

Arts Experiences in Youth and Associated Adult Outcomes

By

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Abstract

This study examined the current trajectory of arts participation and engagement through the lens of socioeconomic status. The study was structured to explore and describe any potential correlation between education, familial support, and introduction to the arts in youth, with current adult experience and patronage. The multiple choice survey posed questions that underscore the possible relationship between youth experience and adult outcomes in terms of participation and engagement with the arts. The survey found that the level of activity during adolescence had a closer relationship to adult participation in the arts than did overall exposure. Even though exposure is seen as a more consumptive aspect of arts participation, it was less of a predictor of adult experience than early engagement on an active level. The study also found that synthesis of two or more factors including exposure, engagement, education, familial support, and acculturation may be required to effect change in socioeconomic status in adulthood.

Introduction

Attendance to the arts overall has diminished over the last few decades (NEA 2015, Americans for the Arts 2014) and this trend is worrisome. For example the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and Americans for the Arts both report that almost 10% of the American population is currently experiencing classical music (NEA 2015, Americans for the Arts 2014), though that is a decline from 13% a few decades earlier. In fact, there has been a consistent long-term decline, and constant cultivation and expansion of patronage is required to sustain the arts (Gordon 2017). The lack of robust growth is disturbing, but there is a greater concern that at the heart of the problem is an intricate web of cultural, economic, and legislative factors (Chen 2017). Unfortunately, there is a lack of necessary support for the arts community to research

these circumstances, and outcomes are impossible to identify and quantify if problems are not clearly defined and researched (Blume-Kohout, Leonard and Novak-Leonard. 2015). This combination of issues and its current trajectory portends a fateful outcome for the arts.

The Problems

Ticket sales for the commercial arts project a misleading concept regarding arts participation. Broadway ticket sales have increased year after year in the current century. The Broadway League (2017) statistics reflect increasing revenue which results from regularly inflated ticket prices. This increase in sales however is misleading regarding the status of overall arts participation in America. Broadway is out of reach for many (in terms of financial ability) and the increasing numbers do not represent attendance at other arts venues.

Production needs and the concept of economic efficiency impact the arts tremendously. An American company fifty years ago required 18 times more workforce to accomplish what one person can do today, but the arts have not been afforded this luxury. Economic efficiency in the arts is burdened because arts organizations in the twenty-first century require roughly the same amount of workforce as they did 50 years ago. As a result we see examples like ticket prices for *Hello, Dolly!* during 2017 (when adjusted for inflation) that are roughly 18 times what they were for *Hello, Dolly!* in 1967. This economic burden heavily impacts the pricing of arts events in the twenty-first century and is one of the factors affecting attendance issues throughout the arts.

The shrinking middle class creates additional problems for the arts. The middle class will always be the middle 50% of the population, with 25% above and 25% below those income ranges deemed the mean. As more people move into the ranks of the über-wealthy, or more people move into the ranks of the poor, the salary range for what we define as middle class shifts. The drastic explosion over recent decades in the upper ranks has pushed middle class incomes

lower, which translates into less discretionary income. Consider the year *Beauty and the Beast* opened on Broadway (1994). It was a stretch to take a family of four to see the musical as costs ran in the neighborhood of \$1000 for the evening with dinner, parking, souvenirs, and the show tickets. That one event would consume more than a week's worth of net income for the average American household in 1994. A similar outing to a hit musical in 2017 can cost more than a trip to Europe. Unfortunately, consistently rising costs in the arts require consistently increasing revenue streams, including higher ticket prices. This economic fact means that youth miss out on the arts, and this lack of exposure may be critical for future participation.

The crux of the matter revolves around discretionary income, which is divvied up between other competing interests such as cable, Internet, cell phones, Netflix, and dining out. These competitors to the arts result in less and less financial opportunity to expose our children to the arts, and the arts disappear into the upper economic tiers of society. As a consequence of this socioeconomic deprivation, fewer adult authority figures introduce or encourage children in the arts and children grow up to be adult authority figures with little knowledge of the arts. As a result, familial exposure and support for scholastic induction to the arts decreases or ceases all together.

