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Understanding of the value and impacts of cultural experience - a literature review

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POLICY REVIEW

Understanding of the value and impacts of cultural experience – a literature review by John D. Carnwaith and Alan S. Brown, London, Arts Council England, 2014, published online at http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Understanding_the_value_and_impacts_of_cultural_experiences.pdf

This literature review was published by Arts Council England (ACE) in July 2014. It is part of a long line of research reports, some commissioned and some produced in-house by the research team, although it is tagged as part of ACE's "international" resources. The report was produced by WolfBrown, the arts consultancy who have been very active in the focus of the literature review – the impact of arts on the personal experiences of individuals – sometimes termed "intrinsic" impacts. This puts the authors in the slightly ambiguous position of reviewing much of their own work, alongside a selection of international studies and research reports produced by academics and other arts consultants.

The review is ostensibly mobilised by the continuing quest for further evidence of the value of arts engagement, wedded to methodological anxieties about whether the resulting evidence has integrity in the eyes of its constituent audiences. These are prioritised as policy and funding agencies, followed by cultural institutions and arts organisations. The review follows a "sister" report produced by ACE, published earlier in the year, "The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society" (Arts Council England, 2014) explicitly aimed to bring together evidence from recent years attributing particular impacts and effects in relation to the Arts Council's five strategic goals that were set out in the refreshed *Great Arts and Culture For Everyone* (GACFE). This in-house evidence review drew on selected programme evaluations, previous evidence reviews, including the systematic reviews conducted by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Culture and Sport Evidence (CASE) programme four years earlier, and some limited examples of academic research.

WolfBrown's "sister" report classifies the instrumental impacts identified in the literature into five categories: Economy, Health and Wellbeing, Society, Education and Evidence Gaps. The first four form a framework (following GACFE's five goals) for considering how convincingly such evidence attributes extrinsic effects from cultural participation, and for pulling out key nuggets of evidence under each heading that can be mobilised to demonstrate the value and impact of the arts in a digestible format. In Alex Stevens' terms these are "killer facts" for making persuasive policy stories (Stevens, 2011). Hence in the executive summary section under Economy, we discover that "for every £1 of salary paid by the arts and culture industry an additional £2.01 is generated in the wider economy", whereas under Health and Wellbeing we are presented with the slightly more anodyne statement that "engagement in structured arts and culture improve the abilities of children and young people" (Arts Council England, 2014, p. 7).

The GACFE framework acts to sieve the accumulated evidence, and identify research methods and data that fall through the gaps. One important absence, noted alongside its general observation of the paucity of clearly established causal relationships and longitudinal studies identified amongst its sources, is a focus on *personal experience* of arts participants in the reported studies. This is particularly the case of the findings from arts and health projects, which tend to concentrate on clinical evidence accredited by health professionals. This constitutes an interesting challenge to arts organisations working with health partners, who may have

previously been under the illusion that clinical trial data with objective quantitative measures are preferable forms of evidence of impact. However, looking closer at this section in the report – away from the inevitable reduction of the Executive Summary – we can see that the process of evidence-gapping points to a rather more complicated picture. Here tensions arise between the desire for evidence which equates to the “gold standards” of robust research (e.g. randomised controlled trials) and winks out the relationships between arts experiences and value at the level of the individual, personal behaviour and outcome (e.g. through multivariate analyses of longitudinal data), and the requirement for comparative data on the behaviour and impact on different population groups: “more fine-grained evidence on who gains more or less from arts engagement, in different contexts and in different settings” (Arts Council England, 2014, p. 42).

These gaps, and these tensions, form the rationale for commissioning Carnwaith and Brown’s literature review. As such, it inevitably straddles the fence of intellectual and instrumental endeavour – as a response to an institutional request for further tools with which to make claims about value, inform organisational practice and enhance the likelihood of value creation, and as an exercise which distils and synthesises (albeit selected and partial) knowledge from prior research. Its intellectual gravitas is presented in the same context as two other concurrent exercises exploring similar issues: the *Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value* and the AHRC’s *Cultural Value* programme. These companions introduce a slight air of nervousness into the report: Alan Davey’s forward contains the careful disclaimer that the range of literature is necessarily limited, and these limits also apply to the extent to which the chosen literature could address the historical or philosophical contexts of the enquiry. Even so, at 156 pages, including appendices (with an Executive Summary of 24 pages), the report is substantial and offers a comprehensive bibliography. This references the 196 items included in review: around a third of which have received closer attention, plus a further 35 items which are offered altruistically since the reviewers were not able to include them in their schedule. This bibliography comprises mainly academic research publications, predominantly from the disciplines of economics, management and business studies, but also some from music, theatre studies and philosophy, as well as some consultancy research and policy reports.

