



Social Impact of
the Arts Project

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**Working Paper #13--
Cultural Participation and Communities:
The Role of Individual and Neighborhood Effects**

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PAPER SUMMARY

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One of the great challenges facing the emerging field of cultural policy studies is to define an intellectual framework for explaining the significance of the arts and culture in American society. Not surprisingly in a nation as wedded to individualism as the United States is, the bulk of work on developing such a framework has looked at the individual as the appropriate *unit of analysis* for understanding the impact of the arts. The *economic impact of the arts* literature has viewed culture as a set of individual consumption decisions around participation. Similarly, the fields of arts education and the arts and youth development have focused on the impact of cultural engagement on the individual cognitive and emotional development of young people. In both cases, the total impact of the arts is simply the sum of many individual impacts.

This individual bias – although consistent with Americans’ prejudices – is out of step with recent trends in the social sciences. In recent years, sociologists have devoted increased attention to the role of context – communities and networks – in influencing social phenomena. William Julius Wilson, for example, is only one of many poverty researchers to examine the role of social and spatial isolation on the problems of the very poor. Robert Putnam, in an influential new book, has argued that social networks are the critical mechanism through which *social capital* is developed. Along similar lines, a number of scholars, including Robert Sampson and Felton Earls, have suggested that “collective efficacy” – a process through which geographic neighborhoods are transformed through the development of social networks – is the critical element in understanding a variety of child outcomes from physical health to cognitive development. As Sampson has noted, a framework that focuses on the embeddedness of individual action in social contexts can avoid “the psychological reductionism that flows from the dominant theoretical and empirical focus on individuals.”¹

The study of public participation in the arts is a perfect example of the focus on individual actions to the exclusion of the social context. The study of public participation has focused primarily on the role of individual demographic characteristics and the individual biography of participants to the exclusion of obvious contextual variables like the availability of cultural opportunities and the social milieu which encourage or discourage cultural participation. This individualistic bias, of course, has been reinforced by surveys of public participation in the arts (SPPA) commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts over the past two decades. Although these surveys and the scholarship based on them has enriched our understanding of who is involved in the arts, the lack of ecological information has made it difficult for researchers to examine individual and neighborhood effects on participation in a balanced way.

This paper seeks to right this balance. Using an enhanced version of the 1997 SPPA provided by the NEA, it links information on individual respondents to information about the zip code in which the person lived. Using four American metropolitan

¹ Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush, “Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods” *American Journal of Sociology* 105:3(Nov 1999): 603.

areas – Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco – as a case study, the paper finds that neighborhood effects are as strong as individual level variables in influencing the frequency of cultural participation in eight types of cultural activities – museums, opera, jazz, classical music, ballet, other dance, plays, and musicals or music theater.

Method

The research department of the NEA made a version of the 1997 SPPA available to the researchers that included the zip code in which the respondent lived. Using this file, we were able to link information on the respondent to two other data sets: 1) U.S. decennial census data from the 1990 enumeration aggregated to the zip code level; and 2) information on the number of cultural organizations in the respondent's zip code derived from the Internal Revenue Services master file of exempt organizations. This data set allowed us to examine the relative influences of individual demographic variables, like education, income, gender, and age, and neighborhood characteristics in influencing levels of cultural participation.

Findings

Individual characteristics

As previous research would suggest, individual demographic characteristics had notable correlations with levels of cultural participation:

- Women were slightly more likely to attend cultural events than men (Table 1).
- Non-Hispanic whites were substantially more likely to attend cultural events than other ethnic groups (Table 2).
- Those with advanced graduate and professional degrees had higher rates of participation than those with less education (Table 3, Figure 1).
- Those with higher income attend more events than those with less income (Table 4).
- Middle aged (45-59) respondents attended more events than either young adults or older adults (Table 5).

Taken together, however, only two of these influences were statistically significant across the four metropolitan areas. Educational attainment was most strongly correlated with cultural participation with a beta-weight of .31. Income was somewhat less strongly related with a beta-weight of .17 (Table 6).

Neighborhood effects

The neighborhood effects we examined fall into three groups: institutions, socio-economic status, and diversity.

- ***Institutions.*** Respondents who lived in zip codes with many cultural institutions had much higher rates of cultural participation than other respondents (Table 7, Figure 2).
- ***Socio-economic status.*** Just as *individual* economic status influences participation, individuals who lived in neighborhoods with high socio-economic status were more likely to attend cultural events than those in other neighborhoods (Table 8).
- ***Diversity.*** In our previous work on Philadelphia, we found that economic and ethnic diversity were strongly related to the presence of cultural providers and levels of cultural participation at an ecological level. In this paper, we found that respondents who lived in neighborhoods that were ethnically and economically diverse had much higher rates of cultural participation than those who lived in neighborhoods that were homogeneous.² However, across the cities, ethnic diversity was not strongly related to participation. Finally, *household diversity* – as measured by the proportion of non-family households in the neighborhood – was strongly related to cultural participation (Tables 9-12, Figure 4).

