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How the Arts Impact Communities:

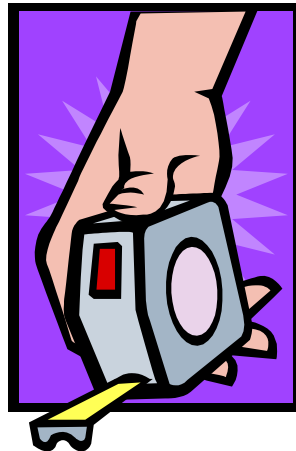
An introduction to the literature on arts impact studies

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INTRODUCTION

As private and public agencies seek innovative ways to employ the arts to improve and strengthen communities, they have become increasingly interested in assessing the impact of their investments. In this context, arts advocates and researchers have made a variety of ambitious claims about how the arts impact communities. These claims, however, are made problematic by the many complications involved in studying the arts. Just consider the possible definitions of the phrase, “the arts impact communities.” When speaking of “the arts,” do we refer to individual participation (as audience member or direct involvement?), to the presence of arts organizations (non-profit *and* for-profit?) or to art/cultural districts, festivals or community arts? When speaking of “impact,” do we refer to economic, cultural or social impact; do we refer exclusively to direct community-level effects or do we also include individual- and organizational-level ones? By “communities,” do we mean regions, cities, neighborhoods, schools or ethnic groups?

Of course, there are no authoritative answers to these questions, since different research questions require different definitions. And as one might expect, arts impact studies employ these heterogeneous definitions in a variety of combinations. Given this array of definitions, how would we go about measuring the impact of the arts on communities? One problem is that researchers and arts advocates rarely seem to consider such complications when making claims about the broader impact of the arts, and seldom discuss the implications of making particular theoretical and methodological choices.¹

In this paper, I will lay out some of the issues that need to be addressed when thinking about and studying how the arts impact communities, in addition to providing an introduction to the literature on arts impact studies. I begin discussing the mechanisms through which the arts are said to have an impact. Following this is a

¹ To be fair, many studies are not intended to examine the impact of arts programs on the broader community, but only at a relatively limited number of participants. Nevertheless, the findings of these studies are often used by arts advocates to support more ambitious claims about the impact of the arts on communities.

discussion of key theoretical and methodological issues involved in studying the impact of the arts. I conclude by suggesting areas for further research and reflecting on the limitations of past research.

MECHANISMS

The arts have been heralded as a panacea for all kinds of problems Arts-integrated school curricula supposedly improve academic performance and student discipline (Fiske 1999; Remer 1990). The arts revitalize neighborhoods and promote economic prosperity (Costello 1998; SCDCAC 2001; Stanziola 1999; Walesh 2001). Participation in the arts improves physical and psychological well-being (Baklien 2000; Ball and Keating 2002; Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson 1996; Turner and Senior 2000). The arts provide a catalyst for the creation of social capital and the attainment of important community goals (Goss 2000; Matarasso 1997; Williams 1995).

Given these claims, the question arises of how to elaborate the causal mechanisms through which the arts have an impact (i.e., the intervening factors that connect a particular arts activity with a specific outcome). Below is a grid that lays out two dimensions that will help in thinking about this.² The rows represent three aspects of the arts typically highlighted in the literature: direct involvement in arts organizations, especially that which entails personal engagement in some form of creative activity (most often associated with community arts programs and the use of the arts in education); participation in the arts as an audience member (mostly associated with cognitive ability, cultural capital and health improvement arguments, as well as economic impact studies of the arts – i.e., whether the arts have an economic impact by drawing audience dollars from outside the community); and the presence of arts organizations in a community (mostly associated with economic impact studies and social capital arguments).

² This grid expands and builds upon a typology of arts effects developed in a research proposal to the Wallace-Readers Digest Funds by Kevin McCarthy (2002) of the RAND Corporation.

