

Tending to Society, Tending to Yourself: The Roles of Culture

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Abstract: This paper addresses the role that cultural activities may play in the lives of youth. First, it reviews the general roles that culture is argued to play in society. It then looks at a schema of communications in an individual's life, hinting at the roles culture may play in this and arguing that studying culture and youth is part of a more comprehensive research framework in order to place the particular role of culture and youth into a larger picture. It ends by reviewing concrete examples of research on youth and culture, highlighting existing strategic constraints and proposing the need for a more intensive and more broadly based research of the impacts of culture on individuals which would contribute to better understanding and, ultimately, more appropriate culture policies and programs.

Résumé: Cette étude adresse le rôle que les activités culturelles peuvent jouer dans la vie des jeunes. D'abord, elle passe en revue les rôles généraux que la culture est censée jouer dans la société. Ensuite, elle examine un schéma de communications dans la vie de l'individu, suggérant quels rôles la culture peut jouer dans une telle situation et soutenant que l'étude de la culture et de la jeunesse devraient faire partie d'un cadre de recherche élargi de manière à situer le rôle particulier de la culture et de la jeunesse dans un contexte plus large. L'étude conclut en examinant des exemples concrets de recherche sur culture et jeunesse, soulignant les contraintes stratégiques actuelles et affirmant le besoin d'étudier les effets de la culture sur les individus de manière plus intensive et mieux assise. Une telle recherche pourrait contribuer à une meilleure compréhension de ces effets et, finalement, à des politiques et des programmes culturels plus appropriés.

Introduction

The expressed, and prospective, claims for the impacts of cultural activity on society, especially on the formation of youth, the quality of life of adults, and inherent economic strengthening of businesses and careers, are numerous. The conclusions offered in various research studies to "prove" these claims are however often unconvincing, even to those who consider or would hope them to be true.

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Measuring the (social) impacts of culture is conceptually quite complex and wide-ranging, and there is a need for a well-established framework for research to begin to report on this, a framework which needs to accommodate not only economic and quantitative social science research but qualitative and humanistic research as well. This paper comments on research on the impacts of cultural activity on youth, but in so doing proposes a broader framework to examine questions such as: What is culture? What are its impacts? And how do you conceive of the roles of culture in society and on individual lives?

This paper sketches out a framework within which culture's impact on individuals could be assessed, looks at examples of existing studies for the specific situation of youth, and suggests that both more and better evidence is required, including a new strategy for culture impact research. In outlining a framework for placing the role of culture, the paper presents a naïve schema of individual communications development, reviews communications vehicles which address needs and desires to communicate, and hints at the roles that arts and cultural activities play in this process. Linked to the hypothesized role of cultural activity in individual lives, and therefore on society, the paper touches on how individuals at different stages and states of development participate in particular media and modes of cultural expression. All of this is directed towards evolving a more effective research paradigm for studying the role of culture for individuals.

The paper begins by setting the stage with a wide ranging review of the types of rationales or characterizations (hypotheses for research) that can be applied to the case for culture. This section is based upon work conducted for the Department of Canadian Heritage which reviewed materials citing the social and economic impacts and benefits of culture in Canada (Cheney, 1999), supplemented by additional work which tried to identify needs for more effective research on the sector (Cheney, 2000). The review raised key conceptual questions of what exactly is culture and its impacts—and, therefore, how would one “measure” and assess them. The emphasis on measuring impacts on individuals and communities, which is at the core of the research framework here, is reinforced by recent qualitative research on how Canadians see “heritage” (Cheney, 2001).

A cataloguing of cultural contributions

For the past generation, cultural activity in Canada has been increasingly the subject of economic impact analysis. The culture sector plays a now-statistically-documented important role in the Canadian economy, and one with calculated impacts in terms of returns relative to public investment, goals of regional diversity, and labour force skills. It is also recognized as important to the major global tourism market, and for attracting and developing the labour force needed in the current knowledge-based economy.

