17

ART, CULTURE, AND WELLBEING

Reaping the rewards of creativity

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Introduction

Art, culture, and creativity (ACC) are sometimes linked to psychopathology, with many famous creatives being associated with mental illness and suicide (Bille et al., 2013). However, much of the literature associating creativity and mental illness relies on anecdotal evidence or suffers other methodological shortcomings (Bille et al., 2013; Ginis et al., 2022). Moreover, there are numerous examples of successful creative individuals, including artists, performers, writers, and poets, reaping the rewards of creativity, and living happy and healthy lives (Gilbert, 2016; Ginis et al., 2022). Using quantitative and qualitative longitudinal data from the daily diaries of 222 employees in seven companies, Amabile et al. (2005) find that famous troubled artists are greatly outnumbered by less well-known individuals whose creativity is catalysed by positive affect. Likewise, in his evidence-based book, Gillam (2018) notes that mood disorders and psychotic illnesses are generally detrimental to creativity.

Though the impact of ACC on wellbeing has not been firmly established and should be interpreted with caution (Silvia & Kaufman, 2010), a growing number of researchers have found that engaging in ACC itself enhances wellbeing. This is the literature that the rest of the chapter examines.

The following definitions are adopted: *art* refers to traditional forms including the performing arts (theatre, opera, dance), visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture, photography), music and literature, as well as the continuously evolving online, digital, and electronic arts. They encompass artistic activities that are carried out and/or displayed in the public domain, and those that take place within people's homes and communities as a product of everyday human creativity. *Culture* refers to a social context in which the arts are embedded and enacted. This includes theatres, concert

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halls, museums, and galleries. *Creativity* refers to the generation of ideas that are new and valuable (Amabile et al., 1996), considered crucial for becoming a successful artist (Frey, 2019). It is a skill that everyone possesses, albeit to varying degrees, ranging from the 'little-c' (everyday creativity) to the 'Big-C' (eminent creativity) (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). *Mental illness* encompasses a range of conditions that are characterised by changes in thinking, affect, and/or behaviour, which generally cause distress and hinder daily functioning (Waldock, 2015). *Wellbeing* is taken to refer to subjective psychological wellbeing, that is how satisfied one *feels (affect)* and how one evaluates life. Due to space limitations, physiological (or physical) wellbeing is not discussed in this chapter.

ACC may be categorised into active engagement (participation, production, etc.) and passive engagement (attendance, viewing, etc.) (Wang et al., 2020). A further distinction could be between those who perform/produce art for public consumption and those who do so in private or as a hobby. The former are generally regarded as *artists* (although this is perhaps the most debatable definition in this chapter), as are those who have a principal occupation in the arts (Steiner & Schneider, 2013), those who are self-proclaimed, and those for whom artistic creation is central to their life (Briguglio et al., 2020). A further type of engagement entails supporting the arts in some way, such as by volunteering or funding cultural events, but less is known about how this impacts wellbeing. This latter type of engagement is therefore not discussed in this chapter.

Literature on art, culture, and wellbeing

ACC encompass a wide range of activities that are enjoyable, uplifting, and enriching. They enable individuals to feel good (McDonnell, 2014) and are considered to be among the most rewarding activities that one can engage in (Layard & De Neve, 2023). As McDonnell (2014) posits, even simple creative activities, such as writing, drawing, singing, or dancing, often generate positive affect, fostering a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction.

Empirical studies have indicated that both active and passive ACC engagements are associated with higher wellbeing and lower distress, although the effects of active engagement tend to be stronger. Briguglio et al. (2020) analysed cross-sectional data derived from 1,125 interviews conducted for the Malta Cultural Participation Survey (NSO, 2017), and found that while both audiences and participants reported higher levels of life satisfaction than the culturally unengaged, the actively engaged enjoyed the greatest wellbeing of all groups, even after controlling for other determinants of wellbeing. Wang et al.'s (2020) analysis of longitudinal survey data from 23,660 participants of the UK Understanding Society Study similarly found that regular participation in the arts and attending cultural events was associated with reduced mental distress and increased life satisfaction, and that active involvement was linked to improved mental health functioning. The reasons for these effects are varied and interrelated.

For example, creative arts programmes may enable at-risk individuals to satisfy basic needs. Ferrell et al. (2023) conducted a survey among 42 marginalised young people in a youth theatre programme in England, followed by in-depth qualitative interviews with a subset of three survey participants, their parents, and teachers, and found that theatre participation was associated with wellbeing through the satisfaction of basic needs, including autonomy, empowerment, relatedness, and competence. McDonnell (2014) carried out a 14-month ethnographic study in a mental health day centre in Ireland and found that the daily creative activities held at the centre provided service users with somewhere to go and something to do, along with consistent and dependable social assistance.