Table 1: Mechanisms of Arts Impact*

	Individual			Community		
	Material/ Health	Cognitive / Psych.	Interpersonal	Economic	Cultural	Social
Direct Involvement	<p>Builds inter-personal ties and promotes volunteering, which improves health</p> <p>Increases opportunities for self-expression and enjoyment</p> <p>Reduces delinquency in high-risk youth</p>	<p>Increases sense of individual efficacy and self-esteem</p> <p>Improves individuals' sense of belonging or attachment to a community</p> <p>Improves human capital: skills and creative abilities</p>	<p>Builds individual social networks</p> <p>Enhances ability to work with others and communicate ideas</p>	<p>Wages to paid employees</p>	<p>Increases sense of collective identity and efficacy</p>	<p>Builds social capital by getting people involved, by connecting organizations to each other and by giving participants experience in organizing and working with local government and nonprofits.</p>
Audience Participation	<p>Increases opportunities for enjoyment</p> <p>Relieves Stress</p>	<p>Increases cultural capital</p> <p>Enhances visuo-spatial reasoning (Mozart effect)</p> <p>Improves school performance</p>	<p>Increases tolerance of others</p>	<p>People (esp. tourists/visitors) spend money on attending the arts and on local businesses. Further, local spending by these arts venues and patronized businesses has indirect multiplier effects</p>	<p>Builds community identity and pride</p> <p>Leads to positive community norms, such as diversity, tolerance and free expression.</p>	<p>People come together who might not otherwise come into contact with each other</p>
Presence of Artists and Arts Organization & Institutions	<p>Increases individual opportunity and propensity to be involved in the arts</p>			<p>Increases propensity of comm.-unity members to participate in the arts</p> <p>Increases attractiveness of area to tourists, businesses, people (esp. high-skill workers) and investments</p> <p>Fosters a “creative milieu” that spurs economic growth in creative industries.</p> <p>Greater likelihood of revitalization</p>	<p>Improves community image and status</p>	<p>Promotes neighborhood cultural diversity</p> <p>Reduces neighborhood crime and delinquency</p>

* This grid further develops a typology proposed by Kevin McCarthy (2002).

The columns represent types of impact and are divided into individual and community levels. Individual-level effects are relevant for the purposes of community impact studies to the extent that the impact of the arts on individuals aggregates to the community. (For example, some individual-level impacts, such as ‘personal enjoyment,’ may not have any consequences on community life.) The three types of individual impacts are material (mainly health), cognitive/psychological and interpersonal. Types of community-level effects, which are roughly homologous to individual-level ones, are economic, cultural and social. The cells of the table contain, where relevant, specific impacts claimed in the literature.

The grid helps to assess how different levels and types of artistic inputs are related to different types of outputs. It can be taken as axiomatic that, other things being equal, the more *widespread* and/or *intense* the participation of community members (who are not involved as professionals), the greater the impact the arts will have on cultural and social factors.³ However, direct involvement is more intense than audience participation, whereas audience participation is more widespread than direct involvement. (To the extent that community arts programs are geared towards producing some kind of public ‘show’ [art show, play, reading, festival, etc.], they will tend to optimize both dimensions of participation.) Greater concentrations of artists and arts-related organizations lead to higher degrees of arts participation among residents, directly and as audience members (Stern and Seifert 2000). There is also often a trade-off between different types of arts activities in terms of the kinds of benefits they are most likely to produce. For example, a well-respected theater employing a professional staff is more likely to draw visitors and tourists from outside the community than is a local community arts project exhibition, and hence it will have a greater economic impact. But, since the level of participation among community members lacks intensity in the case of the theater, it has less potential for

³ Note that this does not apply to economic impacts, since those rely primarily on bringing revenue from *outside* the community. In this example, the type of participation is ‘widespread’ and the degree is the ‘intensity.’

building social capital and a sense of collective efficacy. Both the theater and the community arts project may enhance community pride and self-image.

It should be noted that, with the exception of economic impact studies, almost all other research focuses on the benefits that accrue to individuals and organizations involved in the arts, rather than the direct impact of the arts on a community as such.⁴ I will discuss this problem of aggregation later in the paper, but for now I bracket it in favor of explicating mechanisms that connect well-defined arts activities to well-defined outcomes.⁵ The following discussion is organized by claims about the impact of the arts. I focus on three types of claims: first, claims that the arts build social capital; second, claims that the arts improve the economy; and third, claims that the arts are good for individuals. These three broad claims capture virtually all of the more specific assertions about the impact of the arts.

Claim: The arts increase social capital⁶ and community cohesion

Claims under this heading encompass the last two columns of the table – community-level cultural and social impacts – as well as interpersonal effects. Virtually all studies that make this claim examine the effects of community arts programs on the participants and organizations involved (Costello 1998; Dolan 1995; Dreeszen 1992; Fritschner and Hoffman 1984; CDA 2000; Krieger 2001; Landry et al. 1996; Matarasso 1997; Matzke 2000; Murphy 1995; Ogilvie 2000; Preston 1983; Stern et al. 1994; Stern and Seifert 2002; Trent 2000; Williams 1995; Wollheim 2000). The following discussion draws on all of these studies.

Although quite varied, community arts programs are grassroots organizations that attempt to use the arts as a tool for human or material development (Costello 1998). Community arts programs almost universally involve community members in a

⁴ One notable exception is Stern (1999; 2001), who demonstrates that a greater concentration of arts organizations in a neighborhood leads to longer-lasting ethnic and economic diversity in that neighborhood.

⁵ By aggregation, I refer to the process by which effects on individuals, taken together, can combine to have an influence on the broader community.