But culture has historically been cited as playing a still more significant, if unquantified and recently rarely acknowledged, role in the lives of societies. This non-economic impact perspective was the predominant basis of Canadian cultural policy review fifty years ago as exemplified in the landmark *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences*

1949-1951, aimed towards developing a “civilized” society (but not necessarily one with engaged and enriched individuals). The implicit and integral value of culture is also reflected more recently in *The Nature of Economies* (Jacobs, 2000) which inherently argues for the importance of cultural activity to achieve creative and successful societies. It is found in indirect arguments for economic well-being—“Artistic perception is as necessary to the modern manufacturer . . . as engineering skill” (Toffler, 1965, p. 116, citing Kenneth Galbraith)—and in becoming growing citizens of the world to become growing citizens at home—“the most fulfilling communities have lain elsewhere . . . [even in] ‘a good book’” (Kenner, 1998, p. 88).

The overall impacts on society are implicit, and natural, contributions—the arts are a cornerstone of civilizations and their legacies, as are government, values, health care, education, and security. Culture¹ is a foundation of community activity, participation, expression, and identity; of stockpiling and guarding the history of governments, businesses, communities, and families; as a vehicle of recreation, continuing education, personal development, a conduit for celebrations, and the social lubricant of community gatherings; for preserving and promoting a consciousness of the past, providing insights on the present, and a source of inspiration and guidance for the future. Cultural activities are also argued to play a practical role in such areas as maintaining and recovering physical and mental health, and in the intellectual, social, academic, and personal development of children.²

Culture is part of a “good society,” a life physically, mentally, socially, and even financially sound. It contributes to “settlements”—an original meaning ascribed to “Canada”—which exist in a ring of shared understanding, fundamentals of identify, and instruments of discourse. On a practical level, cultural activity helps fulfill people’s leisure time, nurtures infants and children, supports businesses and supplies employment, and fine-tunes skills which give a country a presence in the markets and on the stages of the world. Cultural activities can provide salve for emotional wounds, open the mind to insights and inspiration, and set the scene for celebration. They are integral to what life is all about, and in so being are the Siamese twin of the more physical economic structures of society.

On the world stage, civilizations are characterized, and remembered, by their culture activity: outstanding artists, monuments, and works of art become indistinguishable from civilizations, and are often their only legacy: the Acropolis of Athens, the Great Wall of China, the Library of Alexandria; Molière and Michelangelo; Mayan ruins, cave paintings, petroglyphs; the Pompidou Centre, the Sydney Opera House; the Bolshoi Ballet; the BBC.

Moreover, culture is present in the everyday life of every community. Whether a public library, an amateur choir, a school play, a local historical society, a downtown restoration, piano lessons, a craft shop, a story teller, a troubadour, local cable television productions, tourists in hotels, or people listening to the stereo, culture is part and parcel of schooling, family, leisure, and vacations, and the drive to work.

Cultural activities play an important role in the lives of pre-schoolers as they learn to communicate; in the lives of teenagers as they come to understand their (not yet everybody's) world; and in the lives of adults as they grow up and grow old, sharing a sense of community and understanding of the different fortunes of life.

Individuals draw from culture to help build their lives. Culture helps form the stepping stones of life: holding a grandparent's war medal, seeing an exhibit on immigrants (one's own parents?), a personal attempt at painting, a dog-eared book. These experiences nurture and validate lives: inspiration from that dog-eared book, from a speech or lecture; discipline and a sense of accomplishment learned from an art teacher; a career chosen from a visit to the library; family memories from a trip to an historic site; a love confirmed at a movie theatre; a lullaby sung to an infant; a poem read on the death of a parent.

Exposure to the arts in school helps develop skills, including physical dexterity, mental concentration, discipline and creativity, and imagination. As a child, working in the arts helps develop expression and visual communications skills. Exposure to the arts refines practical and social skills: effective speaking and writing, and problem solving.