Participation in the arts has declined in the twenty-first century due, at least in part, to declining arts education in schools (Kracman 1996). Though American arts organizations experienced occasional increased attendance and arts creation over the last few decades, these bumps on the graphs tend to be temporary, and are typically associated with increased government funding either directly to arts organizations or in support of new promotional approaches (Stallings, Stephanie, & Bronwyn 2016). Revenues for arts organizations, however, have barely kept pace with rising expenses, and attendance has declined since the 1990s (NEA

2015). The National Endowment for the Arts reported substantial aggregate attendance drops from 1982 to 2012, as did the Arts Index Report (Americans for the Arts 2014). Declining attendance is likely multi-factorial, but the impact of diminishing childhood arts education is a potential factor.

Connections

Johnson, Riis, and Noble (2016) addressed the cyclical advantage of a higher socioeconomic status in terms of education, exposure to cultural expression, an expanded language base, and brain development in their *State of the art review: poverty and the developing brain*. Developmental psychologists report an increase in certain attributes such as attention, motivation, emotional regulation, engagement, and improved understanding and acceptance of others in relation to experience and engagement with the arts in childhood (Goldstein, Lerner, Winner 2017). These attribute increases from arts exposure have been associated with gains in math, science, and language arts with improved student levels of comprehension, critical thinking, and collaborative efforts (Americans for the Arts, 2012 & 2013). A demonstrable connection is necessary for survival of the arts, but it is uncertain if one exists. It is important to analyze when the arts are necessary in youth and if arts connections in youth are predictive of adult experiences in order to create improved outcomes for the arts.

A number of studies suggest a linkage between childhood arts participation and adult arts participation. Rabkin and Hedberg (2011) reported that, “adults who took childhood classes in at least four art subjects were three times more likely to attend the arts.” The Arts Council England reported that encouragement to attend and participate in the arts during childhood was associated with significantly higher adult arts participation (Oskala, Keaney, Chan & Bunting 2009). Other studies have reported a similar impact: Childhood exposure appears to impact adult arts

participation (Bergonzi & Smith 1996; Orend 1988; Orend & Keegan 1996; Scottish Government 2009). Relationships amongst variables in longitudinal studies on human behavior have influences too great to measure accurately. For example, Nagel and Ganzeboom (2002) reported that art schooling was important for adult participation in the arts, but family influences appeared stronger, suggesting an interplay of mediating factors that could be vast in quantity and unknown. Quantity of arts education is also a component in increasing arts participation. A research division report backed by the National Endowment of the Arts (Bergonzi & Smith 1996) reported that, “the more one received of both school and community-based arts education, the more one participated in the arts as an adult, either through consumption or creation.” The report stated that arts education is the strongest predictor of arts attendance and arts creation. Although the aforementioned literature suggests that childhood arts experiences are influential on adult arts participation, the data collected predates the recent declines in both arts education and arts participation amongst American adults.

Academic education and socioeconomic status also appear to influence attendance. Bergonzi & Smith (1996) found that socioeconomic status was linked to arts participation as an adult. Stern (2011) found that educational achievement accounted for arts attendance much more than age or generation. A Princeton University review, using data from the Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study, reported that the likelihood of attending a classical music concert is related to education level (Princeton 2005). McCarthy et al (2001) found that arts attendance increased with education level, and education level correlated with arts education in childhood. The evidence suggests that arts education in childhood impacts adult participation in a myriad of ways, and with differing impact. There are mediating connections throughout literature that associate childhood arts experiences with adult arts participation, socioeconomic

status, and lifelong success. The total impact of early arts education is not fully understood due to gaps in the literature and paucity of recent studies.

Gaps in the Literature

Gaps in the literature exist for a number of issues. First, there appears to be no clear set of factors that define the various aspects of arts experience. Aggregating all arts experiences defines a social construct for the importance of the arts without clearly explaining the potential differences in the respective values of arts education, arts exposure, arts engagement, and perhaps other more subtle means of arts experiences. In fact, those terms may not be the appropriate scale for investigation. They consider different methods of delivery, but do not account for quality or the level of intervention associated with the art. Nevertheless, understanding the nuances and interplay between the types of arts experiences is an important step in attempting to figure out what is going on, because there may be no single influence that has the greatest bearing on arts experiences as an adult.