⁶ Scholars often fail to define precisely what they mean by social capital. According to Robert Putnam's influential definition, "social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them," which may facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (2001: 19)

creative activity leading to a public performance or exhibit. As defined by the Ontario Arts Council (2002), “Community Arts is an art process that involves professional artists and community members in a collaborative creative process resulting in collective experience and public expression. It provides a way for communities to express themselves; enables artists, through financial or other supports, to engage in creative activity with communities; and is collaborative – the creative process is equally important as the artistic outcome.” (Note that this is different from such things as local, neighborhood knitting groups.) Community arts programs often involve people who are disadvantaged in some way (at-risk youth, ethnic minorities, people in a poor neighborhood) and are designed in the context of some larger goal, such as neighborhood improvement (typically aesthetic) or learning and teaching about diverse cultures (multiculturalism). These goals are usually the basis for claims about the politically transformative potential of community arts projects (e.g., see Williams 1997). Regardless of the ultimate purpose(s) to which social capital is to be put, community arts programs are said to build social capital by boosting individuals’ ability and motivation to be civically engaged, as well as building organizational capacity for effective action. This is specifically accomplished by:

- Creating a venue that draws people together who would otherwise not be engaged in constructive social activity.
- Fostering trust between participants and thereby increasing their generalized trust of others
- Providing an experience of collective efficacy and civic engagement, which spurs participants to further collective action
- Arts events may be a source of pride for residents (participants and non-participants alike) in their community, increasing their sense of connection to that community.
- Providing an experience for participants to learn technical and interpersonal skills important for collective organizing
- Increasing the scope of individuals’ social networks

- Providing an experience for the organizations involved to enhance their capacities. Much of this comes when organizations' establish ties and learn how to work, consult and coordinate with other organizations and government bodies in order to accomplish their goals.

A case study from Williams' (1995: 101-106)) research in Australia provides an example of these mechanisms. The study was conducted on a sample of recipients of community-based arts grants provided by the Australia Council. One of these grants was given to a small group of women residents of Longlea, a suburb of Brisbane. Their goal was to beautify their blighted community center, which involved local residents in the creation of artworks around the community center. This drew together townspeople who might otherwise have stayed at home to engage in a constructive social activity. As people worked collaboratively on the project and got to know each other better, their mutual trust increased. Their success in negotiating with the municipal bureaucracy in order to accomplish the task gave participants a newfound sense that they could accomplish other goals. The community group and individuals coordinating the efforts learned organizing skills, learned how to navigate the bureaucracy and built relationships with the municipal and regional government. Finally, the people involved felt an increased sense of pride and appreciation of their town.

Claim: The arts have a beneficial impact on the economy

Economic impacts are perhaps the most widely touted benefits of the arts. The literature on economic impact studies of the arts tends to fall into two categories: on the one hand, advocacy studies based on quick appraisals that often exaggerate the impact of the arts (Azmier 2002; Bryan 1998; Eckstein 1995; Perryman 2001; SCDCAC 2001; Singer 2000; Walesh 2001). On the other hand are more rigorous studies -- which, overtime, show increasing methodological refinement (Cohen 1994; Costello 1998; CPC 2002; Cwi 1980a; Cwi 1980b; Cwi and Lyall 1977; DiNoto and Merk 1993; Frey 1998; Gazel 1997; Kling, Revier and Sable 2001; Mitchell 1993;

O'Hagan and Duffy 1987; Port Authority of New York and New Jersey 1983; Radich 1987; Rolph 2001; Sable and Kling 2001; Seaman 1997; Stern and Seifert 2000; Throsby 2001; Travers, Stokes and Kleinmann 1997). In the following discussion, I have tried to rely on these more rigorous studies.

- The arts attract visitors (art as 'export' industry):
Tourists visit a community primarily in order to attend an arts event (alternatively, tourists may prolong a trip in order to attend an arts event). They will spend directly on the arts event and may also shop, eat at a local restaurant and/or stay at a hotel in the community. To the extent that these tourist dollars are spent by the arts organization – as well as the stores, restaurants and hotels – on local goods and services, the dollars brought in to the community for an arts event will have indirect multiplier effects on the local economy.⁷
- The arts attract residents and businesses:
The density of arts organizations and prevalence of arts events may play a role in attracting residents and businesses to (re)locate to a community by improving its image and making it more appealing. This is especially true for attracting highly skilled, high-wage residents, who will have a larger economic impact than less-skilled people. Businesses, especially those that employ highly trained mobile personnel, may consider the presence of art venues when making (re)location decisions (Cwi 1980b: 18-19). The presence of the arts (i.e., improved image of an area) may work to enhance the impact of tax incentives for business location decisions (Costello 1998: 147-9).
High concentrations of artists and/or high-skilled workers may produce agglomeration effects, where businesses (especially those in the fast-growing 'creative industries' (Walesh 2001)) are drawn to an area because of the availability of creative talent and/or high-skilled workers, and vice versa.
- The arts attract investments:
By improving a community's image, people may feel more confident about investing in that community. So for example, people might be