On an emotional front, culture gives exposure to and satisfies needs for a range of feelings which bring satisfaction, joy, exuberance, hope, and a sense of renewal in the face of external circumstances. Cultural activities provide reflection, inspiration, relaxation, entertainment, and escape; they provide challenge, and provocation, and help people confront fear or anxiety; and they help people to develop a sense of self, of identity and well-being, the *sine qua non* of effective family and social participation.

Involvement with literature and history provides a background of knowledge and insights to understand the role of society, and how people relate to each other and to the environment. It provides a basis for understanding people in different circumstances, different ages, different places, and different times. All of these are crucial in forging a sense of self, and a sense of community—local, regional, national, international, historical—which enable productive participation in the work world, in society, and in personal relations with family, colleagues and friends, and strangers.

Families, and especially nuclear and extended families, are rapidly becoming a lost feature in the Canadian demographic landscape. Cultural activities are a key link in the development and strength of families, and an increasingly important resource for supplementing, virtually, role models which may now not be present in the physical lives of children. Cultural activities are the source of much leisure-time activity which takes place in households. They are the source of shared experiences, and provide a structure for exposing children to shared (or individual creative) activity. They are the vehicle for exploration and understanding, and are the means whereby family facts and traditions get passed on from generation to generation.

The most important impacts of culture take place among the tight circle of acquaintances which form people's communities (not governments' communities), either the physical communities where they live or the virtual communities of interest that may link people around the world. As a focus of things to do together, and as a basis of developing shared perceptions of community, they are fundamental to establishing and enriching the lives of families, and preparing them for relationships with society.

Cultural facilities and events provide a physical gathering place, and are the subjects of discussion for friends and neighbours, colleagues, visitors, and business partners to meet and talk. The various forms of cultural expression construct intangible infrastructures of shared histories, common exposure to values, and a sense of place. These weave the fabrics of society.

In practical instances, the arts are called upon to help address those prone to failing in school and those having problems with delinquency. Pilot programs also have had success in working with inmates to develop skills and personal confidence, and hence reduce the risk of repeat offenses under the law. The arts are also called upon to play a therapeutic role in trying to deal with both physical and mental illnesses. In particular, those who are actively involved with cultural activity are considered to be less prone to illness and early death.

Overall, arts and cultural expressions are activities in which people participate either in forming part of an audience or more actively (i.e., direct participation). In so doing, they develop a sense of accomplishment, increase their understanding, open communications, or engage in debate. Through this process, they enrich their own lives and the legacy of civilization.

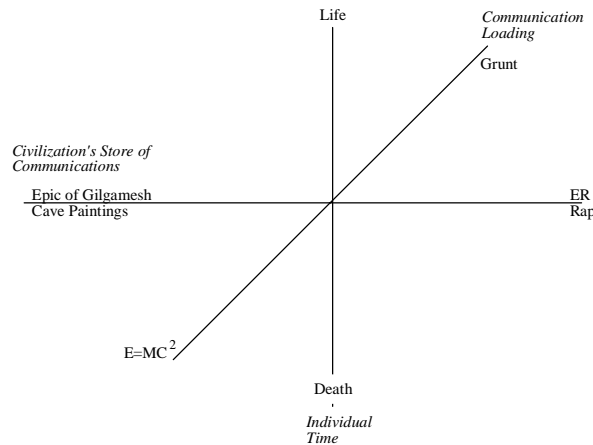
A schema of human communication

Communication plays the central role in the lives of individuals and societies on a number of levels. Indeed, communication with family, with friends, with society, and with self is the conscious life. Cultural activities hold a key place in these communications, addressing significant communication needs, whether "philosophical" or day-to-day.

A number of schematic elements are presented here which help to study communications and the roles of culture within the context of human development. To begin the discussion, I have outlined a "naïve" overview of communications based on three fundamental axes relating to how people "see" the world: (1) *Individual Time*: the individual's lifespan, birth to death (the Z-axis on the graphic); (2) *Civilization's Time*: the expanding storehouse of communications materials from the first cave paintings and writings to contemporary mass media and specialized communications (academic journals, for example) (the X-axis); and (3) *Communication Loading*: the individual's capacity to receive and communicate, from the first cry or grunt to the most compressed mathematical expression (the Y-axis). These are represented in Figure 1. Any individual will be situated somewhere in this space: the impacts of cultural activities will depend upon that situation.