Individual and neighborhood variables acted independently of one another. For example, among individuals with post-bachelor’s education, the rate of cultural participation was nearly twice as high among those who lived in diverse neighborhoods as among those in homogeneous neighborhoods.

Multivariate analyses

A number of the ecological variables in the analysis were correlated with one another. We conducted a factor analysis to identify the underlying similarities between different variables (Table 13). This analysis produced two factor indexes:

- ***Neighborhood socio-economic status.*** This factor was strongly related to educational attainment, professional and managerial employment, average gross housing value, per capita income, and average household size. The number of cultural providers per capita was moderately related to this index (Table 14).
- ***Neighborhood diversity.*** This factor was related to economic and ethnic diversity, average household size, non-family households, the proportion of renters, and the age of housing stock. Cultural providers per capita also loaded moderately on this index (Table 15).

² Our measure of economically diversity was the proportion of the population of the respondent’s zip code that lived in block groups that had poverty rates and proportion of professionals and managers that were above average for the metropolitan area. The measure of ethnic diversity was the proportion of the population of the respondent’s zip code that lived in block groups that had no ethnic group that composed more than 80 percent of the population.

We performed a multiple regression to assess the relative importance of the individual and ecological variables (Table 16). The only individual level variable that remained statistically significant in this analysis was educational attainment, which explained 8.5 percent of the variance in frequency of cultural participation. The two neighborhood factor indexes – socio-economic status and diversity – together explained 7.7 percent of the variance. When entered on their own, socio-economic status had a beta-weight of .23 and diversity had a beta-weight of .17.

The composite model that included all individual and neighborhood effects explained 12.7 percent of the variance in frequency of cultural participation. Diversity emerged as the strongest neighborhood effect in the model. An alternative regression analysis suggested that the presence of cultural providers did not have an independent influence of cultural participation. (See Diagram)

Discussion

The basic conclusion we draw from this analysis is that cultural participation needs to be seen as a form of collective behavior. The over-reliance on individual level models of cultural engagement misses the very strong influence that social context has on participation.

The ecological influences on participation break down into two distinct dimensions. Cultural participation is strongly sorted by social hierarchies. Just as *individuals* with higher incomes, more education, and better jobs attend cultural events more frequently, people who live in *neighborhoods* with these characteristics – whatever their individual status – also have higher cultural participation rates. These findings support theories like the *cultural capital* theory associated with the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu.

But this is not *all* that culture does. Cultural engagement – at both the individual and institutional level – is a product of diversity. Economically diverse neighborhoods and especially those that are also ethnically diverse, have much higher rates of cultural participation than ordinary urban neighborhoods. This analysis suggests that there is a household dimension to cultural engagement as well. Neighborhoods that have older housing, lower numbers of children, and many non-family households have much higher participation rates. Alternative domestic arrangements – people living by themselves, as unmarried heterosexual couples, or in gay or lesbian families – produce higher rates of cultural engagement.

In a broader perspective, like crime, political participation, and consumer behavior, the social context in which cultural participation occurs exerts a strong influence on that behavior. It provides existing cultural forms – like street festivals, book clubs, and community theaters – of which individuals can take advantage. It integrates or isolates individuals from social networks that support cultural participation. Finally, it provides standards of behavior – social norms – that encourage or discourage cultural participation.

The implications of this analysis for cultural policy are clear. First, cultural policy must not restrict itself only to individual level variables. Communities and social networks provide powerful influences on cultural engagement. By the same token, culture is a unique and important part of the process of forming those networks. Attendance at cultural events forges relationships that often spill over into other forms of association. In the language used by Robert Sampson and Felton Earls, cultural engagement is one means through which collective efficacy is achieved.

If this is true – as this paper and our other research suggest – then cultural policy is integrally connected with many of the major contemporary debates in urban policy. If culture promotes collective efficacy and social capital, it is one means we can use to strengthen urban communities. If – as we’ve documented in Philadelphia – cultural participation bridges the gaps that separate well-off from poor communities and black and Hispanic from white communities, it is one means of overcoming the destructive influence that these divisions cause. If diversity and cultural engagement truly reinforce one another, then cultural policy provides one avenue for addressing patterns of discrimination and exclusion that still plague our cities. No rationale for a concerted cultural policy is stronger than the unique role of cultural engagement in addressing city’s intractable social divisions and building social networks that overcome them.

In his 1998 book, *The Future of Us All*³, Roger Sanjek documents the transition of a section of Queens in New York City from a homogeneous white community to one populated by whites, African-Americans, and a wide variety of immigrant groups from Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. This transition, while often bumpy, ultimately succeeded in developing a sense of community and collective efficacy that cut across ethnic and social class lines. According to Sanjek, public rituals, including a variety of cultural institutions and creative performances, were a critical element of this reconstruction of community life. If diversity – voluntary or otherwise – is truly the “future of us all” then cultural will need to play a more prominent role in our emerging urban debates.

³ Roger Sanjek, *The future of us all: race and neighborhood politics in New York City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Relationship of neighborhood and individual effects on frequency of cultural participation