⁷ An indirect multiplier is based on the idea that a portion of each dollar spent on some good or service is then used by the recipient to pay for more goods and services. To the extent that the money circulates within a community (e.g., a city), it 'multiplies' within that community. So for example, if you spend \$20 on a ticket to a play, the playhouse turns around and spends \$15 of that for set design supplies from local markets. The employees also spend locally some portion of their income that is derived from that \$15 to pay for more goods and services; and the stores from which they bought supplies in turn use some of that money to pay their workers and buy more supplies, and so on. This 'multiplies' the value of the initial \$20.

more likely to buy property in an area that they feel is “up-and-coming” because of the presence of the arts. Or, banks may be more likely to lend to businesses in areas perceived as more secure and stable, and so on.

One problem with determining the impact of the arts is distinguishing between revenue from locals vs. revenue from tourists, and among the latter determining the extent to which the arts drew them to visit the community. Expenditures by locals should not be included in studies of the economic impact of the arts, because the arts may simply represent an alternative outlet for spending (rather than an additional outlet), thus representing no net differences on the local economy (assuming equal multiplier effects among outlets). In terms of private and public subsidies for the arts, it is difficult to determine the opportunity costs of investing the money in other things (i.e., whether investing the same amount of money in something else would have a stronger impact on the economy). There is scant evidence on whether money spent on the arts is more likely to circulate locally than money spent in other areas (though see Palmer 2002 for a comparison of arts performances versus sports arenas).

As an example of how the arts may have an economic impact, let us examine a summer theater festival that a small town puts on every year (Mitchell 1993). This festival draws thousands of visitors who come – some from far away, but most from the surrounding area – in order to attend the performance. These visitors spend money on tickets as well as restaurants, hotels, parking and retail shopping. (In this sense, the arts are said to be an ‘export’ industry to the extent that they bring in money from outside the local economy.) This spending has a direct positive impact on the town’s economy. Indirectly, this spending has what is called a “multiplier effect” to the extent that those dollars re-circulate in the local economy as a result of spending on local goods and services by the festival and the other business.

Claim: The arts are good for individuals

Claims that the arts are good for individuals take many forms. The arts have been said to improve health, mental well-being, cognitive functioning, creative ability and academic performance.

- The arts improve individual health.
Either engaging in creative activity or simply attending some kind of artistic event appears to improve physical health (Angus 1999; Baklien 2000; Ball and Keating 2002; Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson 1996; HDA 2000; Thoits and Hewitt 2001). This could be due in part to its ability to relieve stress. Also, arts engagement widens and strengthens social bonds, which also improves health (Baklien 2000: 250-51; Ball and Keating 2002). On a more physiological level, Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson (1996: 1580) explain: “we know that the organism responds with changes in the humoral nervous system--for example, verbal expression of traumatic experiences through writing or talking improves physical health, enhances immune function, and is associated with fewer medical visits.”
- The arts improve psychological well-being.
Here we have to distinguish between passive and active participation. Attending arts events may be stimulating and relieve stress, hence leading to improved happiness/ life satisfaction. Active participation in the arts leads, in addition, to improved self-concept and sense of control over one’s life. There are different reasons why this might be so. Lots of the anecdotal evidence comes from community arts programs, some of which are geared towards poor, marginal or ‘at-risk’ populations (Lynch and Chosa 1996; Seham 1997; Weitz 1996; Williams 1995). This is backed up by the little – and poor quality - survey data that do exist. To the extent that the creation and completion of some arts project provides an opportunity to such participants to succeed and gain some positive public recognition, it will improve their sense of control over their life and self-concept (Fiske 1999; Jackson 1979; Randall, Magie and Miller 1997; Seham 1997; Weitz 1996). To date, there has been no systematic comparison between community arts programs operating in different socio-economic climates to see whether such effects appear to be uniform.
- The arts improve skills, cultural capital and creativity.
Here again we have to distinguish between passive and active participation. Audience members may gain some new knowledge or

cultural capital⁸ by attending arts events. There is also the so-called Mozart effect showing that children who listen to Mozart (and other similar stimuli) show improved performance on visuo-spatial reasoning tests – although the effect may not last (Chabris et al. 1999; Hetland 2000). Individuals directly involved in creating or organizing artistic activity may learn skills that they did not previously have and may demonstrate greater creativity (Fiske 1999; Randall, Magie and Miller 1997; Rolph 2001; Seham 1997; Sharp 2001; Weitz 1996). On the whole, education studies show that kids engaged in an arts class will do better in other subjects and that an arts-integrated curriculum improves school performance (Albert 1995; Fiske 1999; Jackson 1979; Remer 1990; Weitz 1996; Winner and Hetland 2000). The basic reason for this may be that children find learning through artistic/creative activity much more enjoyable, and so they will have an easier time engaging with the material. It is important to point out, however, that most studies do not control sufficiently for self-selection into arts activities and the effects are not as dramatic as boosters would claim.

