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BRITISH
ACADEMY

for the humanities and social sciences

Essay collection

“If you could do one thing...”

10 local actions
to promote
social integration

[Exerpt: Chapter 7 - Van de Vyver
and Abrams - Community
Connectedness Through the Arts]





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The British Academy social integration project “If you could do one thing...” set out to examine successful integration projects drawing lessons from clear evidence about methods that can improve integration and result in long term cohesion in our society.

This collection of essays brings academic viewpoints and research on social integration together with examples of practical interventions and activities that have been shown to make significant positive impact. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the British Academy but are commended as a contribution to public debate.

This collection of ideas is accompanied by a set of case studies on the integration experiences of recently arrived migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, with a focus on young people.

“If you could do one thing...” 10 local actions to promote social integration

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Community Connectedness Through the Arts

7



1 Introduction

This essay illustrates the potential of an arts-based community-led intervention for promoting community connectedness and engagement. We first provide a brief overview of the topic area and then describe the specific arts-based intervention led by People United. We describe findings from a comprehensive mixed-methods evaluation to demonstrate the effectiveness of this programme for promoting community connectedness and engagement. Finally, we outline the implications of these findings for practitioners and policy-makers.

2 Research Background

Humans are social beings and therefore we rely heavily on our connections with others in order to understand and feel confident in our social world.¹ In particular, the social groups we belong to and identify with are essential for providing social knowledge and support. Social group memberships protect against depression and boost self-esteem.² Conversely, when people feel that they do not belong, or when they feel ostracised, they become defensive, hostile, and suffer from low self-esteem.³ There are many social groups to which we may belong and identify with (e.g., a psychologist, a woman, a team member) and identification with one's community is particularly important for fostering and maintaining good relations amongst community members. In this chapter we employ the term community to refer to a group of individuals who share a physical space (e.g., neighbourhood, town, school, or workplace).⁴ Community connectedness is a broad term and encompasses the extent to which people feel like they belong, the extent to which they feel they matter to their community, the extent to which they feel their needs are met by their community, and the extent to which they believe they share history, common place, and experience with their community.⁵

“When Londoners face adversity we pull together. We stand up for our values and our way of life. We stand together.”

Sadiq Khan, London Mayor.

We consider community engagement or good relations as involving: “non-obligatory willingness to take social and practical responsibility for others. It may also involve the implicit presumption that there is a set of people who have the same willingness toward oneself. It is likely to be founded on a sense of common interest, common purpose and common identity. [It] depends on recognition that oneself and the other person are part of the same entity. [It] is part of what people do concretely to establish and maintain that entity”.⁶ Research shows that community connectedness and engagement are associated with one another as well as with increases in social empowerment and social capital.⁷ But how is this positive connectedness established or sustained? In this essay we show that the arts have a distinct and powerful ability to promote community connectedness and engagement.





Artistic
practices occur
cross-culturally
as well as
historically

The Arts’ covers a broad and inclusive range of activities. The word “art” refers to “The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” (Oxford English Dictionary). The key ingredients of artistic practice are creativity and self-expression, which may occur through doing and making as well as witnessing.⁸ Recently it has been contended that artistic expression is part of an evolutionary mechanism for creating and maintaining social ties or feelings of connectedness within humans.⁹ Artistic practices occur cross-culturally as well as historically. Any person in any part of the world can engage in the arts in one way or another and can hence establish shared meaning through the experience or creation of arts. Research shows that artistic engagement encourages greater social connectedness¹⁰, perspective taking and empathy¹¹, and helping behaviours¹².

