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Social Capital and Participation: The Role of Community Arts Festivals for Generating Wellbeing

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Abstract

Community arts festivals have a potential role for fostering social capital and population wellbeing. This small, exploratory study collected and analysed qualitative data from eight semi-structured interviews with festival organizers. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts. The findings suggest that festivals create bridging social capital. Festivals also stimulate self-efficacy, which facilitates participation, an emotional response, and may lead to a sense of personal wellbeing, with a living legacy for the community. The article posits a model to articulate the suggested interrelationship between these concepts. Very little research exists about the contribution of arts festivals for community health and wellbeing. This nascent research therefore adds to the body of knowledge, and suggests the importance of developing participatory activity at local arts and cultural festivals for community health and wellbeing.

Key Words

Arts-Festival

Social-Capital

Wellbeing

Participation

Self-Efficacy

Transformative

Background

Active participation with, and engagement in, the arts has been shown to provide actual and potential opportunities that bring people together to partake in a shared experience for their mutual benefit (Laing and Mair 2015). The benefits of arts participation include a sense of agency and empowerment, improved mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and a perception of improved health and happiness (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing 2017; Davies et al. 2016; Parkinson and White 2013; Royal Society for

Public Health 2013; Ings et al. 2012; Renton 2012; Parkinson 2010; Secker et al. 2008; Abel 2007; Mulligan et al. 2006). Research has shown that where individuals have a sense of purpose, a sense of agency, and are given opportunities to achieve their potential, they are more likely to report heightened wellbeing (Chummun 2011; Aked 2008).

However, The Young Foundation (Mguni et al. 2012) suggest that a sense of wellbeing alone is not entirely protective; and makes the case for resilience, maintaining that wellbeing and resilience are two sides of the same coin. They suggest that wellbeing and resilience relate to psychosocial factors incorporating networks, communities and neighbourhoods. Resilience is important as it enables individuals to successfully adapt and confidently manage adversity (Van Schrojenstein Lantman et al. 2017).

Other authors have noted the association between wellbeing and resilience, and crucially, reliance on relationships with others, such as family and local community (Phipps and Slater 2010). The Foresight Report for Mental Capital and Wellbeing highlights the importance of ‘strong positive relationships’ and ‘contribution to community’ (2008:10). They describe the importance of developing social networks to buffer against mental ill health, create healthy families and communities, develop social cohesion and promote a wider range of opportunities for the marginalized (Foresight Report for Mental Capital and Wellbeing 2008). Furthermore, the Marmot Review into Health Inequalities in England (2010) highlighted the importance of social networks and social participation for mental ill-health reduction, and to foster a sense of happiness and good general health. Additionally, a ‘What Works Centre’ has recently been established to research, evidence and bridge knowledge, about wellbeing (www.whatworkswellbeing.org).

In a blog for the ‘What Works Centre’, Bagnall (2017) identifies that although ‘community’ is a contested and loosely defined concept, it should be considered critical because it is essential to achieving wellbeing. A recent scoping review of indicators of community wellbeing identified a wide range of important themes from research about community wellbeing (Bagnall et al. 2017); they include relationships, inclusion, social capital, sense of belonging and cohesion.

These domains are akin to the social capital described by Putnam (1993). He argued that, among other things, strong relationships create reciprocity and trustworthiness leading to communal resources and reduction of collective poverty. Social capital alone may not be entirely protective (Pearce and Smith 2003), however its multi-level contribution may expedite creation of opportunity and optimize good physical and mental health throughout life (Hawe and Sheill 2000).

In the literature, social capital is subject to varying definitions and conceptualisations with multiple dimensions described. To illustrate, ‘bonding’ provides a thick trust between people who are often alike, for example, socio-demographically or joined by family ties; ‘bridging’ facilitates the creation of respect and mutual support, enabling ease of movement over and through social heterogeneous relationships (known as cross-cutting ties); and ‘linking’ capital enables citizens to interact across boundaries that may be defined by powerful hierarchies (Blakely and Ivory 2006). All dimensions theoretically provide increased opportunities to secure health-promoting resources alongside the confidence of communal support.