The *Coming Up Taller* report (Weitz 1996) provides concrete examples of some of these mechanisms. The report identifies arts-training programs targeted at at-risk youth and seeks to understand why these programs work. At least two of the programs involved working with sentenced juvenile offenders. One program taught musical theater; the other painting. Both programs appeared to enhance the self-esteem of their participants, because they learned new skills, found that they had undiscovered talents, and received positive recognition from peers and others when they perform or exhibit their work. Learning new skills may also improve their position on the job market. For example, in addition to learning singing, dancing and acting, participants in the music theater program also learn about the technical side of producing a play, such as lighting, set-design and sound. Also, performing a play or doing other kinds of artistic activity can provide a means of learning that children find much more fun and engaging. As a result they will learn and absorb the material better.

⁸ I use the most restricted definition of cultural capital as simply knowledge of the fine arts. For example, in taking an arts class, one learns something about aesthetics and art appreciation and perhaps about art history. Such knowledge has been linked to better school performance and improvement of other life outcomes (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985).

THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Definitions

As I pointed out at the start, the phrase “arts impact communities” admits of many possible definitions. Specifying these definitions is an important task that researchers often ignore. Here, I briefly sketch some dimensions along which these terms can be defined.

Defining “the arts” – Different research projects rarely define “the arts” in the same way, and often the same study will include diverse activities and organizations, including professional opera companies, neighborhood cultural centers, community arts programs and in some cases even major league sports. There are several dimensions along which definitions of the arts might be specified: genre or art-form (whether the activity is painting, singing, acting, etc.); sector (whether the organization involved is non-profit, commercial or governmental); time (duration of the arts activity or involvement); place (where does the activity/performance take place); group participation (whether the activity is done alone, in small groups or in large groups); medium (whether the arts is live, recorded or Web-based); and mode of participation (whether involvement is active art-making, organizational volunteering or audience participation).

This last dimension provides a distinction useful for classifying prior studies. Some studies look at the effect of participation in the arts on those who are directly involved, especially when they are engaged in art-making. Such studies often examine the impact of community arts programs (CDA 2000; Landry et al. 1996; Matarasso 1997; Matzke 2000; Murphy 1995; Trent 2000; Williams 1995; Wollheim 2000) or arts-centered teaching programs (Albert 1995; Fiske 1999; Jackson 1979; Remer 1990; Seham 1997; Sharp 2001; Weitz 1996; Winner and Hetland 2000), usually on the participants themselves but sometimes on the local community. Other studies look at arts attendance, occasionally examining the impact of the arts on their audience (Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson 1996; Chabris et al. 1999; Hetland 2000; Landry et

al. 1996; Matarasso 1999; Williams 1995), but most often focusing on the audience's impact on the local economy (Bendixen 1997; DiMaggio, Useem and Brown 1978; Frey 1998; Gazel 1997; Laing and York 2000; Mitchell 1993; O'Hagan and Duffy 1987; SATC 1998).⁹ A third major focus of arts research is on the presence and density of arts organizations, looking sometimes at how these factors affect involvement in the arts and other local organizations (Stern 1999; Stern and Seifert 2000), but typically emphasizing the impact of arts organizations on the local economy (Cohen 1994; Costello 1998; Cwi 1980a; DiNoto and Merk 1993; Port Authority of New York and New Jersey 1983; Stern 2001; Stern and Seifert 2000; Travers, Stokes and Kleinmann 1997). Here I have simply provided a quick survey of the definitional terrain of arts studies. The broader point to be made is simply that it is crucial to define precisely what are "the arts" that one is studying, because different arts activities are likely to lead to a different set of outcomes. Furthermore, the use of vague and diverse definitions of the "arts" makes comparability and accumulation across studies very difficult.

Defining "impact" -- As this discussion illustrates, defining the scope of what is meant by the "arts" goes some length towards delimiting their potential impact. (For example, a school arts program is not likely to have an appreciable impact on the economy of a city.) Like the arts, there are also a number of dimensions along which the scope of the impact(s) ought to be clarified: whether the impact is on individuals, institutions/organizations, communities or the economy; whether it is direct or indirect (e.g., does it indirectly affect communities by affecting individuals?); whether the impact is short-term or long-term; whether impacts are greater for some groups and individuals than for others; and whether the impact is social, cultural, psychological, economic, and so on. These dimensions are often under-specified, and as a result findings can be easily inflated or over generalized (e.g., a small, short-term impact on a subgroup of people might be viewed as an enduring impact on a broader

⁹ Dollars spent in a community by cultural tourists are only one way in which the arts are said to have an economic impact.

class of residents). Furthermore, as Cwi (1987) notes, the policy relevance of most arts program evaluations studies is limited, because of their failure to adequately specify the impact that the program is intended to have.