Considerable overlays can be elaborated and added to this schema. An individual's life content and reservoir for communication augments over most of their

Figure 1: Civilization Time, Individual Time, and Communication Loading – 1



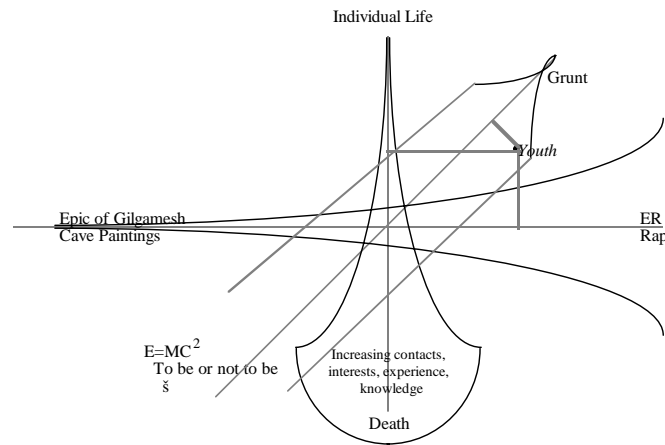
life with increasing knowledge, experience, and circle of contacts. The record of civilization communication materials continues to increase (excepting where mutability and disasters intervene: lost texts, lost art, lost oral traditions). Finally, the capacity to “articulate,” joining received communication to expressed communication, varies from individual to individual, and increases considerably in the first part of life, with “blips” as people become experts in, for example, economics terminology, then forget it. Such overlays are represented in the second rendering of the culture and communication axes in Figure 2.)

Thus, as an individual’s life time evolves, the core basis of information received increasingly expands as a resource base for communication to achieve a final concerted (and relatively stable) storehouse in the last parts of life. The capacity to speak increases from the cry and grunt stage to verbal communication relatively quickly and will reach different stages of accomplishments and expertise for each individual, but will remain relatively constant after a certain period of time. Civilizations’ communications inputs will also be growing at a relatively slower, but independent rate.

Any individual can be characterized by their position on these axes: in the example plotted, youth has gotten beyond the cry/grunt stage to nearly finished capacity to articulate their thoughts. Their Life Time situation still provides them with a limited base of reference, but they are exposed to most of the communication evidence civilization has to offer (and will likely be in the lead in some new areas!). Cultural offerings and impacts have to be seen within the context of such circumstances.

A key element of this schematization is the diversity of roles that communications plays in the lives of individuals and societies. Communications activity

Figure 2: Civilization Time, Individual Time, and Communication Loading – 2



can be considered as responding to such things as fear, boredom, efficiency, survival, and the desire to manipulate, among other considerations.

More broadly, communications (and the roles of cultural activity) can be taken as a response to such things as a need for:

- understanding: for coherent stories
- comfort
- reassurance
- expanded awareness; “naming” things
- entertainment
- distraction
- gossip
- power
- social order
- “information” (weather, bank rates, medications, job offerings)
- basic facts (speed limits, prices, directions)
- developing skills: training
- day-to-day agenda
- killing time, to chat, to complain
- inspiration
- challenging/debating ideas

These apply whether “talking” to oneself, to another, or to others; in a physical group or via intermediaries (media); and regardless of the technologies of communication. Cultural expression holds a key place in these communications, addressing essential communications needs.

