

Arts engagement can help counter divisions in society

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Engagement with the arts can help societies counter economic, cultural and political divisions, new research co-ordinated by psychologists at the University of Kent shows.

The study, which included a psychologist at the University of Lincoln, provides evidence that the arts can act as a key social psychological catalyst that can foster and maintain social co-operation.

Researchers used data from a national UK survey of attitudes to establish that people's greater engagement in the arts predicts 'prosociality', whereby people were more likely to volunteer and give to charity over a two-year period.

Professor Dominic Abrams at Kent's School of Psychology was the corresponding author on the research, entitled *The Arts as a Catalyst for Human Prosociality and Cooperation*, working with first author Dr Julie Van de Vyver at Lincoln.

The researchers, who also worked with charity People United and were supported by grants from Arts Council England and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), made use of data from the ESRC's Understanding Society annual national longitudinal survey of 30,476 people in the UK.

The team looked at the positive relationship between arts engagement (attendance and participation) and prosociality (charitable giving and

volunteering).

They found that engagement in the arts predicted prosociality 'more strongly than a large set of demographic variables such as gender, individual resources such as personal income, core personality such as openness, and sports engagement'.

Arts participation and attendance independently were 'among the strongest predictors of charitable giving and volunteering', the researchers found. Only age and monthly savings had larger effects than arts engagement on charitable giving and only educational level and working hours had a larger effect than arts engagement on volunteering.

Commenting on the finding, Dr Abrams said that it was remarkable that 'regardless of people's age, education, employment and savings their engagement with the arts remained a stronger predictor of their prosociality than did any other variables'. Dr Van de Vyver said that 'it is particularly impressive that people who engaged more with the arts two years earlier continue to show even greater prosociality now'.

The researchers conclude that one implication of their findings for policy-makers is the potential for 'substantial social and economic gains' from investing in the arts. They argue that these may be achieved 'effectively by policies or investments that make the arts more widely available and ensure that access is not restricted only to the wealthy'.

Arts Council England's Director of Communication and Public Policy, Mags Patten, said: 'This paper makes a significant contribution to growing evidence of a causal link between taking part in the arts, individual wellbeing, and the strength of communities. This valuable piece of research will be important reading for those already studying in this vital area, and it should encourage new studies of the social impact of the arts.'

The Arts as a Catalyst for Human Prosociality and Cooperation (Julie Van de Vyver and Dominic Abrams) is published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Provided by University of Kent

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