Consequently, wellbeing may be strengthened through activities that provide communities with participatory opportunities to develop and deepen relationships. Moreover, where these communities are actively involved in co-production or development of communal activities, there is potential opportunity to develop strong bonds, relational ties and social capital (Rhodes and Schecter 2014; Sardu et al. 2011; Murray and Crummett 2010). Communal participation coupled with the arts, provides a conduit for personal health and wellbeing (The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing 2017; Jensen 2013).

Study aims

The existing evidence base about community arts festivals is limited. It tends to focus on the economic and tourism benefits of festivals, rather than production of wellbeing and social connections. As such the role for community arts festivals in wellbeing production and other communal benefits is under-researched (Mair and Duffy 2015). This article makes the case that participation in community arts and cultural festivals should provide a basis for meaningful communal connection and the fostering of community wellbeing. The research question underpinning this exploratory study is: in what ways do community arts and culture festivals create social capital to foster collective wellbeing?

Methods

Prior to the study university ethical approval was obtained. Data were collected from eight arts festival organizers in southeast England. Laing and Mair (2015: 257 citing Szaryzc 2009) indicate that a small number of participants for this type of study is not unusual. The festivals included in this study were those with an arts and cultural offering, held in towns and small cities (table 1). Each festival was available to passers-by and residents of all ages, ethnicities

and backgrounds; and was either free or low-cost. Participants were identified via social networks, and through snowball sampling. No financial incentives were offered.

Table 1.		
Festival	Cultural Offering/Type	Location
P1	Opera, Dance, Theatre, Community Arts	Coastal Town
P2	Opera, Dance, Theatre, Community Arts, Parade, Visual Arts	City
P3	Parade, Community Arts, Street Theatre, Community Production	Coastal Town
P4	Music	City
P5	Parade, Community Arts, Street Theatre	Coastal Town
P6	Music, Visual Arts	Coastal Town
P7	Three interlinked festivals, Music, Dance, Theatre, Community Arts, Visual Arts, Community Production	Coastal Town
P8	Community Arts, Visual Arts	Coastal Town

Table 1: Festival Offering

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews lasting around 30-60 minutes were conducted, enabling participants to provide their own narrative and thick description. Interviews were recorded on a portable recording device and later transcribed verbatim. They took place at venues chosen by the interviewees to facilitate their comfort and candid contribution. Open questions were asked in order to provide contextual information, along with material specifically sought for the study (table 2).

Table 2. Interview Questions

Tell me about your festival.

What do you mean by arts and cultural festival?

Is your festival active beyond the duration of the main event?

Who are the target audience/participants?

Where does the festival take place?

What do you think the festival offers people, in addition to the event itself?
Do you think festivals have a specific role in the fostering of wellbeing?
What do people take away from the festival with them?
What is it that you seek to evaluate during/after your festival?

Table 2: Interview Questions

Interviewees were encouraged to highlight where information mentioned was commercially sensitive or confidential, such as development ideas, strategies and unique selling points. An earlier pilot study had revealed this to be important, particularly as arts funding for festivals is highly competitive. Where sensitive matter was revealed, the data was redacted before analysis. All data were treated as confidential.

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, early codes were identified using themes from the literature, for example reciprocity, trust, collaboration. These codes formed a handbook, which prompted early analysis and ongoing internal reflexive dialogue during the data-analysis phase.

The interview audio recordings were replayed and transcripts re-read to ensure familiarisation with the data. The coding handbook and inductive open coding identified patterns of meaning; descriptive codes were assigned. During the analysis stage, 28 codes were identified and later reduced to five themes. Two coders agreed on the themes, using thematic analysis with a specific methodology grounded in a theory-driven approach (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Findings

Five inter-related themes were identified (table 3). The following discussion illustrates how these themes, drawn from the interview narratives, appear to demonstrate how community arts festivals develop social capital and contribute to wellbeing.