Some roles for culture

In considering the role of culture within this communications schema, and thus in individual lives, we first need to clarify what “culture” is. In lieu of many theoretical definitions, work on cultural policy research in Canada typically has been based on listing activities which are taken to be cultural (usually as a result of existing granting programs). These include:

1. publishing: reading and writing, and especially publishing and distributing, books, periodicals, and sometimes newspapers, and consideration of such related functions as printing and libraries;
2. heritage institutions: museums (with artistic, scientific, historical, and technological collections), public archives, historic parks and sites, nature (conservation) parks, archaeological sites, and other similar activities;
3. performing arts (theatre, dance, music, and opera);
4. visual arts and crafts;
5. film and video;
6. sound recording;
7. broadcasting; and also often such things as
8. arts education, built heritage, and multicultural activity.

With this scope in mind, we can contemplate the ways cultural activity can touch the lives of individuals through the various instances of communications. There are obviously a number of extenuating elements in assessing any communication instance. Babies may communicate more through touch and sight, for example, mostly to learn about their world, discovering reassurance, or recognizing fear; by cries to express needs and seek a response. Teenagers may never read, especially newspapers, but may be immersed in music seeking distraction, order, community, and “meaning.” Young adults may aggressively pursue books, documentaries, and social outings as they confirm their sense of self and relationship with society. Those in mid-life may be engrossed in time-restricted and closed social worlds where ritual, pattern, and reassurance become prominent, and where museums become important as visual, tactile, and intellectual playgrounds for their children. As they age, individuals may be limited in their ability to read and to hear, and rely more on memory: the refined ore of important personal communications. Cultural activities of various forms (live performances, visits to archives) impact on different stages of life.

Within the scope of communications needs and functions, and the various ways that any of the activities from the culture family can interact with these, many claims have been made by associations, researchers, and culture sector constituents. To date, there appears to have been few efforts to study, catalogue, and document the complex roles and impacts that culture as a critical communication vessel has on an individual and on a society (a society taken generically here as a composite of individuals, whether local, regional, national, or international; immediate or mediated). This topic, however, has become an element of recent

public policy discussions about society in Canada. I am thinking here of the increasing presence of discussions about the role of *social capital* in society, that is, the formation and maintenance of relationships with other people that may be linked with greater civic and social participation. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) cites various culture activities, some on the positive side of the problem (especially participation in the arts) and others on the negative (television and the audiovisual world as breeders of isolation). Detailed consideration of this line of thinking and cultural activity remains to be pursued.

The importance of cultural activities to a successful society is stressed much more in the recent book by Jane Jacobs on *The Nature of Economies* (2000). After assessing a number of ways that a society flourishes, and that a species does not self-destruct, she often cites arts and cultural activities as the ways whereby societies learn to be involved creatively in things and grow, rather than pursuing their capacity to destroy whatever is around them: this, she argues, is a natural safeguard for the longer life of a civilization, and contributes to the evolution of the diversity she so prizes as the key to the success of a society.

In terms of the specific issue of youth, there have been a number of studies done on the impact of involvement with “the arts.” These have tried to assess the impact of different levels and types of arts participation on a number of social outcome indicators (e.g., performance at school, problems integrating into a society). The positive associations that have been reported have become naturally attractive to many organizations in the cultural sector. For instance, a number of arts information and advocacy groups have highlighted some of the findings of such studies, noting, for example, that “evidence . . . suggests that in schools where students perform above average academically, they also receive a richer dose of visual and performing arts” (Cleveland, 1992, quoting “Arts Education in California: Thriving or Surviving?”) A recent newsletter from an arts group in Vancouver refers to “a substantial body of research [which] now proves student satisfaction and engagement in learning increase with participation in the arts” (“Arts Impact . . .,” 1997). Another issue of the newsletter notes that “students from low income families who participate in arts experiences are more likely to do better academically than those who do not” (Milner, 1997). According to the Learning Through the Arts program of the Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto, the active participation of artists in classrooms has been linked with noticeably improved literacy test scores. Similar examples can be found in a number of compendium sources available on the Internet from sites such as those of the California Arts Council and Americans for the Arts.

The studies which are cited tend to report a “relationship” or an “affiliation” between involvement in the arts and “better” lives. At the same time, however, the studies are typically if not universally inconclusive about any causal link. All studies of social factors are much more constrained than are physical scientific studies in being able to account for or isolate single factors. While the natural sciences can predict where the moon will be tomorrow within millimeters, social sci-

entists cannot tell where a person will be, what they will be doing, or what mood they will be in.