In their recent report¹³, People United draw on 10 years of research and learning to outline the ingredients that make the arts so powerful and unique. For example, one ingredient is that participatory arts usually involve “saying yes”. People are used to hearing ‘no’ in their daily lives, but

arts projects give people permission to try something new. Another ingredient is “sharing stories”. The arts have always told stories. Stories help people understand experiences very different from their own. A third ingredient is “building connections”. The arts enable people to create work “side by side” with others. Such a joint and creative endeavour can build connections and a sense of shared fate (“we’re all in this together”). For further detail on these ingredients see Andrews et al. (2017).¹⁴

Based on this learning and evidence we reasoned that arts-based community projects should be particularly effective for promoting community connectedness and engagement. Below we outline a recent arts-based community project which People United developed and managed in Newington. Newington was built predominantly during the 1950s and is the newest and largest estate in Ramsgate, in the south-eastern corner of the UK. Newington has increasingly acquired a reputation as being highly deprived, isolated and fragmented, and the majority of those employed being in low skilled occupations.

3 Intervention

People United specialise in developing and delivering place-based arts projects aimed at promoting community connectedness, community engagement, trust, and kindness.

‘Best of Us’ is People United’s most recent project, and was conducted in Newington between 2015 and 2017. The project was developed by People United in partnership with a resident-led group (Newington Big Local) and initiated a wide array of arts-based activities involving community members across the community. Most of the arts activities were delivered and facilitated by an artist-in-residence, Nova Marshall. The overarching aim of the project was to collect and celebrate good news stories, with a particular focus on kindness. These were gathered through a whole host of art forms including film, photography, dance, visual installations, sound, song, and urban art.

At the start of the project Nova set-up an intergenerational community group, in which members would meet weekly and would co-create art work, visit exhibitions, and would help programme the new yearly community arts festival in Newington (called Best Fest). This group was called the Creative Champions. Setting up this group helped to ensure that community members could help steer and take ownership of the project over time. Seven months

into the project People United and the Creative Champions programmed the first Newington community-wide festival, Best Fest. Best Fest is now a yearly and free community arts festival in Newington full of art, music and fun activities, and planned and organised by local residents.

As well as the Creative Champions group, an intergenerational singing group was developed from an idea by a local resident. People of all ages come together to sing a range of songs from world music to contemporary pop. Although based in Newington, residents from the surrounding area and wider community are very welcome to join in. The group also perform at community events such as Best Fest. Another important project as part of The Best of Us was the development of partnerships with local primary schools. In one particular school, People United’s successful Arts and Kindness programme led by performance artist Bob Karper helped pupils to explore kindness, courage and generosity. Pupils (in years 3, 4, 5 and 6) worked together and creatively to develop a set of kindness qualities and to create a song (GratituTune) to thank the kind people in their lives.

The Best of Us has produced over 50 art works that have been shown, residents have researched and recorded Newington histories and honoured local unsung heroes through four permanent plaques. Children and young people have made urban art boards that highlight community spaces, made zines that focus on friendship in Newington, and have produced a playful visual installation exploring courage. These are just some examples of the many activities that have taken place across Newington over the past two years. But the common theme across all activities is that they involve bringing together local residents, artists (People United worked with 23 artists from different backgrounds and art forms), and community groups to gather and explore stories of bravery, citizenship, hope, zest and persistence, to overcome difference, and to engage in positive community action. A large part of the project has involved setting-up, working with, and facilitating local arts-based groups (Creative Champions, Sing Your Heart Out). These groups not only bring people together and help create connections, but they also maximise the sustainability of the arts-based



