ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Community-Based Arts Initiatives: Exploring the Science of the Arts

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Abstract In this introduction to the special issue, we describe some of the rewards and challenges of community-based arts initiatives for our discipline. We explore the inherent tensions between art and science that are reflected in community-based arts activities. We pose larger questions about researching community-based arts activities and defining the arts as a means of promoting social change. The diversity of populations, settings, and issues represented by the papers in the special issue are described and a common set of values, methods of inquiry and action are discussed.

Keywords Community-based arts · Arts-based research · Social action

The motivation behind this special issue is simple. Turn the *AJCP* spotlight on the work of individuals passionate about the power of community-based arts initiatives to create social change. With a focus on arts-centered activities created by and with community members, community-based arts initiatives are recognized worldwide as promoting personal growth, citizen participation, cultural awareness, and community development (Howells and Zelnik 2009; Kay 2000; Newman et al. 2003). As guest editors, our goal was to present outstanding examples of community-based arts activities to represent this avenue of innovation for our discipline. In our own small way, we wanted to help contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the pride, potential, and problems inherent in standing at the intersection of arts, action, and research. There has been a growing literature on community-based arts initiatives in a variety of disciplines. We wanted to consider what community-based arts initiatives can contribute to community psychology, and what community psychology might offer community-based arts initiatives.

Papers presented in this special issue encompass a wide array of arts activities including theater, visual arts, poetry, music, and other forms of creative expression. Authors from Australia, Canada, and the United States describe arts initiatives done with and by groups who have typically been marginalized by society. Authors situate their community-based arts activities within a variety of conceptual frameworks, but a common set of community psychology values is reflected in all of these authors' accounts. Issues of community access, collaboration, individual expression, and citizen participation are central to papers in this special issue. The papers speak to the diversity of populations and settings that can be the focus of community-based arts initiatives. Collectively, papers in this special issue also raise larger questions about whether the arts have a unique role to play in social action and community change. The articles presented here also stimulate questions about how research data, evidence of impacts, and legitimate ways of knowing are defined. We offer some of our thoughts about community-based arts initiatives in this spirit of reflection.

The Arts and Science

The ease of discussing art forms as diverse as dance, theater, painting, poetry, sculptor, and music using the

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collective term "the arts" stems largely from a defining feature attributed to all forms of art: expression. Common to all art forms is a desire to achieve expressiveness through the ways that the form has been crafted or shaped (Eisner 2008). Art is evocative and is thought to intensify a sense of the immediate (Dewey 1934/1958). We can speak in broad terms of "art making" as the act of creating art or the "expressive object" as the outcome or product of the artistic endeavor. Yet, central to art is its ability to evoke emotion. Additionally, art and art making are said to offer a fresh and often nuanced perspective on the familiar (Eisner 2008; National Art Education Association 1994). Eisner (2008) notes that learning to read art is learning to address what is subtle but significant to allow the individual access to a world previously unnoticed or unattended. Art is credited with the power to disrupt and provoke; to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Eisner 2008). Art has value for its own sake, for its cultural significance, and for what it evokes about the human condition.

The translation of art experiences into the realm of science can be problematic in a number of respects. First, there is the inherent tension between the fundamental attributes of science and those of art. Eighty years ago, John Dewey made the point quite succinctly: "Science states meanings; art expresses them" (Dewey 1934/1958, p. 84). Without going into an epistemological discussion of science, it is probably safe to say that science relies upon description in pursuit of systematic understanding. However, if the purview of art is the emotional, then is it possible that art enables people to know something about feeling that cannot be adequately captured by scientific description? In its broadest form, the debate centers on the ability of science or even language itself to "systematically understand" the experience of art. For our purposes, the juxtaposition of "art" and "science" raises at least two interesting questions. One question is whether art as a phenomenon of interest can or should be treated as analogous to other phenomena of interest to community psychologists. In other words, is there anything unique about art as a focus of inquiry and a catalyst for social change? For example, should we conceptualize art, artists, and art making any differently than we conceptualize trauma, survivors, and coping? If we stay true to our community psychology values, celebrate the importance of context and diversity, and are sensitive to the people of our concern, we can think of ourselves as practicing "good" community psychology. Yet, given the experience of art and the multifaceted meanings of the arts for culture and society, does a focus on the arts demand different sensibilities of community psychologists than a focus on other phenomena of interest?