The studies that examine impacts of cultural participation on children or youth do not address nor confirm a special or unique role of the cultural participation. Typically they establish a correlation with participation in the arts (i.e., this behaviour can help you predict children “at risk”) but cannot establish a causal relation. For example, knowing a child does not participate in a cultural activity is an indication that they may be more likely to be doing poorly at school. But the type of children participating in the arts may come from more supportive or financially better off families, who live in “better” neighbourhoods, which coincidentally offer arts programs, and these same children do better in school. The kind of personal temperament which leads to arts involvement may also link to taking school more conscientiously, and so on. Participation in the arts is also more associated with girls, who tend to have fewer “problems” than boys: Is putting more boys into arts programs the solution? Is this a likely solution? Participation is also linked with the availability of facilities: but this availability is measured by the respondents’ (the parents) perception of availability—maybe the perception is the (methodological) problem. The existing evidence considers often only descriptive, or restrictive multivariate (e.g., considering income), data analysis approaches which can beg more questions than they now answer.

As illustrations of the contributions and restrictions of this research, consider two specific examples: “Involvement in the Arts and Success in Secondary School” by James. S. Catterall (1998a), and “Sports, The Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation” by David R. Offord, Ellen L. Lipman, & Erik K. Duku (1998). The Catterall findings are based on a longitudinal study of 25,000 students across the United States from 1988 on, and link improved academic performance and increased community service to involvement in the arts (how many of the 25,000 were in the analysis is not noted). This arts involvement was recorded as participation in school band or drama productions, art classes in school, art-related lessons outside of school, and visits to museums with family. These were assessed for students at the grade 8 and grade 10 level.

Students were categorized by a point system, and those in the highest and lowest quartiles of an index of parental income and education compared. Those with the higher scorings in arts participation were found to have higher test results, were more likely to stay in school, and more likely to be “less bored” in school. The report also reports that those in higher income families are generally more involved in the arts and more likely to score higher at school. It notes, as well, that for lower income families, those who are involved in the arts do better than others in this income group (but not as well as those in the higher income groups). The report also recites theoretical rationales for why involvement with the arts may be important: promoting cognitive development, broadening ways of thinking, and promoting community involvement. The conclusion, however,

remarks on the lack of “causal attribution” of participation in the arts with the better outcomes.

The study by Catterall stresses *academic* impacts of arts participation.³ The paper by Offord, Lipman, & Duku (1998) looks at the affects of participation in a range of activities (including sports) on the *sociopsychological well-being* of youth. It draws upon a longitudinal survey of over 20,000 Canadian children ages 6 to 11, with all information supplied by a parent (“the household member being most knowledgeable about the child” (i.e., excluding the child him/herself). It pays particular attention to high risk children, which it sees, for example, as children from poor families.

The specific research hypotheses studied are the links between rates of participation in sports, arts (including “other non-sport activities,” although, notably, reading is excluded), and community programs⁴ with “improved psychosocial adjustment.” Variation in the rates of “improved psychosocial adjustment” are examined by selected sociodemographic variables to determine which of these variables have the strongest correlation with participation. The major findings cited include a statement that involvement with an arts club or a sports team “protects children from having emotional and social problems” (Offord, Lipman, & Duku, 1998, p. 3). Their index for association with “one or more problems” was lowest for the 30% reporting participation with the arts, at 0.69 (the same as the score for being a girl!). In comparison, the index for those involved with unsupervised sport was 0.78, and the index for those involved with organized sport was 0.92. The strongest variables for indicating children with problems were low incomes (1.18), an uncivic neighbourhood (i.e., no parks, etc.) at 1.48, and single parenthood (1.78). The authors refer to fewer emotional and behavioural problems and lower school drop-out rates, especially for children “at risk,” as being correlated with higher participation rates with the arts.

