



The Art of Living Together

People United Research Article (Published 28 May 2013)

By Jo Broadwood

In our recent research paper, *Arts and Kindness*, we propose a model for understanding how the arts might create the conditions for kindness to grow through one or more of the following four mediators: *Emotions*, *Connections*, *Values* and *Learning*. This article explores some of the theories underpinning the *Connections* mediator, related to the ability of the arts to connect people with each other quickly and powerfully. In particular we look at some of what we know about social connections and interactions across different identity¹ groups and how that might influence arts practice.

Can we live together – is it even possible?

Several well-respected academics believe that diverse neighbourhoods can never be truly cohesive and integrated. Professor Robert Putnam argues that exposure to ethnic diversity drives down trust². Based on a study in American cities he found that when people live in ethnically diverse settings they tend to exhibit the 'tortoise' effect, i.e. they tend to hunker down and pull away from other people whatever identity group they are from.

Social psychologist, Zachary Neal, has explored this further³. He identifies *homophily* - the human tendency to associate and bond with similar others, and *proximity* - the human tendency to form friendly relationships with people who are geographically closer to you, as being key. He argues it is not possible to have highly integrated and highly cohesive communities, as one moderates the other.

However, it could be argued that his theories do not take into account other human tendencies and characteristics such as curiosity, a desire to play, to experiment, and to learn about the world and others. All of these may motivate us to get to know people who are different from us, and they are all key features of many arts experiences.

What kind of interventions can reduce prejudice and promote empathy?

Professor Miles Hewstone specializes in the study of intergroup relations and has carried out extensive research in Northern Ireland, South Africa and the Balkans working with communities on either side of ethnic, faith and cultural divides. His findings are much more hopeful; in particular he highlights the impact of cross-group friendships⁴.

He responds to Putnam by distinguishing between 'meaningful interaction' and 'opportunities for contact', pointing out they are not the same thing. Living in a diverse neighbourhood may provide you with opportunity for contact but it may not mean that you have any meaningful contact or interaction with people who are different from you. His research demonstrates that meaningful interaction between groups can reduce anxiety and prejudice and promote empathy. He emphasizes that the 'quality' of the type of contact you have is important, with the most powerful form of contact being cross-group friendships (i.e. being friends with someone from a different identity group).

Meaningful interaction can have a kind of 'trickle down' effect; it is likely to improve your attitudes to other identity groups different from your own. Furthermore, if you know someone who is friends with someone from another identity group, then even if you do not know them yourself, it can reduce your anxiety and feelings of prejudice towards that other group.

For arts practitioners interested in the impact of their work on intergroup relations this suggests the following:

- When bringing different groups together it is important to do it in a way that encourages a deeper and more profound connection between people - meaningful interaction. Of course it is impossible to plan for something as individual and personal as friendship, but creating an environment where people feel safe and relaxed enough to get to share stories and personal experiences, may mean interactions are meaningful enough to positively impact attitudes and behaviours.
- Even projects involving a small number of direct participants can have a wider impact. Meaningful interaction can impact on feelings of anxiety and prejudice not just for those directly involved but also for their friends, peers and families.

- Offering participants and audiences opportunities to imagine what it might be like to meet and interact with people from different groups may also be effective in reducing prejudice and promoting empathy.

Empathy and its role... or not, in intergroup helping

We know from social identity theory that we like people most and are most likely to help them if they belong to our social groups. Research conducted by Sturmer, Omoto and Snyder into the helping behaviour of volunteers towards people with HIV/AIDS examines how group membership moderates prosocial emotions and in particular helping⁵.

The researchers discovered that when the helper and the helpee were from the same identity group the helper was motivated by empathy. However, when they were from different identity groups the helper was motivated by interpersonal attraction, i.e. perceiving that they and the helpee were similar in some way, for example sharing similar interests. In other words when people help those from another identity group feelings of empathy may not necessarily be as effective at motivating helping behaviour, as feelings of interpersonal attraction. This suggests some important practical considerations for promoting helping across group boundaries:

- One strategy the researchers discuss is that of 'perspective-taking', i.e. encouraging the helper to take on the perspective of the helpee; that way empathy might be increased to levels which lead to helping behaviour. Many arts experiences encourage us to take the perspective of someone else. Theatre, photography, spoken word, film and other art experiences involve us in seeing the world through someone else's eyes. If that someone else is from a different social group, then it may serve to break down intergroup barriers and categories, and make us more likely to help people from that group when we come across them in real life.
- The other strategy they suggest is to increase interpersonal attraction between the helper and the helpee, focusing on shared interests, aspirations, and preferences. If we think about this in relation to the arts, we can see that participatory arts experiences which bring people from different social groups together in pursuit of a common interest or activity, for example, music making, may be creating the conditions for greater helping behaviour across identity groups.

Sociologist and classicist, Professor Danielle Allen, argues that in a democracy when people from different backgrounds trust each other, society is better off⁶. Furthermore, she says economists have

demonstrated that where people 'bridge' their differences, rather than 'bond' over their similarities the number of job opportunities increase. Her conclusion is that for nations to flourish people need to learn how to get along with strangers. The arts with their ability to help people connect with each other powerfully and directly may play an important role in this.

We are really interested in exploring further how arts experiences might help develop relationships across different identity groups, thereby strengthening social connections and bridging social capital. We'd love to hear your thoughts, comments and own experiences of the power of the arts in bridging across difference.

¹ Tajfel's (1978) definition of social identity is: "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". (p. 63).

² Putnam, R. (2006) *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century*, The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture. Nordic Political Science Association

³ http://www.thersa.org/_data/assets/file/0007/1522429/20130513ZacharyNeal.mp3

⁴ <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/vision-videos/why-cant-we-live-together>

⁵ Sturmer, S, Omoto, A.M & Snyder, M (2005) *Prosocial emotions and helping: The Moderating role of group membership* Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Vol 88, No 3, 532-546

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/apr/30/danielle-allen-obama-equity-equality>