A second question reflected in the tension between "art" and "science" revolves around the definition of research and ways of knowing that best serve a systematic understanding of community-based arts initiatives. Community psychologists are sensitive to the need to employ research methods that reflect specific theoretical and social agendas such as empowerment (Rappaport 1990), that recognize the complexity of community phenomena (Rapkin and Mulvey 1990), that can capture social context (Luke 2005), and connect the experiences of researchers with the people of their concern (Stein and Mankowski 2004). Yet, we must ask if the nature of the experience of art as conceptualized at various levels of analysis favors particular forms of inquiry and standards of evidence over other forms. For example, authors in this special issue selected qualitative forms of inquiry, case studies, and/or first person accounts as their primary ways of knowing and communicating their experiences about community-based arts initiatives to readers. That is not to say that no quantitative indicators of the impacts of community-based arts activities were collected by these researchers. Rather, research evidence offered by these authors to support truth claims about community-based arts were predominantly in the form of words or visuals, and not numbers. Although this is certainly a small and non-random sample of research, do the forms of knowledge representation showcased in this special issue speak to any larger issues about the researching of community-based arts initiatives? How explicit do arts researchers and practitioners need to be in justifying their methodological choices in a social science world currently devoted to legitimizing only those programs and practices determined to be "evidence-based"? If our mission is to systematically understand community-based arts, then who decides what counts as research evidence, or the extent to which different forms of knowing are legitimate for understanding different forms of art, or what kinds of findings are generalizable to different contexts and settings?

The Arts as a Means to an End

Linking the arts with specific outcomes in areas such as economic and community development, educational enhancement, civic engagement, and health and well-being has incredible appeal for researchers, practitioners, arts organizations, and policy makers. In the United States, the perennial threats made to cut government funding for the arts are typically countered by studies documenting the merits of such public-sector investments (National Assembly of State Arts Agencies 2014). However, as Putland (2008) notes, traditional evaluation research approaches to arts programs run the risk of reducing the value and meaning of arts activities to a set of functional characteristics such that art is seen as instrumental to
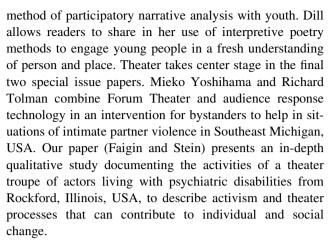
narrowly prescribed social outcomes. For example, in a traditional evaluation of an arts program for health promotion, arts activities may be characterized as instrumental in facilitating such things as identity exploration, social support, or community engagement for program participants, which in turn may be associated with specific individual health outcomes (Putland 2008). Here the merits and the meaning of art are defined by its ability to support a health promotion social agenda. Moreover, when art activities are framed in terms of their capacity to "fix" the "problems" of people identified by the dominant culture as "deficit" or "at risk," there is the danger that the arts simply become an instrument for perpetuating oppression and the status quo. In other words, community-based arts initiatives can be justified and evaluated in ways that reinforce dominate cultural stereotypes and perpetuate existing definitions of social problems.

For Your Consideration

The seven papers in this special issue clearly exemplify what an understanding of community-based arts initiatives can contribute to our discipline. Elizabeth Thomas and her colleagues present a detailed case study of a community-based arts organization and its role in the revitalization of a neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee, USA. Using multiple methods of inquiry, this case study informs our understanding of community building, issues of diversity, and the power of place. In Western Australia, Christopher Sonn and his colleagues showcase the use of the visual arts to express place attachment among Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children, youth, and adults in rural towns in the Eastern Wheatbelt. With an emphasis on empowerment concepts and participatory action research methods, authors explore photography and photo elicitation as ways for people to represent and give meaning to their community. For Janis Timm-Bottos and Rosemary Reilly, the focus of inquiry is a community art studio as storefront classroom in the St. Henri neighborhood of Montréal, Quebec, Canada. Framed in the context of community-engaged service learning, these authors use third space theory to conceptualize a setting where university students and community members come together in the act of art making. Anne Mulvey and Irene Egan use first person narrative to describe their ongoing 15 year involvement in a public arts project for women and girls in Lowell, Massachusetts, USA. These authors highlight Lowell as a context for public art by and about women and describe art making settings, activities, and partnerships that reflect feminist community psychology principles in action.

A neighborhood center in East Oakland, California, USA is the focus of LeConté Dill's work on poetry as a method of participatory narrative analysis with youth. Dill allows readers to share in her use of interpretive poetry methods to engage young people in a fresh understanding of person and place. Theater takes center stage in the final two special issue papers. Mieko Yoshihama and Richard Tolman combine Forum Theater and audience response technology in an intervention for bystanders to help in situations of intimate partner violence in Southeast Michigan, USA. Our paper (Faigin and Stein) presents an in-depth qualitative study documenting the activities of a theater troupe of actors living with psychiatric disabilities from Rockford, Illinois, USA, to describe activism and theater processes that can contribute to individual and social change.

Examining some of the common elements found across these seven papers provide clues as to what a community psychology perspective can contribute to the creation and analysis of community-based arts initiatives. Noteworthy are authors' deep personal commitments to the people of their concern and to the development of long-term community partnerships. Reflected in these papers is a focus on social justice and the role of community-based arts organizations in facilitating social change. The influence of social settings and social context in shaping authors' work is also unmistakable in all of the contributions to the special issue. Moreover, these researchers and practitioners have managed to convey their passion and respect for the multi-faceted nature of the arts. In each paper, the writers reveal something of themselves, their wonder and their vulnerability, amidst the details of their involvements with community-based arts projects. We believe that these qualities and methods of action and inquiry are particularly valued and cultivated in community psychology. Our hope is that readers will be intrigued, provoked, and inspired by papers in this special issue and contribute to the ongoing conversation about community-based arts activities in community psychology.

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