Secondly, while some of the literature considers parental-figure influence on childhood arts experiences, and other studies have examined formal academic influence, there appears to be no framework for considering the relative weights of each on adult participation in the arts. Third, there are no studies that explore both quality and quantity together in any weighted manner. Even in the present study, we have no way of interpreting whether a childhood experience was of high or low quality. For example, we could equate the lack of specificity to a study on healthy eating which might inform us that eating healthier leads to greater lifespan. One cannot know which specific habits are related to longer life, nor to what degree each habit plays on that longevity without an understanding of the specific factors involved in healthier dietary habits, including the quantity and quality of each contributing factor.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was threefold. First, it was used as a means for exploring the potential distinctions between three factors of arts experiences: arts education, arts exposure, and arts engagement. We hypothesized that each of these three factors were distinct and when applied in youth, affect the amount of adult arts participation differently. Second, the study was used to explore if there was a self-reported level of arts education, exposure, or engagement in childhood (through completion of high school) that aligned with socioeconomic brackets as an adult. We hypothesized that socioeconomic level mediated the amount of exposure, education, and/or engagement required in youth to lead toward consistent arts participation as an adult. Finally, the study was used to explore whether self-reported changes in socioeconomic brackets from youth to adult aligned with youth arts education, exposure, or engagement. We hypothesized that some level of greater exposure, education, or engagement as a youth would align with improved socioeconomic status. This study was not a correlation study, but exploratory and descriptive regarding which relationships appear most likely relevant for a detailed future study that can control for a number of factors that may mediate said relationships.

Methods Introduction

A qualitative approach would be a welcomed avenue for a descriptive exploration (Yin 2003). However, we embraced mixed methods, and incorporated a factor analysis in addition to our descriptive observations of trends we saw in the collected data. The study used a multiple choice survey instrument, developed and tested for relevant questions designed to establish a statistical foundation representing experience and exposure to the arts in youth. The format included demographic and socioeconomic variables used to cross-reference potential associations between economic variables, parental influence, educational opportunity, and arts

involvement. The survey consisted of eleven demographic questions and eighteen content questions relating to the attributes of arts engagement, arts education, and arts exposure as well as parental and school influence through their provision of access, introduction, and opportunity for arts involvement. The content explored notions of socioeconomic status over specified time periods during the respondents' lives.

Definitions

There are no standard definitions for arts education, exposure, and engagement in the reported literature. For purposes of the present exploration, we defined these constructs based upon a review of existing literature, as well as generally recognized definitions of the terms, and a number of operating definitions available through myriad websites for associations and governmental agencies. These definitions were then provided to respondents in order to delineate different activities and/or experiences within the arts.

Arts education was introduced as a reference to learning, instruction, and programming based upon visual, auditory, and tangible arts. It included performing arts (e.g. dance, music, theater), and visual arts (e.g. drawing, painting, sculpture, and design works). Arts education was defined as a process where the respondents were taught or trained in at least one art form as part of a pre-determined curriculum. For example, an entire class being required to participate in learning how to play the harpsichord, or to read out loud the roles in "Romeo and Juliet," would be considered examples of arts education. The entire class had to participate in the art form as part of structured classroom activities to meet the definition of arts education, meaning a subset of the class, or an extracurricular group would be classified in one of the other two definitions discussed in the following paragraphs.

Arts engagement was defined as participation in a process meant to connect the participant with the art, and that the participant had taken advantage of an opportunity to participate in the creation of an art form as a voluntary activity. Examples might include being in a school play or band (these being subsets of a full class or extracurricular groups) or enrollment by a parent in some type of arts lessons such as an instrument, painting, or ballet. In these instances, someone facilitated the engagement as part of the definition. Simply making a decision to paint a picture without facilitation by an adult does not meet the definition for arts engagement.

Arts exposure was characterized as an opportunity provided to the respondent to experience one or more of the arts without being directly engaged in its creation. Arts exposure was defined as being a member of an arts audience. Examples include being taken to a play either as part of a class or by a parental figure, being taken to an art museum, or having someone play a symphony.

Methodology

The survey was built in Qualtrics, a web-based survey creation, collection, and analysis software tool. The survey was first tested on a small sample to allow for adjustments in wording and to clarify intent. For the test survey, contacts known to the researchers were used. Use of relevant contacts could pose potential conflict (e.g. poor selection of contacts for type of research, potential bias in selection of contacts); however, it is considered a valid approach in this type of research (Yin 2003). Additionally, the initial test sample was not included in the survey dataset.

