PolicyLink

Social Cohesion that Promotes Equity and Well-Being through Arts and Culture:
Guidance for Research

Victor Rubin
November 2021

Introduction

People use the arts to build community in many powerful and unique ways. Numerous local projects are testimony to the influence of place-based arts and culture strategies. But how does the creative process of bringing people in a community closer together or bridging across divides work? Where has it been found to advance health equity and community well-being? Are there lessons in research and in the experience of the people who carry out this work that can be turned into tools for positive social change? And what should be the priorities for new inquiries, whether they are individual case studies or data sets that compare many experiences, whether they feature qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods?

The report from Metris Arts Consulting, *WE-Making: How Arts & Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being*, released in April 2021, addresses these questions with uncommon depth and comprehensiveness. Based on interviews with artists and community development leaders, an extensive and eclectic literature review, and insightful cases from three diverse communities, the report presented a multistage theory of change and detailed conceptual framework about the features, drivers, and outcomes of social cohesion.

Research for the report began in 2018 and the draft completed that year as the first phase of the project was revised and influenced in 2019 and 2020 through additional exchanges and feedback organized by PolicyLink and the Center for Arts and Medicine of the University of Florida.

This second phase of the project further amplified the voices of community-focused artists and cultural strategists, community developers, public health leaders, and researchers in all those fields.[1] Their dialogues were concerned with a closely related additional question: What are ways to infuse concepts of equity throughout both the theory and practice of advancing social cohesion through the arts?[2] Our participants dug even deeper than that, asking if social cohesion is, in every circumstance, an appropriate concept by

1

which to frame our understanding of this kind of organizing to advance equity? Is it perhaps too limited in its cultural context and assumptions? Does it put boundaries on radical imagination about transformative change? And is equity even the right goal, or should that goal be framed as a more fundamental type of change: the *liberation* of marginalized communities? The *WE-Making* report was strengthened by the dialogue engendered by raising these and other questions.

The completed suite of *WE-Making* resources by Metris includes four components with more than 160 pages, including an Appendix with, among other features, recommendations for future research.[3] Its relevance was tested and found to be very useful as guidance for responses to the crises that engulfed the country in 2020. As the funders of the project wrote in December 2020 in the Preface to the report:

> At a time when "social cohesion" is challenged in new ways by "social distancing," and when "place-based" art has come to mean arts participation with neighbors whom we only see at a distance or virtually, one well might ask whether resources of this nature are hopelessly obsolete. Far from it. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic fall-out and the protests related to racially motivated violence and discrimination have brought into national focus the persistent long-term threats to health equity. These crises have laid bare the ill effects of social isolation, social scarring, and social divides. These tools—and the lessons learned in their development—remain broadly applicable to those seeking to advance social cohesion, health equity, and community well-being.

This is one of two memoranda prepared by PolicyLink to augment the *WE-Making* report, to extend its reach, apply its concepts, and amplify its relevance with special attention to issues of racial equity. This is the memoranda on **research**, while an earlier one, published in April 2021, is focused on **practice**. Both memos address the sectors of community development, public health, and the arts. The memos draw upon the voices brought into the discussions about "WE-Making" as well as the array of experiences which the PolicyLink arts, culture, and equitable development team has encountered in our six years of documenting and assisting the field.

In the next section of the memorandum, we examine three realms of practice and social change which are generating important implications for research about social cohesion:

1. **Crises and social movements** in racial justice and public health: What does the evolution of these efforts suggest for research on social cohesion and the arts?

2. **Innovative practices** in place-based arts and culture and community health: What can we learn about social cohesion from people-focused changes to local places, from streetscapes to public housing redesigns to immigrant food systems?

3. **A new federal policy initiative** on infrastructure for communities—the Biden America's Jobs Plan—has social cohesion as an explicit goal. What could that mean and how could the link between infrastructure and social cohesion be studied?

   We conclude with a review of the vehicles by which new research can be shaped and supported: the frameworks being put forward, the networks of researchers, and the outlets for their work.

Three Areas of Social Change Generating New Avenues for Research

1. Crises and social movements in racial justice and public health: implications for research on social cohesion and the arts

Social cohesion, by that or another name, represents a set of drivers of collective action, collective efficacy, and development of shared values, all of which are basic building blocks of increased equitable community health and well-being. The convening to solicit feedback about the "We-Making" framework and its implications took place in September 2019, before the pandemic and before the most intense racial reckoning the following summer. There was a sense among some participants that the concept of social cohesion needed to be interrogated as potentially limited. That is, the predominant concept of research tends to posit or implicitly use a common, shared meaning and relevance of social cohesion. Acknowledging that this is a generalization, the predominant concept fits into a mainstream, often implicitly middle-class White social and cultural framework. This framework may be irrelevant to, or completely miss, the most important qualities of social organization in lower income communities and communities of color. Research is needed to understand the relationship between cultural strategies and social cohesion—if that is the best term to still use—and what it means in and for ethnically and racially distinct and diverse populations and places.

