of benefits that festivals can produce it might be more useful to undertake more narrowly focussed, in-depth scrutiny of fewer individual, or clustered, benefits, as in Black (2016).
In a sense, the definitional problems characterising social sustainability are not dissimilar to those associated with the social dimensions of festivals: an unevenness of theoretical underpinnings, a wide variety of sometimes ill-defined criteria and difficulties in translating knowledge into meaningful actions for policymakers and actors on the ground. While more efforts to create helpful, overarching conceptual scaffolding are needed, so too are more efforts needed to translate knowledge into actions, be it to seek to influence individuals or groups to adopt more sustainable practices or to influence government to introduce change. As noted earlier, the festivals literature is moving to be more concerned with the processes of social change, as opposed to identifying the change itself (Smith 2009). Focussing attention on the idea of process, as Vallance et al. (2011) have done, should help link theory and practise in terms of breaking down the enormity of the problem (fostering socially sustainable festivals) into parts, and encouraging enquiries to take account of how scale matters, something that has been infrequently addressed in the festivals literature under study here.

It is important to note that interchange between festival studies and broader social sustainability debates would be mutually constructive. The extensive and long-standing body of research on the social dimensions of festivals attests to the fact that far from being some marginal, trivial activity, festivals are important social practices. They perfectly illustrate Fine’s (2012, pp. 117–116) ‘focused microgatherings’ and ‘archetypal form of wispy communities’, which constitute the basic building blocks of society and play a pivotal role in organising social life and developing local cultures and identities. Festivals are premised on people willingly coming together and are an example of the ‘occasional public’ that Wynn (2015, p. 9) associates with ‘local actions and greater social forces com(ing) together for bounded periods to engage in cultural work’. Equally, they are an example of a ‘third space’, the type that people need to be able to access in order to enjoy informal, social interactions that lead to shared experiences, common understandings, a sense of community and an improved sense of social well-being (Knox & Mayer 2013).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has briefly reviewed the literature dealing with the social dimensions of festivals. It noted a growing interest in social questions and identified a number of developments in the literature. All of these, it is argued, point to a deepening and broadening of interest in the processes underpinning social change, a growing influence of more social science concepts and theories, and of critical enquiry. While all of these developments are very constructive in advancing understanding, they are also serving to further expose the complexities and the many unknowns that encompass the social significance of festivals. In an attempt to make a contribution, the chapter suggests turning to the under-explored concept of social sustainability. Sustainability is now widely accepted as a worthy conceptual framework of analysis. Yet relative to environmental and economic sustainability, social sustainability is a little used concept. This chapter suggests that a closer interrogation of the concept would be of value in addressing some of the theoretical and conceptual shortcomings in the existing literature and in further encouraging critical enquiry in the field. It might also offer a more systematic means of making more sense of the social dimensions, both negative and positive, that have long been identified in numerous empirical studies. In addition, the evidence emerging from festival studies has much potential to inform evolving understandings of social sustainability in other areas of study. In conclusion, this chapter hopes to encourage festival researchers to tune into broader debates about social sustainability more generally. It offers some suggestions to encourage the integration of the concept into festival studies and advocates that further consideration is given to taking the literature in this direction.
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