The group also perform at community events such as

Best Fest

Newingtons, Annual Community Arts Festival





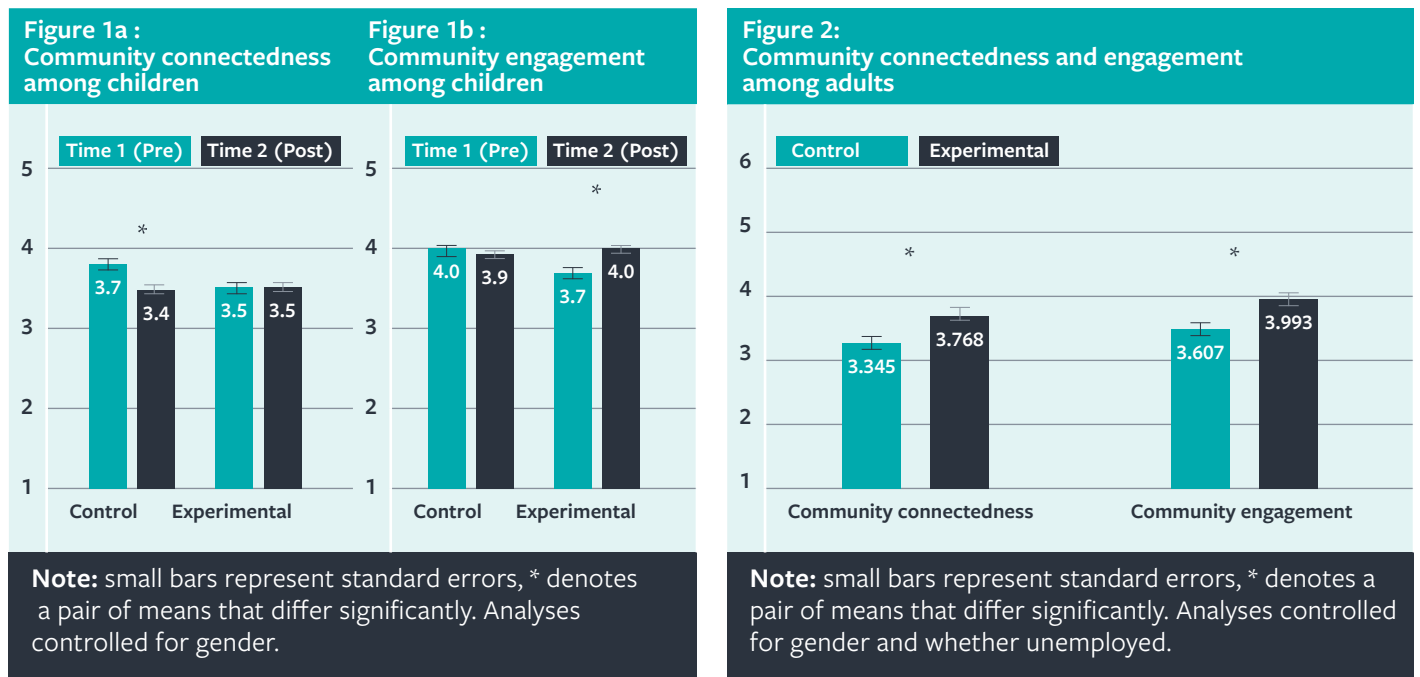
community intervention. Community members can take ownership of the project and can take it forward in the years to come, for example there are already funding applications in place to support Best Fest 2018, and the artist-in-residence will continue to work in the community for another year.

4 Research and Evaluation

We evaluated the effectiveness of People United’s arts-based community project for promoting community connectedness and engagement using a rigorous mixed methods approach.

First, we conducted a quantitative study in the local primary school in Newington. We surveyed children before and after the arts project. We also surveyed children from two schools that had not taken part in the arts project. In total, 254 children between 7 to 11 years took part. 55.1 per cent were female and 66.7 per cent were White British. We measured children’s sense of community connectedness using questions such as “I like being part of Newington” and “I feel proud to be a part of Newington”. Children responded to these using a 5-point response scale from “not at all” to “a lot”. Statistical analyses showed that whereas community connectedness declined significantly over this period in the control schools (no arts project), it sustained high levels in the experimental school (Newington; arts project), suggesting that perhaps the intervention in Newington had at least preserved children’s positive orientation.

