Rural empowerment through the arts: The role of the arts in civic and social participation in the Mid West region of Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

To combat social and economic inequity in rural Australia, governments, communities, and policy makers are seeking ways to empower local residents to find local solutions to local problems. Through an exploratory review of the literature and semi-structured interviews conducted in the Mid West of Western Australia, this research examined the role of the arts as a vehicle for increased social and civic participation to build resilience to inequity. For those interviewed, the arts were observed to strengthen sense of place and community identity. The arts were utilised as a means for encouraging and enabling civic participation, as well as providing opportunities for social interaction and networking, which are essential for the health and wellbeing of rural and remote residents. While providing a context for civic and social participation, the arts were viewed by several of those interviewed as a means for facilitating understanding between divisive and disparate groups. Yet, it was noted that the execution and drive for arts activities and events was dependent on the availability of human capital, but also on support from governance and funding authorities to build capacity to sustain these activities. If, as suggested by this exploratory review, the arts are a vehicle for building resilience in rural Australia, then further research is needed to support these claims to enable continued and future support for not just the arts, but the capacity of communities to engage in the arts.

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1. Introduction

To combat social and economic inequity in rural Australia, governments, communities, and policy makers are seeking ways to empower local residents to find local solutions to local problems. Rural Australia, and in particular, the Mid West region of Western Australia, is facing many challenges. These challenges stem from economic and policy reform, placing remote and often isolated communities in a globalised competitive market. As the financial viability of rural small businesses and family farms declines, the social, infrastructure, and wellbeing aspects of community declines in parallel. This situation is further compounded by environmental concerns, such as dryland salinity and other environmental degradation resulting from the combination of a highly variable climate, with an exceptionally fragile landscape making traditional European-based farming practices unsustainable. Health, service, and infrastructure provision is, in turn, hindered by the low population density and remoteness, or inaccessibility of the region. There is also a notable social dynamic in these communities, including the changing role of women, Indigenous disadvantage, and other divisions and social problems, which are overrepresented in rural and remote Australia (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2005).

Many small towns in rural and remote Australia are subject to forms of social and economic disadvantage not experienced by their metropolitan counterparts. Yet, some rural and remote communities have managed to reposition themselves and have thus experienced a turnaround in the face of changing economic conditions (Baum et al., 2005). These communities could be referred to as resilient. A term often used in health promotion and psychology literature, resilience refers to protective factors against adverse outcomes, despite the presence of known risk factors (Mitchell, 2010; Wolff, 1995). It is thought that the arts may be a means for strengthening these protective factors. The arts, for the purpose of this research, have been defined as the product of creative expression and includes, but are not limited to, the visual arts, design and craft; the performing arts, such as music, dance, and theatre; film, photography and digital media; and the literary arts, such as creative writing (Anwar McHenry, 2009b). It has been demonstrated that the arts provide opportunities for networking, self expression, and sense of achievement, along with economic opportunities through tourism and supplementary income provision (Gibson, 2002; Mills and Brown, 2004; Pearn, 2007). The arts

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engage a diverse cross-section of the community, including disadvantaged and lower socioeconomic groups, and thus because of their broad appeal and flexible application in a variety of contexts, the arts are well placed to engage and empower residents through the development of a stronger sense of place, increasing individual confidence, and facilitating understanding (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006; McQueen-Thomson et al., 2004).

This research aims to explore the role of the arts in social and economic inequity in rural Australia. This is achieved through an exploratory review of the role of the arts in empowering Australian rural communities as a means for strengthening the protective factors that enable them to combat inequities. This includes the role of the arts in culture and sense of place, and as a means for social and civic participation. The barriers to the establishment and continued support of arts-related activity within communities themselves are also considered. The literature review provides a theoretical framework for the role of the arts in resilience and reviews rural Australia as the context for this research. Methods for the collection of primary qualitative data and their analysis are explained followed by a review of the case-study focus region, the Mid West of Western Australia. The results and discussion are presented according to the following themes: culture and sense of place; civic participation and exclusion; social participation and division, and; sustaining support for the arts. Finally, the key findings and future implications are summarised in the conclusion.