Unlike ACEs earlier Evidence Review, this is no pot-boiler of research-into-advocacy, but a rather more sustained attempt to find clarity and to suggest a way forward. The report begins with a brief recent history of the main ways in which policy-makers have understood the value of the arts in the Anglophone world, beginning with their roots in economics. It works through some of key protagonists in the field of cultural value/the value of culture (e.g. Belfiore and Bennett, 2007; Holden, 2004, 2006; Selwood, 2010; Throsby, 2010; Walmsley, 2013), and develops a glossary of key terms used, picking through the conceptual mire of terms such as “impact”, “cultural value”, “cultural capital” and “valorisation”. The review includes Alan Brown’s own work with Novak-Leonard which favours the term “benefits” over “value” and which has developed a range of frameworks which position the “intrinsic impacts” of the arts as central to understand the immediate transformative potential of the arts and hence the production of instrumental benefits. From this initial conceptual review, the authors plump for the term “individual impacts” to provide the heuristic hook for analysis of the following literature. “Individual impacts” refer to the totality of different experiences and effects as a result from direct, immediate engagement with an artistic event or activity (although they may occur before an event, in anticipation, and for some time afterwards). This term deliberately only includes individuals who come into contact with the arts: it excludes those who may value arts altruistically, but not experience it (for economists, “existence value”). This way, the review suggests, we can be more definite about the causality and attribution of effect, and cut out the “noise” of the social context of arts experiences. However, the authors concede there may be external factors which change individual’s experience: “impact can be influenced by the individual’s personal background (cultural frame of

reference) and experience with the form, the artist, the work, or the topic or subject matter” as well as the “community context” and setting of reception (p. 57).

The meat of the report is on the pros and cons of particular methods for measuring individual impacts, on the basis of examples of their implementation and analysis. It mainly discards physiological and psychometric data as objective measures for audience response, but identifies the post-event survey as “the most effective means of assessing short-term effects” (p. 12). It recognises that this is the dominant method used in arts evaluation to produce quantitative data on the experiences reported by arts participants and audiences against pre-determined constructs, or indicators. Reviewing more closely a number of studies from four particular sources, including Wolf-brown, the authors look for common and discrepant definitions of these experiences – such as captivation, challenge, emotional involvement and aesthetic growth – which they use to inform a common measurement set grouped under themed headings including energy, learning, empathy/emotional involvement, aesthetic growth (which includes taste and normative values) and social connectedness (these are included in the report in table form in the Appendices). They encourage the further testing of these indicators and urge further theorisation in this area, corroborated by empirical findings.

The report is less strident about the value of qualitative research for these purposes. Although the authors concede that in-depth qualitative research can provide broader insights, allowing more agency within participant responses and supporting the ways they make sense of their experiences – including negative feelings associated with arts participation – they point to the inherent weaknesses of qualitative methods – namely, a lack of replicability, verifiability and refutability. They warn that the findings of qualitative studies cannot be confirmed by or compared to other studies, unless very close scrutiny is made of their integrity and methodology. They find narrative accounts useful in triangulation with quantitative data, but (oddly) do not consider how qualitative research might be useful in informing indicators for quantitative research.

Bringing the two methodological groups together, the report discusses how studies have identified ways in which impacts may accumulate over time, and it provides more conceptual apparatus for exploring time and duration, namely, “concurrent”, “experienced”, “extended” and “accumulative” impacts. These are helpful in focusing the future evaluator on where and when they might want to collect data from arts audiences to best identify impact. The report also includes a section on the “field of marketing literature”, although it is unclear why this is separate from the other literature considered, since it concerns many of the same issues and methods concerning audience behaviour, motivation and satisfaction, albeit in terms more suited to the marketing team and board room than to the public funder.