Table 3.	
Theme	Frequency
Social Capital	8
Participation	6
Self-efficacy	2

Living legacy	6
Emotional Response	6

Table 3: Identified Themes

Theme 1. Social Capital

The findings show that specific domains of social capital can be fostered through arts festivals. These specifically relate to descriptions of bonding, bridging and linking capital, civic pride and temporary social norms of reciprocity and trust development. For example, the festival organizers discussed use of the festival to bridge cross-cutting ties within the community: ‘we are [...] building relationships. [...] it’s quite exploratory, and it’s very organic’ (P1). They highlighted that this was achieved through cross-boundary working, co-production and collaboration creating mutually beneficial resources:

I mean we always have a meeting at the beginning and we invite loads of people, as many people as will come along. And they offer what they can do and we are sort of the umbrella over the top and [...] They] are the people that actually perform and do stuff [...] (P5)

The act of community participation through the organising, preparing, delivering or being at festivals form and strengthen social bonds: ‘[...] it’s family, it’s friends and they’re all coming along because they’re on stage. And that’s, that’s the great thing about local engagement, [...] audience that knows them and want to be there’ (P2). These strengthened social bonds further engender trust and reciprocity:

[...] they’re all kind of in this state of reform almost, where they’ve come from quite, erm, quite violent backgrounds [...] really troubled and complicated home lives to being advocates for [...] loving and respecting each other and community [...] they realized that they could learn from each other. (P8)

Festival organizers report that volunteers and participants develop a sense of connection to both the festival and the community. It:

[...] creates a great sense of community and when something like that happens in your town, you do feel proud to live there [...] like, attachment to place and loving their

town, essentially [...] and in turn that helps with people respecting their town and acting more respectfully. (P3)

Theme 2: Participation

The festival organizers report that they consciously seek to foster participation through their specific activities. The organizer's actions are to deliberately engage the community in the preparations; for example, '[w]e have public think-ins where we invite, whoever, to come in and tell us what should be in the festival' (P7). Furthermore, organizers act to engage community in the arts offering of the festival: '[w]e put in a bid to run a programme to work with the community in the six-month lead up, which was about them becoming comfortable with that' (P1). The findings also showed organizers actively facilitating creative skills development, which go beyond artistic performance: '[s]o people, students, these kids, will have the opportunity to come along and shadow and learn professional event dressing [...]' (P6). They also seek to foster wider participation at the event: 'It's important that it's affordable first [...] if there's people that want to come that we know can't afford it, we'll give them tickets. You know, it's really about removing barriers as opposed to putting them up' (P7).

Theme 3: Self-Efficacy.

The different strands of participation as described above, also appear to facilitate a sense of confidence and personal achievement; thematically identified as 'self-efficacy'. This theme represents concepts such as self-esteem, a belief in being able to succeed, and feeling in control.

I've seen people [...] who having participated previously offer to do something [...] come back the next year, do something bigger and [...] you know, those people were nervous, were anxious [...] and you just see them grow, it's incredible. [Colleague] worked really hard with some of the service users that we met through the wellbeing breakfast thing and they read their poetry [...] and then [participant] came back this year and read more poetry and did a bit of comedy [...] I got a text from him: "I've got my first gig at the [comedy venue]". (P7)

Theme 4: Living Legacy

Festival participation creates a living legacy. By this it is meant that the festival creates more than a memory in attendees but instead serves to live on within the community. It does this by stimulating an awareness of available resources and opportunities. This legacy therefore emphasizes the assets that already exist: '[...] the result of the summer festival, was to do something that showed the best of the place and started to reveal what it has to offer' (P1).

The living legacy of the festival, positively influences how the community perceives itself and anticipates the future: '[...] they're all about community resilience, people feeling connected to what is an arts-led regeneration agenda [...] it's about making this place a better place to live [...] people get really excited if they've connected and validated' (P7). The living legacy of festival participation can be focused on the individual; it is one of personal contemplation or individual reflection that endures beyond the event: '[i]t's a mix, you know, an offer of things that make you think about who you are and where you are and what's going on around you' (P7).

Theme 5: Emotional Response:

This themed group of findings illustrate that festivals elicit an individual, or collective positive personal response. For example, an emotional response to an artistic performance: '[w]e brought that [cultural offering] down and we decided to put it on the main stage [...] people cried' (P1). Alternatively, the wider experience of the festival itself create a sense of celebration: '[s]o [the] festival is essentially a celebration of [city] and its community' (P3). Many of the participants describe the festival as being a conduit for happiness or wellbeing:

I mean it's an amateur choir; anyone can join and you sing happy songs that everyone knows [...] It's music that you can dance along to. And the age range in that choir is, it's huge [...] I think that happiness, wellbeing, art, the arts; are all a big pot. (P2)