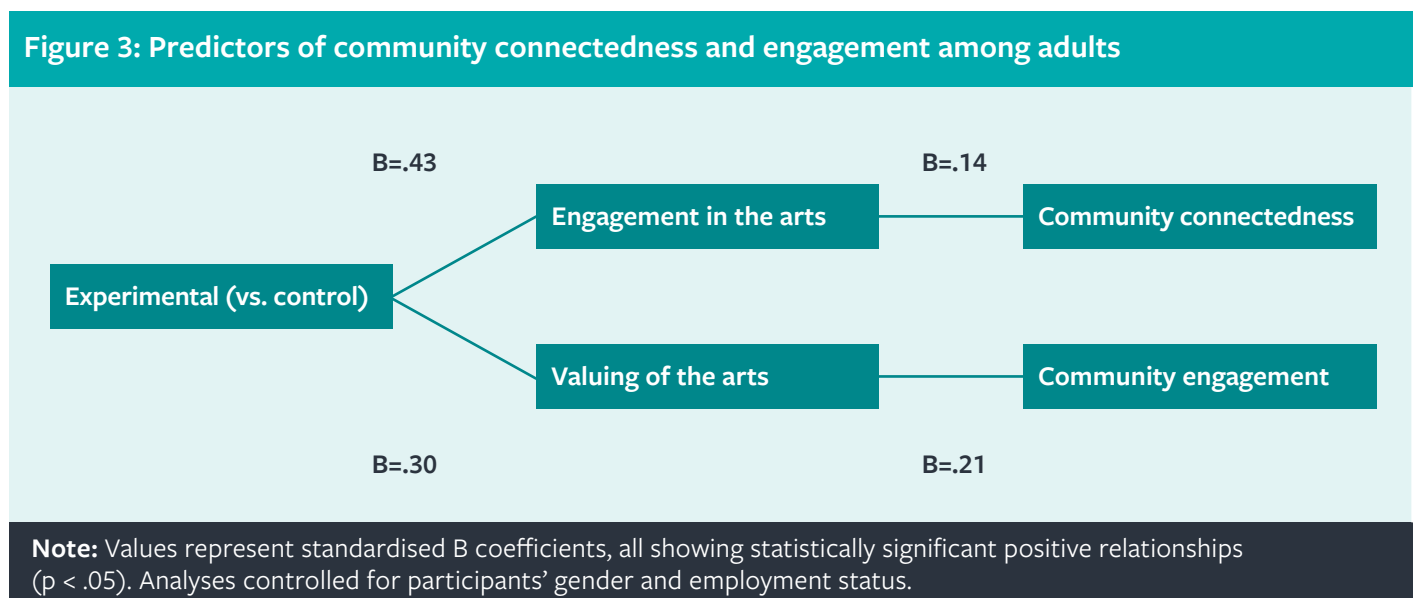
Using a more indirect, but also more sensitive, measure, we tested children’s community engagement via their general motivation to be kind to peers. Children read about 6 different scenarios and were asked whether they would assist or help in each one (e.g., “You see a child running across the park but trips over a rock and falls down. The child gets up and begins to cry. Would you go over and comfort the child?”). Children responded using a 5-point response scale from “definitely not” to “definitely would”. We found that community engagement increased significantly in the experimental school (Newington; arts project) but did not change in the control schools (no arts project). Overall the evidence supports the conclusion that the arts-based school project significantly promoted children’s community engagement and may also have buffered against reductions in children’s feelings of community connectedness (see Figure 1a and Figure 1b).



Second, we conducted a quantitative evaluation among adults in the local community in Newington. We designed the evaluation to compare participants from Newington with those from a matched town. We surveyed 190 participants (94.7 per cent White British; 81.1 per cent female) just after the first arts-based community festival in Newington, Best Fest. We recruited participants by asking local schools to share flyers with parents, which invited anyone over 18 years to take part. We measured community connectedness using questions such as “I feel proud to be part of Newington” and “I belong in Newington”. Participants responded on a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. We measured community engagement using questions such as “I think that involvement in programmes to improve my community is important” and “I think that people should find the time to contribute to their communities”.