The selection of literature is not without criticism: Dave O’Brien in his blogpost on the review points out that for this review “international” is confined to the Anglophone world of the US, the UK and Australia and does not venture near any non-English language approaches to the subject which might dispel the Western European trait of assuming culture as a universalising good, with the focus on *positive impact* out-glaring any dissenting voices (O’Brien, 2014). Arguably, the literature review further “fixes” the positive impact discourse as dominant, reifying it within the means of its own reproduction in influential research tools which are taken around the European and Anglophone world in policy transfer flows, as has so often previously happened (Pratt, 2009).

A further critical observation from O’Brien concerns the miscegenation of market and academic research in these kinds of reviews, which signals the increasing dominance of commercial forms of data collection over more traditional social scientific methods. Interestingly, the same reflection was made at a recent symposium led by the UK’s AHRC *Cultural Value* programme and USA’s the National Endowment for the Arts, which concerned the measurement of cultural participation. Bob Groves, the former Director of the US Census Bureau, posed the challenge that “organic data” scraped from transactions, internet searches, credit cards and social media may tell

us “so much more that was about actual behaviour, rather than asking people what they did” (Crossick, 2014). However, this is not explored in the literature review.

The literature review’s central conceit is laid out in Davey’s forward: herein lies the main problem. It professes a willingness to tackle difficult questions of getting at individual experience and subjective meaning, whilst unpacking the relationships between “intrinsic” and “instrumental”, as well as the problems in trying to separate them. ACE want to do this on behalf of the sector to improve their methodological toolkit for evaluation, as well as enliven the debate, but it seems not to surmount the first hurdle of how to encapsulate personal response to art in ways which satisfy the bureaucrats without resorting to quantifiable metrics. Davey asserts that “you can’t tick a box marked profundity” (Camwaith & Brown, 2014, p. 2) but it seems that much of the report is dedicated to finding out ways of precisely doing this.

The final component of the report addresses the creative capacity of arts organisations as “a counterpoint to the analysis of individual impacts” to address questions of value and quality from an organisational perspective: what do organisations that engage people in impactful experiences look like? How can the “quality” of cultural organisations as a whole be assessed?. This discursive shift to “quality” seems weird at first sight – but on closer inspection the review of arts management literature on quality assurance and performance management frameworks for arts organisations makes sense in this context. After all, WolfBrown’s review is primarily targeted at arts organisations in terms of their accountability to the public purse and necessarily addresses the mechanisms for feedback and valorisation of value operating within the organisation, as well as to its funders and its audiences. It also explains a further “coda” in the report, which outlines new work developed in Australia and supported by ACE in Manchester, UK on “quality” indicators for co-produced management frameworks, including peers, funders and the public (Bunting & Knell, 2014; Chappell & Knell, 2012).

In reviewing this significant survey of literature and the contribution it makes to both the field of arts management and of cultural policy studies, there are three further observations to make.

- The first is about the context of its commissioning, its target audience, purpose and how these have shaped the outcome. We can safely assume that the primary audience for the report is the arts organisations and their funders – it does a comprehensive job of critically investigating the literature and developing arguments for particular measurement tools intended to help arts organisations to improve their practices and produce positive impacts. As Bell and Oakley (2014) suggest, we can also explore cultural policy-as-texts, with material forms which have their own agency and which interpolate different audiences in their dissemination and reception. This particular text has agency in meeting the shifting demands of an increasingly integrated, complicit approach to cultural policy research and evidence making, involving market research, policy researchers and the academy and speaks to this combined audience quite effectively. It does, however, exclude some voices, the non-Anglophone.
- The second observation relates to O’Brien’s hope that this report is “another nail in the coffin of the intrinsic/instrumental divide”. This seems unlikely – the report is wholly instrumental in its approach to understand the arts and cultural experiences at the level of the individual, so if it has buried this divide it is only by crossing over to one of its sides. For example, when developing future research topics, it asks the clumsy question “what is an effective ‘dose’ of culture?”.
- Finally, the conceptualisation of the *individual* is problematical. The relationship between arts organisations and their communities is constructed through the prism of “intrinsic impact” data indicators proposed here. These seem to denude the exercise of context: of class, race, age or other structural determinants, of settings, geographies and power

relations influencing participation. So, while we may be able to tick the box marked “profoundity”, we may not be able to understand the structural constraints, negative impacts and critical affects of individuals’ arts experiences, or how the cultural practices supported by arts organisations and arts funding can respond to and change them.

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