Defining “community” – Community can be defined in a variety of ways: as a geographic region, municipality, neighborhood (itself open to a variety of definitions), or ethnic group. In general, researchers use one of two criteria in defining community: propinquity and group membership. With the first criterion, researchers define community in terms of people’s proximity to one another and study things like neighborhoods, schools, cities or SMSAs. For example, the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) usually uses census ‘block groups’ as part of its definition of neighborhood, and also historically institutionalized, widely recognized neighborhoods, such as Germantown in Philadelphia or the ‘south side’ of Chicago (Stern 2001). Another common way to define community is as a legally distinct area, such as a town, city or state (Cwi 1980a; Cwi 1982; Cwi and Lyall 1977; DiNoto and Merk 1993; Gazel 1997; Mitchell 1993; NALAA 1994; Perryman 2001). Studies using this criterion usually focus on the economic impact of the arts, so examining a well-defined tax base makes sense. Alternatively, researchers may study community defined by group membership, categorizing people on the basis of race/ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, occupation and so forth.

Researchers may use one of two methods for classifying people into communities: one method defines community on the basis of criteria imposed by the researcher; the other defines community in accord with individuals’ self-identification (see Stern et al. 1994 for an example of this). Note that the basis of people’s self-identification can come from many sources. It may be coterminous with proximity- or legally-based definitions (e.g., “I’m from Germantown,” “I’m from Robert Taylor Homes” or “I’m from Atlanta.”) People may also self-identify on the basis of group membership. Some community-based arts programs are organized around such communities. For example, one program studied by Williams (1995) was designed to have aboriginal children in a rural Australian town express their culture. It is

important to distinguish between researcher-imposed vs. self-identified definitions of community. It is possible, for example, that in order to understand if and how the arts contribute to such subjective outcomes as increased trust of others, greater pride in one's community and motivation to work towards collective ends, then one needs to take an inductive approach to this question of community (e.g., using definitions that members themselves put forward). And if there is a disjuncture between the researcher's definition of a community and the self-identifications of its members, then the researcher may fail to find evidence of, for example, social solidarity (because s/he would be looking in the wrong places for evidence).¹⁰

Whether researcher-imposed or not, clearly specifying the scope of the community is crucial when trying to think about how the arts impact a community directly, as well as the related problem of aggregation.

The Problem of Aggregation

One of the more vexing issues confronting anyone wishing to understand the impact of the arts on communities is the question of how to link micro-level effects on individuals to the more macro level of the community. Except for economic impact studies, virtually every arts impact study examines how the arts affect individuals (though see Stern 1999; 2001), whether by improving their health (Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson 1996; Costello 1998), their self-esteem (Weitz 1996), their skills, talents and knowledge (Fiske 1999; Winner and Hetland 2000), or their tolerance of other cultures (Matarasso 1997; Williams 1995). In some cases, researchers have also argued that the creation of arts programs (usually made possible by government or private grants) increases the capacities of arts organizations, for example by enhancing their ability to work with local government agencies (Stern and Seifert 2002; Williams 1997). In this case, the problem becomes one of aggregating organizations rather than individuals.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Paul DiMaggio for suggesting these last two points.

Note that defining the scope of the community in question is critical to the problem of aggregation. For example, other things equal, a small community arts program is more likely to have an impact on people in the neighborhood in which it operates than on people living on the other side of town. But without having to define community, at least five general ways in which individual/organizational-level effects might aggregate can be distinguished:

1. Most obviously, one could simply talk in terms of the percentage of individuals/organizations in a population that are affected. Social capital is typically conceived of in such a manner, where a community with a higher percentage of individuals participating in civic groups and/or a greater density of such groups is considered to have greater social capital. Hence, if arts programs get more individuals involved in community groups, then they increase the community's social capital.
2. Closely related to this is the idea that there may be threshold levels or 'tipping points' (Gladwell 2000) at which individual/organizational-level effects begin to have community-level consequences. In this case, as in number 1 above, an unresolved issue is determining the level at which these effects can properly be said to have an impact on the 'community.'
3. The presence of the arts and/or participation by community members may have an impact on community norms or the "opinion climate." For example, the presences and performances of a multicultural theater may reinforce norms about multiculturalism and diversity or free expression..
4. To the extent that arts organizations serve as a catalyst in the creation of ties between dispersed individuals and organizations (who would not otherwise establish ties), these networks, may then be used to accomplish other community goals.
5. Communities may be affected when a few key individuals and/or organizations are affected. For example, a successful community arts program may influence the perceptions of key government officials and make them

- more likely to support such programs in the future. Or successful arts-based neighborhood revitalization programs targeted at particular crime-ridden neighborhoods or juvenile offenders may lower the overall crime rate.
6. Finally, individuals and groups involved in the arts can be said to affect the community by creating public goods.¹¹ The value of arts as a public good (its contingent valuation) is usually measured by willingness-to-pay surveys¹² (CPC 2002; Kling, Revier and Sable 2001; Sable and Kling 2001; Seaman 1997; Throsby 2001).