Participants responded using a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. We found that community connectedness and engagement were both significantly higher in Newington than in the control town (see Figure 2).

These findings were consistent with our expectation that the stronger community connectedness and engagement in Newington arose because of the arts projects there. But we were aware the differences might also be explained by other factors. To check the validity of our reasoning, our surveys measured participants’ levels of engagement with the arts as well as their valuing of arts and creativity. We were therefore able to statistically test whether the higher level of community connectedness and engagement in Newington was associated with residents’ also experiencing higher levels of engagement in and valuing of the arts. The data showed that this was in fact the case. Newington residents’ higher levels of engagement in and valuing of the arts did statistically explain their higher levels of community connectedness and engagement, respectively (see Figure 3).



Overall, results of the evaluation of impact on adults suggest that the arts-based community project significantly promoted feelings of community connectedness as well as community engagement. A limitation is that we were not able to collect data at a second time point with our adult sample. This means that it is impossible for us to eliminate the possibility that the differences in community connectedness and engagement between the two towns may have occurred due to reasons other than the arts activities. Nevertheless, the statistical analyses depicted in Figure 3 suggest that the differences in community connectedness and engagement were explained by engagement in and valuing of arts. A further limitation of this research is that we did not statistically test whether the effectiveness of the arts intervention varied by social class or ethnicity. We did not have data to test the former and as the majority of the sample were White British, we did not have sufficient statistical power to test the latter. Nevertheless, based on recent theory and evidence¹⁵, we expect that arts-based interventions should also be effective for promoting community connectedness and engagement across group divides.

These sources of evidence were complemented by eight in-depth interviews with various stakeholders involved in Best of Us, conducted by an independent qualitative researcher, Joe Bonnell. Interviewees ranged from Creative Champions of various ages and backgrounds to the artist in residence and members of other community groups who had experienced the Best Fest event. The interviews were transcribed for analysis in order to explore participants’ experiences of Best of Us and their wider engagement with the arts. The interviews clearly illustrated how Best of Us had helped foster a sense of community connectedness and engagement among respondents (see Table 1 for interview extracts).

All interview extracts refer in one way or another to community connectedness. Specifically, respondents highlighted increases in community connectedness (e.g., Respondent Two “it does bring people together”). Reference was also made to increases in community engagement. For example, Respondent Seven demonstrates how high quality participatory arts activities can bring together people from different backgrounds to engage in a common purpose or goal. Overall, the evidence from the qualitative interviews is in line with the quantitative evidence which suggests that participatory arts can foster greater community connectedness and engagement.

“As well as the Creative Champions group, an intergenerational singing group was developed from an idea by a local resident”



Table 1: Extracts from Qualitative Interviews (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7)

Respondent 1

“The Best Of Us’ was about caring and sharing but more about art being the route for a lot of people into finding friendship, finding confidence, lots of the things that I’d appreciated as a result of my finding art.”

Respondent 5

“I think the Best Fest went down really well. Actually, it brought people from not just Newington but maybe Margate, Broadstairs, just getting their different perspectives of what art is. So I think it went down really well, and my personal favourite was the band, I loved that band, from London, it’s got that sort of Mardi Gras feel like yeah I like it.”

Respondent 2

“Yeah. It does promote community spirit. It does make. People that’ll come in maybe that haven’t seen each other before, or may have seen each other but not spoken before, but because that’s, they’re here for that mutual interest, they sit and chat and then they might. I think there are one or two of them that have then met up and gone for coffee elsewhere, they became friends because of. It does bring people together.”