2. The role of the arts in resilience

At an individual level, the arts contribute towards resilience by facilitating the development of social and interpersonal skills, and providing opportunities for achievement and self expression (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Staricoff, 2004). The concept of resilience at a community level, however, is complex and thought to be linked to sense of belonging, networks and connectedness, identity, and place (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). It is assumed that participation fosters collective action which, in addition to benefiting individual health and wellbeing, can also increase social capital through the development of relationships, networks, and collective norms (Torjman, 2004). While traditional arguments on the role of the arts have focused on beauty and aesthetics, the arts are primarily concerned with meaning and are utilised as a form of communication (Dissanayake, 1988). Thus, the arts can be a vehicle for participation, for example, as an agent of social change through their use as a social marketing tool to raise awareness of a particular issue, to make a statement, or in protest (Jermyn, 2001; Kagan, 2008; Mills and Brown, 2004; Shaw, 2003). This approach utilises the arts to engage local people to work towards solutions to local problems as a means for addressing inequity experienced as a result of globalisation (Tonts, 2000; Wiseman et al., 2005).

Bush and Baum (2001) suggest that there are two types of participation, social and civic, both of which can be seen to contribute towards community resilience. Civic participation is a predictor of empowerment or 'sense of community control' and refers to political or community action-based participation. Civic participation can occur on an individual basis or through group participation such as charity groups or organising committees, which combine both civic and social elements (Bush and Baum, 2001). Social participation, on the other hand, contributes towards health status and refers to informal participation. This includes activities like visiting friends, family or neighbours, and public social activities, such as going to the theatre, participating in sport, hobbies, or other groups. Wiseman et al. (2005) suggest engagement at a community level is key to the sustainability and revitalisation of small, rural, and remote communities. Further

outcomes of participation include personal and professional development, and employment, which builds individual capacity and community solidarity through promoting cohesion, identity, and sense of place (Coalter, 2001).

While the benefits of the arts for individual resilience and recovery in a clinical and health setting are well known, more recent research focuses on the role of the arts in community settings and their impact at a societal level, in particular, the role of the arts as a means for participation. The arts can be considered a means for both social and civic participation. People come together to create art, rehearse, or take part in performances both as a profession, but also for recreation (Anwar McHenry, 2009a). Furthermore, public art, festivals, and other public celebrations can contribute towards a collective sense of identity and place and is therefore of interest to the sustainability of rural communities with respect to revitalisation, empowerment, and wellbeing.

3. Rural Australia

Australia underwent economic reform in the mid 1970s, which saw a shift in political ideology from the "welfare state", to free markets and economic rationalism characteristic of neoliberalism. Under the welfare state, agriculture and other primary industries were subject to heavy state regulation and subsidisation. Stability in small rural communities was maintained through State and Federal Government intervention by the presence of various agencies and offices, which were also a local source of stable employment. The trend towards neoliberalism, characterised by free market ideology and user-pays mentality, was a policy response to globalisation (Alston, 2007; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). It required the centralisation of Government services by removing agencies from small towns, coupled with the outsourcing and privatisation of services previously provided by State and Federal Government (Tonts, 2000). When coupled with developments in technology and environmental degradation, neoliberal policies have seen the declining profitability of the family farm (Tonts and Jones, 1997). Farmers who remain have increased their landholdings, yet because of advancements in technology there is a reduced need for farm labour. The decline in income and farm labour employment has seen a reduction in spending in town-based businesses and services. This further compounds the subsequent withdrawal of infrastructure and public resources, which are no longer subsidised with State and Federal Government support (Haslam McKenzie, 2000). Alston (2007) goes further to suggest that current rural circumstances combined with an inadequate policy response has exposed rural people to increased risk of ill health.

Even with the challenges, not all rural towns are suffering from decline. The greater competition in regions with relative low density population has led to some towns thriving, while most decline as they cannot outcompete their neighbours (Furuseth, 1998; Tonts and Atherley, 2005). Small non-metropolitan communities which are not suffering from decline can be categorised as either income and employment advantaged, or population growth advantaged. The income/employment advantaged communities are communities whose primary industry is mining, characterised by high incomes and a largely transient workforce (Baum et al., 2005). The population growth advantaged communities are characterised by small sea-change communities. They are located on or near the coast in what would be considered traditional retirement regions for the lifestyle they offer as the urban–rural interface. These communities have characteristically more employment in new economy and professional industries (Baum et al., 2005). The disadvantaged small non-metropolitan communities are characterised by communities based on agriculture, and those experiencing population stagnation