The final instrument was disseminated via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowd sourcing employer and labor force database designed for individuals and employers to coordinate the use of human intelligence to perform tasks. MTurk has been widely accepted for use in

artistic and education research (Koblin 2008; McMaster 2012). Crump et al. (2013) replicated results of a 1961 study using the platform, and did so in less time and with minimal financial incentive to participants. Paolacci et al (2010) suggest that experimental design and data collection through MTurk is a viable alternative to more antiquated survey collection methodology. A number of studies suggest that MTurk may provide more reliable results than traditional data collection methodology (see Casler et al. 2013; Burhmester et al. 2011), and respondent performance tends to be superior (Hauser & Schwarz 2015). Respondents are typically compensated <40 cents for participation in the survey and average a completion time of approximately three minutes for most studies.

For the present study, demographic descriptors included age, gender, state of residence, occupation, highest education level attained, personal income, and household income. Respondents were asked to describe their family socioeconomic status during the periods of ages 0-4, kindergarten through eighth grade, and ninth grade through high school (or the equivalent age level if not attending school). Socioeconomic levels were assessed using definitions recognized by the Poverty Institute as defined by Donna Beegle in 2006. As a means of triangulating demographic data, respondents were asked to consider socioeconomic descriptors for themselves during their formative, school years, or the age equivalent. Middle class was defined as an individual annual income between \$25,000 and \$100,000 (Luhby 2016).

Content questions asked respondents to recall frequency of arts engagement, exposure, and education at each of the three levels of kindergarten through eighth grade, ninth grade through high school (or the equivalent age level if not attending school), and currently as an adult. Respondents were also asked to recall whether a parental figure, or formal school representative encouraged said arts exposure, engagement, or education in their youth.

The data was analyzed using the Qualtrics data analysis package with which two independent researchers performed examinations of the data searching for themes, motifs, or anomalies that might suggest alignment between attributes of arts experiences, the providers of those experiences, and socioeconomic factors. Simple correlations were performed between variables. Logistic regression analyses were used to tease out further correlations and remove interrelated associations. Factor analysis was conducted to further triangulate results.

Results

Three hundred and forty-six respondents were compensated twenty cents for participation in surveys that lasted approximately seven minutes. Geographic distribution was roughly equal to the country's population distribution. The majority of respondents reported residing in suburban areas (54%). Occupations were diverse, with teaching (7%), arts (6%), and professionals (2%) at the top of the list; however, 9% of respondents described themselves as unemployed. Ninety percent of participants had some college level education. The majority (64%) reported annual income greater than \$40,000, and 57% reported household income greater than \$60,000.

Twenty-five percent of respondents self-identified as middle class from birth to high school, while 15% self-identified as working class or lower middle class. Approximately 10% classified themselves as working poor or illusory middle class during that period. Sixty four percent fell within the middle class income definition. All three time spans had similar reports for the percentage of respondents declaring themselves as middle class per Beegle's classification (Beegle 2006). Twenty-five percent reported being raised in middle class homes from ages 0-4 years. Twenty-six percent reported being raised middle class from kindergarten through eighth

grade, and 27% reported being raised middle class from the ninth grade to the end of high school.

Socioeconomic level was a significant predictor of arts engagement within families ($p < .001$). A detailed review of survey responses found that early adolescents raised in higher socioeconomic environments were more likely to engage, experience, and be exposed to art within their familial environment. Socioeconomic level was also a significant predictor of arts engagement in school ($p < .001$). Adolescents raised in higher socioeconomic environments were more likely to engage, experience, and be exposed to art within their school environment. Logistic regression demonstrated that socioeconomic level, educational level, annual income, and household income did not predict the individuals' current engagement in art creation. Individuals' engagement in art during the K-12 period in school and the home environment were correlated with later engagement and experience in the arts ($p < .001$). Students who engaged, experienced, and were exposed to art in their home environment were more likely to experience and engage in art at school, and vice versa ($p < .001$).