Selection Problems

As with much social research, arts impact studies typically suffer from selection bias problems, which make it difficult to identify clearly the causal role of the arts.¹³ This problem is usually expressed by the truism that ‘correlation is not causation.’ For example, research indicates that people who participate in the arts are healthier and happier (Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson 1996; Costello 1998; Thoits and Hewitt 2001). But, does this mean that arts involvement makes people healthier and happier, or that such people are more likely to get involved in the arts? Do arts programs build social capital, or are communities with higher social capital more likely to initiate arts programs? Usually, the answer to such questions is ‘both.’ On average, healthier people are more likely to volunteer in arts programs, but that activity likely improves their health as well (Thoits and Hewitt 2001). Communities with greater social capital are more likely to initiate arts programs, but those programs may further promote the building of social capital. Most likely, health or social capital

¹¹ Outdoor sculpture is a good example of public goods, since many people can enjoy it. But, people don’t necessarily need to use/enjoy art for it to be a public good.

¹² Willingness-to-pay surveys ask respondents how much they would be willing to pay (usually in taxes) to support some artistic activity (e.g., “How much would you be willing to pay in taxes to support the NEA?”). People who don’t patronize the arts still report that they are willing to pay to fund them, and this is interpreted to mean that the arts are valuable to them.

¹³ Generically, selection bias means that the sample (i.e., the people and/or organizations that one is studying) is not representative of the entire population, leading to conclusions that are not valid. In arts research, the most pernicious of these is self-selection bias: since people who choose participate in the arts may be different from others, that difference may explain the observed outcome rather than the arts activity.

would not have improved in the same way and to the same degree had the arts programs been absent. When seen from this perspective, selection issues – when recognized and handled appropriately – arguably do not present an intractable problem to arts impact studies.

Lack of Appropriate Comparisons

From a policy perspective, however, the issue is no longer whether the existence of the arts has a beneficial impact, but whether money spent on arts programs will have *more* of an impact than other programs. Indeed, one flaw with the literature on arts impact is the lack of studies that compare the arts with other programs or industries. The key question for policy-makers (or grant-givers) is this: given some pre-defined goal (improving the economy, attracting tourism, improving education, reforming at-risk adolescents, etc.), how can that goal be most effectively reached? Thus, the issue changes from ‘did this program work at all’ to ‘did this program work better than another?’ Instead of ‘what are the benefits of the arts,’ the question becomes ‘what are the opportunity costs¹⁴ of using this money to fund the arts?’ For example, are arts programs for at-risk youth more effective than the Boy Scouts or midnight basketball? Do arts programs draw people away from other high-impact activities in which they would otherwise be involved, such as environmental activism or charity; would public money be better spent on things like transportation infrastructure or police? Determining whether a program is more ‘effective’ than another is of course no simple matter and demands precise definition of the goal of the program, but none of the studies I reviewed adequately addressed this issue. The difficulty of the comparison is compounded by the fact that many of the benefits we associate with the arts, like increased creativity or feelings of well-being, are ‘intangible’ and therefore difficult to measure. However, to the extent that the arts do potentially provide something unique, the lack of comparative studies make it that much more difficult to concretely demonstrate the unique contribution of the arts.

¹⁴ Opportunity costs basically mean that when you spend your money or time in one activity/investment, there is a cost of not being able to use that time or money in some other activity/investment.

Negative Externalities

In addition to ignoring opportunity costs, arts impact studies typically ignore the potentially negative impacts of the arts. For example, given the broad definition of the ‘arts’ found in many studies, the negative impact of such events as raves or rock concerts – for example noise pollution and delinquency – largely goes ignored (though see Gazel [1997] for an economic impact study of a Grateful Dead concert in Las Vegas that took into account the city’s extra expenditures on security for the event). Or, if an arts’ program builds social solidarity among some ethnic group, could this lead to greater balkanization of the community? Zukin’s (1989) study of New York City shows that the presence of arts activities and artists in a poor neighborhood may be a harbinger of gentrification (though see Stern [1999] for evidence from other cities that the presence of arts organizations leads to lasting diversity). To the extent that studies do examine failed programs, they tend to focus on the causes of failure rather than its consequences (Matarasso 1997; Williams 1997). In short, those who investigate the impact of the arts need to be more aware of potential negative as well as positive impacts.