Taking this one step further, the research should be informed by a racial equity framework, with respect not only to understanding distinct cultural communities and their relationship to historical trauma and current structural racism, but also for learning the strategies by which to generate social cohesion in order to advance health equity in and for these communities.[4]

The intensity of the crises generated by Covid calls for putting the place of social cohesion and the arts in perspective. How does it fit into such dire, life-and-death situations? The recommendations for research on the arts, even when the focus is the connection to health equity, may seem out of place or hard to concentrate on during an intense national and world-wide Covid-19 health emergency and the upheaval and raising of awareness caused by recent movements for racial justice. We conclude, though, that the topic is fundamentally important and relevant to challenges raised by the pandemic. The myriad responses of artists in social practice to the pandemic reflect that importance, and cultural leaders who are trusted messengers make a unique contribution to public health education. Even if art is not a matter of urgency comparable to medical care at a time when basic safety, health, and economic

survival are at risk, it is an essential element of healing, collective organizing, and other responses.[5]

In a period of prolonged social isolation made necessary by the pandemic, strategies for reclaiming the components of social cohesion (e.g., place attachment, civic engagement, social capital) become newly important. The centrality of a racial equity lens for research, the biggest theme of the critique from our convening participants in September 2019, becomes even more essential at this time.

The movement in response to police violence and related forms of systemic racism has generated a wealth of art and cultural expression on city streets and on innumerable virtual platforms in spite of the limitations imposed by the pandemic. Black Lives Matter is an assertion of social solidarity as well as individual rights, and the flowering of Black cultural forms from movement-focused street murals and documentary filmmaking to Afro Futurist writing and so much else has reinforced that solidarity. As BLM movement groups face the inevitable complexities and divisions that come with seeking to endure beyond their galvanizing moment, arts and culture can be a critical element of shaping the ways that diversity of perspectives can exist within a broader common agenda. In each community, then, the long-term efficacy of movements for racial justice will depend on generating social cohesion.

There are important research issues to be explored, starting in real time, and continuing after the immediate events have taken place, about whether and how social cohesion is generated. While the research issues fit into the academic study of social movements known to political scientists and sociologists, it is important to combine that approach with a greater sophistication about the creative process and the impact of arts and culture strategies. The study of cultural strategies has benefited from a recent body of cross-disciplinary theory and empirical research.[6]

2. Innovative practices in place-based arts and culture and community health: what we can learn about social cohesion

Local innovators are continually breaking new ground in the integration of arts and culture strategies with efforts to revitalize and strengthen low-income communities and those that are home to people of color and Indigenous populations. Only a fraction of these efforts have been systematically documented and analyzed, and a great deal of valuable "practice-based evidence" could be gleaned from these myriad ventures if there was more of this research on local cases and a way to compare and share what is learned. At PolicyLink during 2019 and 2020, we sought to encourage this line of inquiry by modeling potential research agendas drawn from several exemplary cases. Now, the Center for Arts in Medicine at the University of Florida, already home to several repositories about arts and community health, is soliciting stories for a new compendium focused on social cohesion, the arts, and health equity. We discuss each of these efforts below.

Research agendas inspired by local creative placemaking innovations

Examples of valuable ways to frame and incentivize research can be drawn from, among other places, the four "research agendas" about creative placemaking completed in 2020 by PolicyLink. As the PolicyLink website describes the collection: "This series of applied research agendas, composed of four components, that when taken as a group, form a blueprint for generating and translating knowledge about arts, culture, and equitable development in 2020. The goal of the series is to encourage the examination of these various issues and see that the importance of arts and culture strategies is recognized by potential researchers and those who can use that research." (https://www.communitydevelopment.art/resources/research-agendas)

The four cases include:

- a cultural strategy for the reconstruction of Yesler Terrace, a public housing development in Seattle;
- a grassroots-led streetscape redesign in Oakland with the designers of "scraper bikes" at its center (See https://scraperbiketeam.com/ for background on this phenomenon);
- the cultural power of immigrant food systems with a focus on Asian American communities in Philadelphia and Vancouver, British Columbia; and
- an examination of how business improvement districts can reflect local cultures in their placemaking, with a leading example in Grand Rapids.

In 2021 we reexamined these four cases, and in every instance the local innovation had been conceived and implemented in ways that implicitly embodied the *WE-Making* theory of change about the components and processes of social cohesion. This suggests that other such local placemaking strategies would be fertile ground for case studies and comparative research that could help define the factors for success and the unique contributions of the emphasis on arts and culture.