The authors additionally raise concern with the low rates of participation in these activities, and especially in community arts programs, by different groups in society. Participation was found to be strongly linked to gender, to income, and to the availability of facilities. The authors conclude the need for new programs to increase participation and to target selected groups, especially the poor, noting “some evidence that participation in the arts and unsupervised sports may protect children from having problems . . . [although] no causal inferences can be made” (p. 26).

The proof which such studies offer about the strength of a positive contribution by “the arts” is also limited for a number of general reasons in addition to the specific methodological constraints mentioned earlier. They do not consider all of “culture” as delineated above (if they were to include mass media they may have found quite contrary impacts on youth), nor do they consider the wide range of potential communication impacts/roles that cultural activities may play in a person’s life (as outlined earlier in the paper) in relation to self, to family, to friends, and to the progress of a person’s life, as well as the possible indirect

impacts on their own circle of friends and, eventually, their own children and grandchildren.

Such studies cannot truly succeed by assessing participation in arts as a discrete feature functioning independently from such overriding factors as the personality and temperament of an individual and the contextual support from family and friends—both of which may significantly contribute to the types of children participating, not participating, or dropping out. People dropping out/not participating in the arts may be shy, be unco-ordinated, have hearing problems, and so forth. Such factors may exacerbate the “failures” among the non-participant groups who may be condemned by such features to fail at school, both academically and socially. As often stated, sports doesn’t build character, it reveals character: participation in the arts may simply be linked to a type of character which will also succeed at social relations and academics. Thus arts participation may serve more as a litmus test than a solution: it “exposes” better students of the education system, it does not make them.

There is also a philosophical dimension to considering research on participation and assessed “good character.” Is programmed leisure, while enhancing stable (static?) social order, better than unprogrammed leisure which allows an individual to explore and grow in other ways, and perhaps be better off in later life? “Education today faces many challenges. One of them is leisure. If all that was required was increased emphasis on hobbies and activities, the problem would be non-existent,” (Cherry & Woodburn, [1978], adapting Norman Cousins). Are the children who are extremely active in the arts being over protected, over programmed, over parented? Offord, Lipman, & Duku (1998) offer “competent parents” as an unmeasured factor: “Participation in the arts and a decrease [in] problems [may be] a result of other factors in the child’s background, for example, having very competent parents” (p. 26).

Also, what is the difference between exposure to and differing degrees of participation? The studies also do not appraise the uniqueness of a claim for the arts (if this is the intent): participation in after-school language schools, religious programs, and volunteer work may all have similar relationships (and similar underlying causes: parenting, temperament). All in all, the evidence is incomplete and is ambiguous, and its implications are not yet self-evident for application in developing future public policies for culture.

Future research and discussion

To address the question of the impact of cultural activity in human society and individual circumstances, including those of youth, much more comprehensive and intensive studies are needed (as is increasing their role in public policy development). There has not been a concerted research effort in this regard. A promising example is the “Use or Ornament?” project undertaken in the U.K. which called upon a variety of methods, including surveys, interviews, case studies, and organized discussions as well as literature reviews, to try to assess the social impacts of culture (with no special emphasis on youth) (Matarasso, 1997).

There is also a more fundamental question: Can typical social science research procedures “prove” (positive or negative) impacts of culture, particularly on individual lives? Case studies of individuals and families to probe on what roles reading, attending performing arts events, going to museums, and using archives have, have had, and may have in their lives could be the best evidence: What can people recall as the impacts and importance of culture on their parents, themselves, their friends, their children? Through pursuing more extensive and complex research we would be better positioned to identify and understand the roles of various impacts of culture across the widest matrix of human life.