Other ways in which ACC enhance wellbeing is via self-expression, self-disclosure, and distraction. In their qualitative study with ten eminent Australian female visual artists, Ginis et al. (2022) found that producing art is a way of expressing thoughts and feelings, or revealing hidden traumas, allowing individuals to process suffering and come to terms with it. Such catharsis provides emotional release and respite, which results in reduced stress and an enhanced sense of wellbeing. Some of the artists interviewed even found comfort in transforming pain into works of art. Creative activities involve more than simple recall and expression; they also involve actively engaging with thoughts and experiences, which in turn facilitates their evolution and reinterpretation (Forgeard et al., 2014). Nainis et al. (2006) conducted a quasi-experimental design among 50 adult cancer patients in northwestern United States to examine the effect of a one-hour art therapy session on their symptoms and found that ACC serve to distract their mind from troubles and pain, thereby enhancing wellbeing by reducing stress and suffering.

ACC may further contribute to wellbeing by providing opportunities for learning and skill development, and by enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy. For example, marginalised young people interviewed by Ferrell et al. (2023) in their UK-based study reported that when they perform on stage, in front of an audience who can appreciate the show and their effort, they experience feelings of self-worth, accomplishment, and empowerment. Boutry's (2017) qualitative study found that a community college creativity programme helped develop a positive self-image among traditionally underserved and challenged students which in turn enabled them to visualise and explore future possibilities and aspirations. According to Hughes and Wilson (2017), this is in itself a basic act of creativity.

ACC are also associated with wellbeing via the state of flow. This refers to a complete immersion or absorption in an activity, or 'being in the zone', which often leads to feelings of happiness and fulfilment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow and its wellbeing outcomes may be experienced in many activities that are absorbing and that improve with effort and time, such as work, science, sports, and the arts. However, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) considered creativity to be at the heart of the flow and wellbeing experience, because discovering and creating new things generates happy feelings. This notion has been supported by various authors including Ginis et al. (2022) in their study of eminent female artists in Australia, who found

that creative pursuits such as painting, sculpture, and photography foster a sense of absorption and deep engagement with the task (i.e. flow), which in turn promote wellbeing and autonomy.

There appears to be diversity in the degree of impact of ACC. Researchers have analysed panel data to examine the impact of socio-demographic variables on the relationship between ACC and wellbeing, with findings strongly indicating that disadvantaged groups such as low-income families and single-person households in Korea (Lee & Heo, 2021), those living in deprived areas in the UK (Mak et al., 2021), and persons with disability in Germany (Pagán, 2015) have the potential to derive greater benefits from ACC than others. Yet high-income households and multi-person families tend to engage in ACC more frequently and more broadly. This is likely due to the high entrance fees of mainstream ACC and the lower opportunity cost of alternative activities (Frey, 2019), and implies that ACC are less accessible to minorities and disadvantaged groups. The APPGAHW (2017) in fact identifies a lack of diversity in the creative industries in the UK. Employment in the creative industries also lacks diversity (APPG, 2017).

Finally, despite the 'anguished artist' stereotype, empirical research reviewed by Frey (2019) indicates that artists report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than non-artists of similar demographics. This is supported by Briguglio et al.'s (2020) analysis of the Malta Cultural Participation Survey (NSO, 2017) data, who found wellbeing to be higher among actively employed artists. This, of course, does not imply that wellbeing is high among all artists, as the nature of professional creative work could be very demanding and stressful (Frey, 2019; Ginis et al., 2022). Yet such work can be highly satisfying as it entails creative processes that are characterised by novelty and variety, and which generally takes the form of autonomous and self-determined self-employment (Frey, 2019; Steiner & Schneider, 2013). In accordance with this, Bille et al.'s (2013) study of artists in 49 countries found that they appreciate the possibility to take initiative in their work and the inherent interest of their job and that they exhibit significantly higher job satisfaction than nonartists.

Evidence of interventions

Several studies have provided evidence on the effectiveness of ACC interventions on wellbeing of individuals of all ages, from schoolchildren to senior citizens. Some studies contain real-world ACC interventions whose impact is assessed, while others consist of trials or experiments in which research participants engage in ACC activities and their outcomes are compared to those of a control group.