Discussion

The findings appear to show a strong inter-relationship between the personal and shared experiences of festivals, and development of connection to others within the community. The strongest form of connection was demonstrated through the strengthening of social bonds, the bridging of cross-cutting ties, collaborations for mutual benefit and reciprocity (thematically coded as 'social capital'). This festival potential is important as people aged 24-64 in the United Kingdom reportedly spend less time connecting with others, than in similar northern European countries (Abdallah 2016). Additionally, British research has found that 80 per cent

of under-34-year-olds report feeling lonely ‘always or often’, which may lead to, among other things, loss of their own sense of self and their confidence, resulting in personal disconnection (British Red Cross 2016). Community arts festivals, therefore, may provide a safe environment to foster social interaction and personal connection. Many of the festival organizers interviewed, reported consciously seeking to engage the local community for their cultural participation. It has been claimed that cultural participation is essential for the achievement of social inclusion in isolated groups (Laing and Mair 2015).

Shared experiences that provide opportunities to engage in particular local culture, linked physically and emotionally to place, have been reported to contribute to the development of connections and trust, resulting in social capital formation (Attanasi et al. 2013). Furthermore, opportunities for volunteering, festival making or sharing personal skills and resources may strengthen social capital. Festival organizers interviewed for this research, report these fringe and preparatory activities as essential in this process. Similarly, a Chinese study reported that participants, given these types of opportunities, developed connections with others, reinforcing their shared social identity (Lau and Li 2014). Therefore these processes appear to transcend national or cultural differences.

Festival organizers specifically allow time for participants to meet others; moreover the structure of the arts festival provides time to pause and reflect. This opportunity may lead, in some cases, to renewed self-understanding, or renewed perceptions about the geographical place and specifically their community. Ballantyne et al. (2014) reinforces this finding; identifying that the presence of other arts and other social activities are an important contributory aspect of the festival experience overall.

The organizers’ role seems to facilitate transformative experiences. Especially so, when the festival provides opportunities to immerse self, engage in activities that use the senses and emotions, or provide moments for creativity and co-creation. Titchen et al. (2011) suggest that these types of transformative experiences are among the elementary conditions for human flourishing, specifically personal growth, development and thriving. Positive psychology links human flourishing to wellbeing. Where lives have meaning and purpose, where people are engaged, and experience positive emotions, coupled with other aspects such as feeling in control, self-esteem, positive relationships and personal resilience, people thrive physically and mentally (Seligman 2011). These ‘take-home’ aspects of festivals should be considered an important part of their legacy.

Arts festival participation can stimulate a sense of ability to succeed and be in control, themed here as ‘self-efficacy’. Research has shown the benefits of a facilitated quality arts

experience in fostering this type of personal development (Ings et al. 2013). An enabling spirit seems to percolate around arts festivals. Weed et al. describe a ‘festival effect’ as a side-product of large sporting events that also engage arts and culture, such as the Olympics (2012: 75). This effect is an experience that is ‘rooted in the lives of local and cultural communities’ and provides a community spirit that engenders a desire to be involved and participate. Furthermore, arts festivals enable access to community resources and even to spaces that might not have otherwise been perceived as being available (Arcodia and Whitford 2006).

To summarize, arts festivals and their organizers offer transformative experiences for some participants. Some may feel enabled or empowered by an aspect of festival engagement. Where the arts festival is inclusive, further opportunities to bring the community together are afforded, providing mutual connection, and participation in a shared, positive experience. Gilchrist (2009) maintains that where these elements exist, communities become resilient. This is central to developing community wellbeing. Therefore it is posited that in this way, arts festivals can make an important contribution to the community as a health-promoting asset. Approaches using these assets seek to empower communities employing their pre-existing skills, knowledge and communal connections. Where these assets are utilized in the long-term, local place-based communities are more likely to collaborate to co-produce in the health interests of that community (Foot and Hopkins 2010).

However, there are some potential challenges; it is well documented that regardless of the offer, arts and cultural events may not attract particular groups or sections of society (The Warwick Commission 2015; Jancovich 2011). Specifically affected are those who are reluctant, through a view of it ‘not being for them’, resulting from perceptions of class divide, educational experience, or economic constraint (Vella-Burrows et al., 2014), or potentially, those overlooked by structural inequalities. Furthermore, it is noted that the organizers were for the most part, self-appointed. The community therefore, may perceive the festival organizers, who may also belong to the community, as gatekeepers and consequently holders of power (Derrett 2003). Unintentionally, this may result in arts festivals that specifically include or exclude some members of the community (Jepson 2008). There was no evidence that this specifically affects the included festivals but is offered as a caveat to the assertion that all arts festivals create community, through social capital, and influence aspects of subjective wellbeing.