To further triangulate results, a factor analysis was conducted with an expectation that three distinct factors would emerge. However, only a single item loaded into factor three, and that item demonstrated greater commonalities with factor 1. Further, the eigenvalue of expected factor 3 (.561) suggests that it does not behave as a factor. As a result, we were left with two factors: arts exposure (including exposure through educational experiences) and arts engagement.

Discussion

The data did not demonstrate a relationship between any one type of arts experience (exposure, education, or engagement) and adult arts experience. The results support the notion that socioeconomic factors correlate with arts participation as a youth, but do not necessarily

influence adult arts participation. The factor analysis demonstrated that the study's focus on three distinct factors may be too detailed, as there appears to be only two distinct factors related to participation in the arts; namely arts engagement and arts exposure (including exposure through an educational process). This finding suggests that the level of activity may have a closer relationship to adult arts participation. Both arts education and arts exposure, by our definition, require less active participation but are more consumptive, while engagement requires activity.

When examining any factor of arts experience through the formative years (K-12 or its equivalent), there appears to be no clear relationship regarding minimum education, engagement, or exposure at any socioeconomic level. Self-reported socioeconomic levels are lower than those determined by generally accepted socioeconomic levels, suggesting either that the data may not be representative or there exists a tendency to self-report inaccurately. There was no apparent alignment between the quantity and duration of arts education, arts exposure, or arts engagement as a youth, and socioeconomic brackets as an adult. The change in socioeconomic brackets from adolescence to adulthood did not correlate with any of the individually considered factors of arts education, exposure, or engagement as a youth.

The lack of apparent correlation between any individual attribute of arts experience, the provider of that experience, and socioeconomic factors may mean that an interplay between arts exposure, arts engagement, and arts education provided by the school system or parental figure in some combination may correlate with adult arts attendance. The factor analysis loaded only two distinct factors, which supports this assumption. The present study made no distinction between the quality and quantity of arts experience and this too may have relevance. For example, socioeconomic improvement as a result of the arts in youth may require acculturation from both the school and the parental figure in some determined quantity sufficient to contribute

to a change in behavior. It is also possible that any one attribute, such as exposure to the arts without associated engagement, may be insufficient in supporting a change in status.

One item of note is the representation that socioeconomic factors during childhood do impact arts experiences. This notion is well supported in the literature (Silber and Triplett 2015). Our analysis, however, did not find this interplay between adult socioeconomic factors and adult experiences in the arts.

Limitations

This is a non-generalizable study because the case sample may have been too small to detect alignment between arts exposure, arts education, arts engagement, and income brackets. A larger sample would allow for more detailed cross-tabulation at deeper levels. Participants were asked to recall experiences dating back to birth. Recall, using past memories during childhood (particularly early childhood), are likely to be less accurate (which may have skewed the data). It is important to note that engagement is active, while exposure is considered internal and reactive, and this could also influence memory. Participants were given definitions for what constitutes arts engagement, exposure, and education, but their interpretation of these definitions is personal and may be prone to bias. Finally, socioeconomic descriptors from childhood may be suspect since childhood memories of wealth or poverty can be inaccurate.

Further Study

Future study could involve qualitative and quantitative research with longitudinal follow-up for a more accurate categorization of arts involvement and socioeconomic status during youth. A larger sample size is necessary for deeper examination of cross-tabulations between each individual attribute of arts education, exposure, and engagement in association with the provider of the experience, and examined against socioeconomic status. It would also provide more

generalizability for the study. Finally, a qualitative examination of modeling behavior in terms of familial and essential authority figures and arts exposure during childhood, as well as social skills training and peer modeling, would be useful in determining the long-term effect of these elements in arts experience and appreciation. The future of the arts, both in the community and in the schools, may depend on finding associations between exposure, engagement, and attendance to the arts.

Of particular interest for further study, is the notion that reported socioeconomic status and actual status may differ, suggesting that the changing status of individuals (the shrinking middle class) has a deteriorating effect on arts experiences as an adult. Further, there may be an implication that this change has some effect on arts experience as a youth that contributes in some mediating way to adult experience with the arts. In effect, the process may be cyclical to the detriment of arts experiences.

In the case of the present study, which was defined to respondents as one regarding arts experiences, it was found that parental-figure influence was described as low which may be somehow associated with said underreported socioeconomic status. It was beyond the scope of this study to further explore this notion, however, it suggests that future study in this area would be warranted.

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