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Culture and Art in Public Health

Abstract

This article explains the role of culture in health - leading to the use of art as a tool for improving and promoting health.

It is intended to promote awareness of the arts as tools for public health practitioners to use in developing community health and designing health interventions. Learning objectives for the reader are 1) to recognize the use of the word art as both a verb (activity) and a noun (product) and 2) to be able to distinguish between art as clinical therapy and art as an intervention that affects the public.

Some uses of art in health promotion and education, in addition to the diagnostic and therapeutic benefits, are reviewed in order to present some ideas about how community arts can be used to promote various aspects of health.

Community Art and Public Art are should be integrated into health education, community assessment, prevention of disease and illness, and in health promotion.

It is important for health officers to be aware of culture of their communities and the meanings that the people give to art. Similarly, health officers should become aware of the role of art and culture in health and be able to incorporate art in community health activities.

Title: Culture and Art in Public Health

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Cultural Determinants of Community Health

Medical practitioners as well as health planners have become aware of the many cultural determinants of health behavior. In fact, there are many potential psychological, social and cultural determinants of health at the individual, family, community, institutional and societal levels. A short list of examples of how culture could affect health would include:

- 1) Language – and the meaning we give to words - determines our understanding and beliefs about the environment and diseases, as well as our roles.
- 2) Traditional health practitioners – determines availability, effectiveness, access and barriers to care.
- 3) Cultural practices and behaviors - determine such things as physical activity and ability, sleep, stress tolerance, and diet.
- 4) Socialization Rituals – determine such things as drinking, dating and mating and customs including for example; circumcision – tattoos – housing styles.
- 5) Norms and Lifestyle – determine things like work types, settings for schooling of children, exposure to media and to programs designed to improve health behaviors, access to other resources.
- 6) Art.

Most of the above aspects of culture are well researched and are often targets of intervention when working to improve the health status of communities, especially immigrant or minority ethnic communities. However, one of the most prominent identifiers of culture is art. In fact, there are some who say art is culture, while others see art as a reflection of culture.

Whenever people design, create, invent, or embellish something to make it pleasant for others (aesthetics) or to get attention (entertainment), they are making art. Anthropologists call those things cultural artifacts. And, even though some people think that art is something “extra” that humans do, because art means adding something that is not – strictly speaking – essential to the intended purpose of an item, art occurs in all societies and cultures, thus embellishment and entertainment must be universal human traits.

Educational philosopher John Dewey claimed that “art is the universal language,” and that “art is a product of culture, and it is through art that people of a given culture express the significance of their lives, as well as their hopes and ideals”¹. Richard Shusterman extends that pragmatic view of art as a product and says that in our present society “the essence and value of art is not in (such) artifacts but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived”².

Regardless of whether or not we subscribe to art as an ideal form, as the expression of human feeling, or as a symbolic gesture of the society in which we live, it is evident that diverse cultures of the world have applied art in historically different contexts. “In an era

of political turmoil and complex negotiations of personal identity, even artists from within a nation, people, or culture may face difficulties in assessing meaning and value in art...while recognizing that communities are diverse and evolving, we can still say that John Dewey's idea makes sense, that art 'expresses the life of a community'"³. Both the expression and cognitive theories of art hold that art *communicates*: it can communicate feelings and emotions, or thoughts and ideas.⁴ Importantly, the communication aspect of art means that it expresses something that is meaningful to communities of people.

Interpretation of art is important because it helps explain what an art means to a particular community or society. Art acquires meaning in part from its context (i.e. the background in which art is made or found), and in looking at the role of art in public health, the community is the setting. Moreover, public health will be most concerned with public art. Modern times are seeing an organization of intellectual activity around the concepts of community art, commercial art, and professional art. However, it is important to remember that art occurs at all levels of culture, thus folk arts and technical arts will apply to health as much as fine arts and performing arts.

Art as a tool for improving and promoting health

The arts have a well-recognized potential to promote health and wellbeing. Creative arts therapies (visual arts, dance movement therapy, drama therapy and psychodrama, music therapy, and poetry or bibliotherapy) have been contributing to medical treatments in North America and many European countries for more than a century, beginning with use in institutions such as TB hospitals, and mental health treatment centers.

Arts in healthcare settings can have very positive impacts on healthcare, resulting in improved clinical outcomes. For example, the design and architecture of a building; dance, music and drama performances; painting and poetry workshops; can all have positive benefits.⁵ In fact – Art Therapy has been recognized as a skill which combines the teaching of art with psychology and communications skills in order to understand patients.

Nancy Cooley (2003) summarized the association of arts and artistic activity with medicine as including:

- a) Medical illustration and education;
- b) Creation of environments that support and foster healing;
- c) Treatment of disease and illness, i.e. physical dysfunction, pain alleviation, and mental, emotional problems;
- d) Maintenance and enhancement of the individual and community health and well-being.⁶

The recognition that art can be used in diagnostic and therapeutic ways offers individual patients a wonderful modality for improving their health as well as their social adaptation skills. It would seem natural to extend the use of arts, and the arts as communication tools, to encompass the health of communities.

One of “the arts” most powerful contributions to health is that they reflect and create an inclusive sense of community. There is now considerable evidence that the stronger people feel this sense of belonging, the healthier they are. Creative activities that help connect us to others in our community are as important to determining our health and wellbeing as the medical care we receive when ill.