Respondent 7

“From the event that they put on, I would say that they were like middle of the road; they were aiming from every perspective they were aiming for age groups. You had the Memory Teas for the older people on the estate and we were all asked to contribute but again I don’t know if they had much come through on the day. I know they had lots of photographs. And then you had like the puppets for the really young, you had the dome for I’d say 4 years right up to 40-50 years old, even older, could be older because Gwen’s over 80. There was artwork from the schools, Dame Turner School, that they put in one of the marquees...[and] as I say The Copse was all ages as well...So there was something for everybody and some of the things were aimed at all age groups and it wasn’t as if anything was too hard for them to do either. I think that might put people off if they think ‘Oh that’s going to be too hard. I’m not going to have a go in case I make a fool of myself’. Nobody was made to feel foolish.”

Respondent 3

“My children are insular because of their autism and actually they talk now and if I walked with them and they see somebody that they met and they saw at Best Fest, they’ll be like ‘Hello’ so it’s really quite friendly so they wouldn’t be able to remember their names but they’d say to you ‘I’ve met people I’ve never met before’ so without a doubt but then so have I so they’ve got to have.”

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This project tested whether an arts-based community intervention can promote community connectedness and engagement. Importantly, community connectedness is essential for fostering good relations and for overcoming division within communities. Indeed, social psychological research shows that when individuals from different groups (e.g., from different ethnic backgrounds) can develop a common identity, such as a community identity, their prejudices are likely to reduce.¹⁶ In other words, interventions aimed at building positive and inclusive community connectedness are absolutely vital for overcoming prejudice and division in society. The arts-based community intervention described here did exactly this. Working with members of a highly deprived, isolated and fragmented community, the program celebrated the best of humanity by gathering stories of kindness, courage, and zest through creative practice in ways that fostered new positive links across the community.

In this essay we provided a case study of a participatory arts intervention in a deprived and fragmented community, Newington. Over the past 10 years we have also evaluated the effectiveness of participatory arts projects for promoting community connectedness and engagement across a range of samples and with many different artists and arts activities. We consistently find that arts engagement promotes greater social connectedness and engagement.¹⁷ Recently, using broader data from a representative sample of over 30,000 people from the UK, we analysed the relationship between people’s self-reported arts engagement and their self-reported volunteering. Volunteering is an example of community engagement. We discovered that, beyond any influence of people’s basic personality traits, demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, wealth, education, and their engagement in other social activity (sports), those who were more engaged in the arts were also more likely to volunteer. Indeed, people’s greater engagement with the arts predicted higher levels of volunteering two years later.¹⁸ In other words, using a range of methods and across a range of samples, our research consistently shows that arts engagement promotes social connectedness and engagement.

This essay contributes to the growing evidence that high quality participatory arts projects can powerfully promote positive community outcomes. We propose that any local action aimed at promoting community connectedness and engagement, whether organised by practitioners, community members, or policy-makers, would benefit from involving and listening to artists. There will inevitably be costs involved when commissioning artists. However, one way to minimise the cost is to integrate our recommendation with a planned or ongoing local action or local project. In other words, we suggest that any local action aimed at promoting positive community outcomes can be enhanced by involving an artist, and that this is a realistic and relatively low risk recommendation. If it is not possible to involve artists directly, then local actions can try to incorporate some of the “key arts ingredients” into their programmes (see Andrews et al., 2017, also outlined here in the introduction). For example, by encouraging people to share their stories and experiences with one another.

To summarise, our key message for practitioners, policy makers, and community members is that place-based arts programmes can work. They can significantly increase positive community connectedness and engagement, even within fragmented neighbourhoods. If delivered on a larger scale, across many communities, arts-based community interventions, could have a significant impact by helping to sustain and build more socially harmonious communities nationally. In terms of small and feasible practical steps, when developing any local action aimed at promoting community cohesion and integration, consider involving an artist or a participatory arts organisation. If you could do one thing to improve social integration, the evidence presented here would suggest that arts-based community interventions such as those delivered by People United could be that one thing.

Useful links

<http://peopleunited.org.uk/>

<http://peopleunited.org.uk/project/the-best-of-us/>

<http://peopleunited.org.uk/events/best-fest-2016/>

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