Conceptual Model

A conceptual model (figure 1) has been developed, highlighting how the different domains described in the discussion interrelate to build relationships and wellbeing.

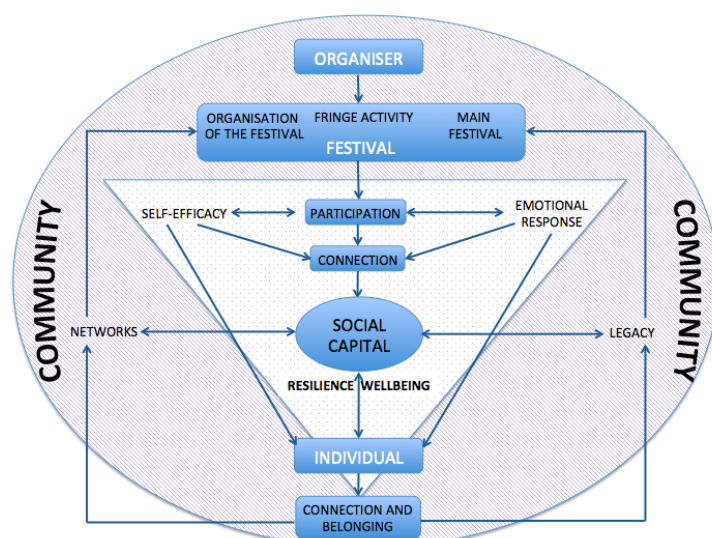


Figure 1. Conceptual Model for How Festivals Build Relationships and Develop Wellbeing

The model shows the three specific areas of arts festival engagement. These are the preparation and organisation in advance of the festival, fringe activities that may happen before, during or after the programmed festival, and the main festival event itself. Individual participation in one or any of the areas may influence individual cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) processes eliciting an emotional response. Cognition and affect can influence self-efficacy and when coupled with shared social experiences during the arts festival, may engender feelings of connection and belonging, ultimately shaping social capital. Individually these facets are likely to contribute to a wider, more holistic picture that leads to personal wellbeing and resilience. However these aspects were not specifically sought out or proven by this study and so it remains a working hypothesis; indicated by a lighter shaded area within the model.

The model also shows the interdependent relationships between individual, their own transformation, and new community connections resulting specifically from participation. The living legacy arises from the development of social capital and access to new resources, consequently increasing the likelihood of future participation, with the community arts festival.

Limitations

The sampling method meant that only a very small geographical region was explored. Furthermore, six of the eight festivals operate in arts regeneration areas and this may influence how the festivals operate and how audiences engage with them. This means that it is difficult to argue for transferability of findings. The data collected are also indirect, in that it is from the organizers' perspective. However, the study is a new form of enquiry in this field and as such is a starting point for future research. Further data collection from festival participants would test both the findings and the model. Additionally, enquiries about positive or negative unanticipated experiences of participants are deemed important for a more in-depth enquiry.

Conclusion

The community arts festivals examined make a contribution to wider population health and wellbeing through the creation of bridging social capital. Festivals also stimulate self-efficacy, which facilitates participation, an emotional response, and may lead to a sense of personal wellbeing, with a living legacy for the community.

This article has shown that local arts festivals reaffirm social bonds, create social capital and provide the foundations for wellbeing. Unfortunately, prolonged sense of wellbeing as a result of arts festivals has not been proven here. Further research into this element is required and use of a specific measure is recommended.

The conceptual model presented demonstrates the potentially transformative experience, reflecting the envisaged domains that specifically support individual development within communities. This development provides personal resources that translate into community assets, with the potential to enhance personal and communal health and wellbeing.

This article adds to the body of knowledge as there is very little research into the role of community arts festivals for health and wellbeing; this is because it is usually written from the perspective of tourism rather than arts and health or public health. This study appears to be unique in terms of the nature of the enquiry made to festival organizers.

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