The UK's *Creative Partnerships* (CP) programme (2002–2011), which involved over 5,000 schools, 90,000 teachers, and over one million young people who worked with approximately 6,500 arts organisations, evaluated CP with respect to a variety of dimensions including wellbeing. According to Thomson et al.'s (2018) review of the CP research archive, one of the reported outcomes of CP was that

schools were happier, livelier, and generally better places with higher teaching morale and freedom to innovate.

Cohen (2006) found that an intervention group, comprising elderly individuals who were engaged in intensive participatory art programmes in Washington, United States, fared significantly better than the unengaged control group after one and two years. Notably, the intervention group reported improved health, fewer medical visits, and decreased medication usage, more positive responses in mental health measures, and generally higher levels of activity.

Bell and Robbins (2007) conducted a randomised, controlled trial with 50 adults in Pennsylvania, United States, to compare the effects of producing versus viewing art on reductions in stress and elevations in mood. Their participants were randomly divided into two groups – one group was given drawing/painting materials and asked to produce (draw/paint) a picture of their choice, while the other group were given prints of famous paintings and asked to view and sort them as they deemed fit. The findings revealed significantly larger drops in negative mood and anxiety among participants engaged in art production, compared to those in the art-viewing control group.

Sandmire et al. (2012) investigated the impact of ACC on the mental wellbeing of 57 undergraduate students in the northeastern United States, who were randomly assigned to either an art-making test group or a no-activity control group one week before their final exams. Artistic tasks included painting, colouring mandalas, making collages, still life drawing, and clay modelling. Findings revealed that the control group experienced a significant decrease in anxiety after their artistic activities, while no change was observed in the control group. These results indicate that a brief session of art making can alleviate anxiety levels.

Boutry (2017) implemented a creativity programme at a community college for underserved, challenged students in California, United States, and evaluated it by means of self-assessment reports from programme participants. She reports overwhelmingly positive feedback, with students revealing wellbeing benefits such as improved self-image, self-esteem, and pride in their accomplishments. Boutry concludes that creativity equips students with enhanced capabilities to navigate life challenges, which encourage students to tap into their creative capacities.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are many examples of inclusive ACC interventions whose impacts have not been documented. Examples from Malta are the specialised movement classes for individuals living with Parkinson's and their caregivers (Step up for Parkinson's, n.d.), dance classes for persons living with dementia and their carers (Malta Dementia Society, 2024), and arts training and performances for adults with intellectual disabilities (Opening Doors Association, n.d.).

Discussion and actionable points

Before concluding with a few points for action, it is worth noting that intervention studies are sometimes criticised as the mere act of observing participants may alter outcomes including affect and wellbeing (Muldoon & Zoller, 2020). Moreover,

as discussed at the outset, a reverse causality may also exist, that is happy people are more likely to become artists and to visit art activities and cultural events, because they are more curious and open to experiences. This may be the case, but such a reverse effect does not appear to be dominant (Frey, 2019). It is also worth acknowledging that art and culture could have negative effects on bystanders such as residents who suffer negative consequences. For example, cultural events that entail public gatherings, such as outdoor concerts and music festivals, are often criticised for leaving various undesirable consequences including noise, litter, and traffic congestion (Frey, 2019).

On the basis of the literature reviewed in this chapter, the following are recommended actions for the enhancement of wellbeing via ACC:

- Active engagement can generate higher effects than passive engagement, suggesting room for intervention. Opportunities should be provided for learning, participation, and performance. Existing social venues and communities, such as educational institutions, religious establishments, and family centres, could be leveraged for greater cost-effectiveness. Investment is needed to educate people about the positive effects of ACC and to promote cultural events, while mitigating their possible negative impacts on the broader community.
- While everyone benefits from ACC, this is more beneficial yet less accessible to minorities and disadvantaged groups. An explanation for this is the possibility that minorities have their own art forms that were not measured or considered in research, such as church music and singing. However, it is also likely that they do not have the money, time, and energy to engage in costly mainstream ACC. Interventions may therefore be needed to promote active ACC engagement generally, as well as to level the playing field among different strata of society, for instance through subsidies.
- Despite the potential benefits of ACC occupations, employment in creative industries lacks diversity. To address this, policy-makers could draw inspiration from the OECD's (2015–2023) inclusive entrepreneurship book series and initiatives, which aim at increasing self-employment opportunities for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.
- More scientific research on the effects of ACC on wellbeing is needed to better understand the mechanisms underlying this relationship. Formal evaluations of arts-based interventions are also required to inform future policy-making. Rigorous research and evaluation require funding, which could come from government programmes and other sources, such as philanthropists and social innovators.

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