This need to better understand, and thus respond to, the roles of culture is increasingly important from a public policy point of view in terms of social trends. At the present time in Canada, there are fundamental structural social changes taking place, often invisibly, being so “natural” they are not identified as major public policy issues. In the last decade, many people have lost jobs; if they are older, lost jobs forever. Families have two working parents. The number and proximity of close family members is extremely curtailed (grandparents are working; aunts and uncles live in a different province; generations are having fewer children, later in life). “Families” exist with separated and legally if not physically isolated parents (hence missing the inputs from many aunts and uncles, grandparents, and even siblings). And most recently on the economic plane (and an increasing preoccupation in the mass media) is the growing role of the material society, the pre-eminent importance of money over community, and the increasing rupture of Canadian society into the really rich and the so-so: What impact does this have on perceptions of human life in Canada on the individual and social level? What role do arts and culture activities play in this? Is its communications strength being bled?

In terms of popular culture and communications, we are entertained by expensive television shows pursuing candy-coated windmills, tasty political scandals, and the play-dough of unceasing technological innovations whereby, in the Canadian tradition at least, we become preoccupied with process rather than substance. Such features lead to an abstraction and diminishing of close and meaningful communication—cultural communication. The impact of culture on Canadians, and on the formative step that is youth, is a concern for society if not for public policy. The evolving forms of culture and the constancy of the status of “youth” make this an intriguing area for study.

Communication and culture are increasingly mediated rather than im-mediate: in a sense, mindless rather than mindful. In this, cultural activity has a potentially large, and perhaps a challenging new rather than presumed, role to play. The social renovation just described has often been alluded to as a source of emotional and intellectual problems among children. Culture as a basis of individual and social formation should be a positive player in responding to these concerns. Studying this is the research challenge.

Ultimately though the impacts of cultural activities may come down to recognition—by individuals in their personal lives and by society as a whole—

that these are fundamental and durable elements, benefits, and requirements of individuals, of local communities, and of societies if they are to be “good societies.” How do you prove the moon is round; or that one minus one is zero? How do you prove looking at a painting, watching a provocative television show, or “killing” a weekend reading a book, is good for you, for your social relationships, and for society? Despite new sources of natural resources, new technologies, and new forms of distraction, cultural activity has always been exhibited by humans, serving a full range of functions (e.g., from propaganda to revolution). Does it take an archaeologist to “discover” culture is important? Does it take an economist to prove it?

In Canada—where the importance of culture and its relative role has never been acceded to—culture, I think, is treated as an old grandmother, frail but somehow valid, needing support from time to time. Cultural researchers, and the culture sector itself, have failed to realize the legitimacy and vitality of culture in the arena of public policy. I suspect the presumed perception that culture is important is not as prevalent as people who work in the sector would like to believe, nor is changing that perception as easy as some might think.

A better understanding of the legitimate roles and impacts of culture as a significant vehicle of communications across the spectrum of civilization and of individual human life situations, as discussed earlier, would ultimately improve the public image of the sector, public policy and public programs for culture, and, most importantly, culture participation and hence community discussion.

With a better understanding of the real roles and impacts of culture on society, public policies might be more effectively directed. In the meantime, being passed from the hands of the economists and interpreters of economic impact into the hands of social scientists developing indicators of “adjustment” may not be the best route for culture research to take. Research has a major challenge to establish convincing/conclusive evidence of the roles of cultural activities. Taking a much broader, strategic, qualitative, and humanities-based approach to this task would be an important new step.

Notes

1. “Culture” is always a source of definitional concern: hundreds of definitions have been applied. For the purposes of this paper culture is taken to be “arts and culture,” such things as books, music, performing and visual arts, films, museums, and historic sites; but also the presumed learning and the discussion generated by these in individuals and their communities.
2. There is a corresponding stream of commentary on the “reserved” roles culture can play; see, for example, Steiner (1967) who remarks on the popularity of classical music performance in Germany in the 1930s.
3. For an overview of the range of studies which have been made, especially for academic and cognitive benefits, see “Does Experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?” (Catterall, 1998b). Catterall suggests that based on the weight of evidence they do.
4. The activities were clarified as sports involving coaching or instruction, unorganized physical activity, lessons or instruction in music, dance art or *other non-sports activities*, and clubs or community programs (emphasis added).

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