Community arts and health

Community Art has been narrowly defined as art for social change (activist art that intends to cure social ills), but most people will subscribe to the broader view that includes public art (art installed outdoors that intersects with daily community life) and public arts policy (from arts funding to political involvement) as community art⁷. A service organization for artists, artsource: the Artists Foundation of WA Ltd., encourages understanding the distinction between art in public places and community art. Ideally, art that is predominately designed and made by a professional artist, is public art. Public artworks may involve the community in various stages of consultation; however a community art project is when non-artist members of the community actively participate in the making of the work. They further recommend that a trained artist and/or community arts worker should facilitate community arts projects.⁸

Cooley’s summary of the association of art with medicine could be paralleled by a list associating “art in the community” with “community health”. The list might then read as follows:

- a) Health Education: Art is important in community health education, for everything from focusing attention on problems to explaining the causes and symptoms of health problems with brochures, posters, and public service announcements;
- b) Community Assessment: Public and private artistry, including graffiti, is important in defining community values, knowledge, comfort and the collaboration among community members;
- c) Illness Prevention: Prevention of behavioral disorders and even accidents can be enhanced through promotion of community arts and community artists, especially when done to create a sense of identity and community awareness, such as seen in “one tambon, one product” projects, or some community development projects following a disaster.
- d) Health Promotion: Promotion and maintenance of community health is facilitated by using media creatively, using art projects for teaching and education, and can target particular risk groups.

Art in medicine and therapy has advanced from using the product of the artist to assess and diagnose to emphasize the communication aspect, and ultimately to use the process of creating art as a treatment modality. Art at the community level should

also be viewed as a process consisting of both a message and a process which can be managed to enhance community health quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

**People and Activities at the Intersection of Arts and Health
Special Relationships – Elderly and Youth-at-Risk**

One thing noticeable in the literature reviewed here, as well as in information on art therapy, is that involvement in the arts, either as a participant or a spectator, can be used to engage disadvantaged populations, minorities and people at risk.

Arts provide a system of communication, and public art communicates with the public. The arts have also helped to deliver health promotion messages on issues such as teenage pregnancy, obesity, heart disease, and breast cancer.

One of the most striking and successful areas of the intentional social use of both community and more formal arts is in reaching youth-at-risk and youth who often do not respond to other types of initiatives. Virtually every type of artistic activity seems to have been used to attract and engage youth.⁶ The two figures below show examples of how art is used in Community Health Development by the Faculty of Public Health at Burapha University.

INSERT FIGURE 1 AND FIGURE 2 HERE

With participation in community arts activities, community members work in collaboration with artists to create a performance, exhibition or public event that expresses or raises issues important to that community. Through this process people can:

- develop skills and capacity to express and celebrate their culture
- get involved in group activities
- access supportive relationships
- build self-esteem and self-confidence
- increase a sense of self-determination and control

What are the benefits of promoting health through participation in community arts?

- community members learn transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving, negotiation, cooperation as well as skills in the arts
- the arts can provide a powerful tool for advocacy by creating and enlarging understanding of unfamiliar people and issues
- arts projects transcend language and cultural barriers
- a community is created among those working on the project, bolstering individual connections to the community
- events allow us to gain an appreciation of the talents of others and promote familiarity and greater understanding
- groups are linked to relevant support services, increasing communication and improving services
- organizations outside the arts sector develop an understanding of health promotion through partnership in community arts project.⁹

Conclusions

Worldwide, efforts are being concentrated on improving the health of populations through science (assessing problems and solutions), implementing effective programs, and developing policies and rules that benefit the majority of the people. The “new public health” focuses on preventing diseases not just curing them. It does not deny the importance of basic health care, but takes a socio-ecological view of health, promoting equity and social equality for the benefit of whole populations.¹⁰

Art is obviously not one of the core functions (assessment, assurance, or policy development) that are associated with the new public health.¹¹ However, in taking the broad view of the arts it is apparent that use of art is essential in providing public health.

So health officers should become aware of the role of art and culture in health and be able to discuss the uses of art in community health. They should be aware of the uses of art in media campaigns and be comfortable choosing messages that have meaning, and choosing art that enhances the credibility of a message. For example, art can be particularly useful in social marketing when turning a “negative consequence” into a benefit of abstention.¹² However, in order to convey such messages, it is important for health officers to be aware of culture of their communities and the meanings that the people give to art. Copying a model program or health promotion may not be effective unless it can be adapted it to local culture or integrated into the community art.

The health personnel should not hesitate to contact artists and persons with interest in culture when working on projects intended to benefit the public. Similarly, arts councils

and foundations can be active at national and regional levels to build relationships with the health sector and supporting artists to work in health contexts. Coordination of public investment in culture and health can make a positive difference to the wellbeing and aspirations of communities.¹³

It is important to point out that there is little academic research done on the effects of arts and culture on health. However, standard research techniques of the sort required for evidence-based practice may be inappropriate. While we would not say that art is antithetical to scientific knowledge, arts and artists provide a different way of knowing and understanding than the scientific method. Nevertheless, the effects of art interventions on specific health outcomes have been demonstrated and more recently, a role for arts in developing social capital, promoting social inclusion and public health is being recognized.¹⁴

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Figure 1 Some of the art activities used by Pissamai Homchampa to teach safe sex behavior and HIV prevention to youths in the Eastern Health Region of Thailand



Figure 2 Koolarb Rudtanasudjatam teaches communities how to use Dance and performance art for exercise at centers for the elderly.