Lack of Adequate Data

Most arts impact studies are based on cross-sectional data, making inferences about selection and the causal role of the arts exceedingly difficult. The lack of over-time data also makes it impossible to see how long the effects of an arts program persist.¹⁵ Furthermore, the sample sizes of many studies are too small for making proper statistical inferences.¹⁶ In many instances, researchers employ multiple or comparative case study approaches, for example by studying several different community arts programs. Despite the strengths of this type of analysis for describing

¹⁵ Williams’ (1997) study in Australia did follow some of the communities she studied for several years after the initial program; this enabled her to draw inferences about what factors lead to sustained impact.

¹⁶ Statistical inferences (for example, determining with what degree of confidence we can say that children in arts programs do better in school) are based on the premise that the sample is representative of the entire population. The representativeness of small sample sizes cannot be guaranteed with a high level of confidence.

in detail the supposed consequences of particular arts programs on particular individuals, these studies are limited in a number of ways:

First, they tend to rely exclusively on the subjective accounts of people involved in the art programs or audience members in order to support their claims – in short, they tend to be anecdote-rich and evidence-poor (though perhaps there’s an argument to be made that a mountain of anecdotes serves as some kind of evidence). The fundamental question here is whether impact can be *measured* solely or largely on the basis of these accounts, especially considering that participants almost always self-select into participation. What would happen if people were randomly assigned into an “arts treatment” group? This is closely related to another problem with these, as with other arts impact studies, which is that they tend to sample only treated groups. For example, questionnaires go only to people who are centrally or closely involved in a particular arts program, rarely asking community members what consequences the program had on them (though see Matarasso 1997). Also, evaluation studies only look at organizations or communities that won the supporting grant (whose impact the study is intended to measure), never comparing it with a similar community that didn’t win a grant, let alone one that never even applied. No doubt it is especially difficult to create a quasi-experimental design in applied social science, but arts impact research seldom makes an effort to achieve this goal. (One problem, of course, has been lack of adequate funding to undertake such an effort.) More generically, the problem with in-depth case studies is that they are rarely representative of the overall population.

Specification of Context Effects and Intervening Factors

Researchers studying the impact of the arts are rarely sensitive to contextual or intervening factors that influence the outcomes they find. This is important for generalizing from the findings of a specific study. To take a simple example, many studies claim that the arts have a beneficial economic impact. However, it is likely that this impact varies depending on the size of the community under discussion and

the size and density of arts organizations/events. Thus, in order for the arts to make an appreciable (and perhaps measurable) impact on the economy of a large city, it will likely require the development of an arts district (such as the Temple Bar in Dublin, see Costello 1998). An annual drama festival is likely to have little economic impact on a large city (though it may have an appreciable impact on the neighborhood in which it is located), but may be a decisive factor in the economy of a small town (Mitchell 1993). And local community arts projects are likely to have little economic impact. The National Association of Local Arts Agencies study is one of the best to date in selecting arts activities of various sizes across a wide range of municipalities (Cohen 1994). The point is simply that arts impact researchers need to begin to think more seriously about the conditions under which their results do – or do not – generalize.

CONCLUSION

Research on the how the arts impact communities is a burgeoning and wide-ranging field of research. Despite the variety of research subjects and methodologies alive and well in the field, there are a number of avenues this literature has yet to explore. For example, researchers study formal groups and organizations to the exclusion of more informal groups, such as local neighborhood knitting groups and the like. Case studies tend to focus on arts programs developed for marginal populations (like at-risk children); it would be interesting to see what could be learned from comparing these programs to ones where most of the participants are middle- or upper-middle class. Also, researchers often study community arts programs that have some kind of political or social goal: what might be learned by comparing these organizations to those that have no such goal? And in terms of determining their relative economic impact, we need to know whether arts organizations tend to spend more money in the local economy and on locally-produced goods than do other organizations/businesses. These examples point to a larger problem with the research in this field, especially those that use multiple, in-depth case studies: the cases are

generally not chosen in such a way as to gain much empirical ‘leverage’ from the comparison. Cases appear to be selected on the basis of capturing the widest diversity of programs possible – sometimes with an implication that this will ensure representativeness. The most that comes from this sort of comparison is a list of some factors that appear to affect the relative success of the programs. Researchers need to think more about the logic driving their case selection, so that they can get more from their comparisons.

The criticisms that I have enumerated in this paper could apply to most bodies of social research. But, the field of cultural policy studies is young and resources are scarce. Therefore, it is perhaps more important than in other fields that small investments in research yield strong results that can be leveraged to advance public policy and private philanthropy. As a result, it is especially incumbent upon arts researchers to carefully specify their definitions and think critically about the theoretical and empirical issues confronting them when attempting to take the measure of culture.

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