A compendium of new stories on social cohesion, health, and the arts

The research and engagement undertaken during the revision of the *WE-Making* report and the response since its release in April 2021 has shown that there are many local examples of organizations, projects, and strategies which embody the advancement of social cohesion and well-being through the arts. Gathering stories of these examples in the words of their creators is an important next step in disseminating the concepts in the framework, building a virtual community of practitioners with similar goals, and encouraging ongoing attention to these themes from researchers. With support from The Kresge Foundation, the Center for Arts in Medicine at the University of Florida, in consultation with Metris Arts and PolicyLink, will solicit, provide stipends for, and curate for presentation on the web 25 accounts from practitioners in community development, public health, and the arts, of the ways in which their activities reflect the *WE-Making* framework. Particular attention will be paid to soliciting accounts from Black, Indigenous, and people-of-color communities and about projects which have a direct focus on racial equity and/or recovery from the Covid pandemic. [7]

3. Social cohesion as a goal of a new federal policy initiative: the Biden Administration's American Jobs Plan policy agenda for communities

A potentially huge opportunity to deliberately advance social cohesion has recently appeared in a somewhat unexpected quarter. The Biden American Jobs Plan policy agenda for communities explicitly includes social cohesion as a goal of this new federal investment. This may be the first time this intention has been articulated so directly. It is an encouraging sign for those of us who have long made the argument that "infrastructure equity" needs to involve not only the fair distribution of capital projects but also the strategic application of those investments to build economically equitable and environmentally sustainable neighborhoods, cities, and regions.

The White House announcement of the Community Revitalization part of the American Jobs Plan included the following element (with the paragraph on social cohesion appearing later in the original text but lifted up here for emphasis):

> Detailing the President's Proposal for Historic Investments to Build Wealth and Opportunity More Equitably, Including in Communities of Color. Today the Biden-Harris Administration is also releasing new details of President Biden's American Jobs Plan, which will make historic investments in building wealth and opportunity in Black and other communities of color. The American Jobs Plan will: …
>
> - *Strengthen social cohesion and build community wealth.* The Community Revitalization Fund will prioritize projects that strengthen social cohesion through shared use and civic engagement and build community wealth and equity for existing residents. The Fund will encourage innovative approaches to achieve those goals, including land acquisition, creation of new businesses and stronger connections to existing employment centers, establishment of community investment trusts and similar wealth-building models, and projects that provide for intercultural and intergenerational mixing.[8]

This goes well beyond the stodgy image and definitional limits of "traditional infrastructure" and posits a direct link between social cohesion and community wealth-building. It places the priority on "projects that strengthen social cohesion through shared use and civic engagement." This is an invitation for, if not a definition of, community-driven creative placemaking, so it will be interesting to see how the goal is translated into the mechanisms of federal support.

This initiative would benefit from applying systematic knowledge about how to strengthen social cohesion through shared use and civic engagement.

- What are the lessons about process and outcomes from research gleaned from placemaking and arts and culture strategies that could inform the design of an investment program that embodies that goal?
- What will be the opportunities to influence the program design?
- Given the concurrent Biden Administration priority to advance racial equity in the federal government, how should an infrastructure investment strategy with a social cohesion focus be crafted to overcome the consequences of systemic racism and build community?
- And, if it is enacted, what are the most important research and evaluation questions that should be addressed given the numerous and diverse grants and loans that will be made?

The recent emergence of the theory and practice of "equitable evaluation" confirms that there are frameworks and methods to analyze this kind of program that put racial equity at the center and could be applied to capital projects as much as to economic and social support programs.[9] And, the attention being given to the federal infrastructure initiative by practitioners, thought leaders, and researchers in creative placemaking is exemplified by the Creative Placemaking Leadership Summit, Infrastructure for Better Well-Being, scheduled for the end of November 2021. While social cohesion is not mentioned in the conference program, many of the presentations and themes reflect the *WE-Making* framework and the ways in which participatory design and planning for capital projects can advance the same goals.

Recent references to the kinds of infrastructure that enhance social cohesion have not been limited to the federal proposal. Public libraries, for example, can play a critical role by providing welcoming public spaces for collaborative exploration of local culture and common interests, and their potential for doing that in the digital age is as great as ever, as sociologist Eric Klinenberg explained in two books in 2018 and 2020 about what he calls "palaces for the people."[10]

All of these trends—federal infrastructure funding with an emphasis on community building, creative placemaking that is linked to public works investments, and recognition of the essential nature of public social infrastructure—demonstrate the high level of interest in supporting social cohesion through arts, culture, and design. They can all benefit from incorporating the lessons of recent research and from having the next round of innovations be carefully documented and analyzed.

Frameworks, Networks, and Outlets for Informing, Shaping, and Supporting Research

This memo includes recommendations for research in social sciences and for the academic elements of professional fields such as public health, arts management, and community development, whose leaders can benefit from an understanding of the processes of creativity and organizational change. Researchers in this arena are organized into many disciplinary and issue-based networks, and the most important and interesting work brings people from different backgrounds together. Following are notes on, and references to, several of the most significant resources and networks through which this work can be advanced.

Relevant Analytical Frameworks

- **Success Measures for creative community development**. The Success Measures program of NeighborWorks America recently completed a new arts and culture module, which has links to its preexisting neighborhood cohesion module, and these offer methods for directly measuring elements of social cohesion. Many elements in, or very similar to, those in the *WE-Making* theory of change are addressed in these measures, including a section directly on "Social Cohesion, Creativity and Culture" and another on "Community Attachment and Opportunities for Creative Activities." (https://successmeasures.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Creative-Tools-122220.pdf). Beyond the suite of data collection tools, the Success Measures team conveyed that this kind of evaluation should embody the values, principles, and practices of engaged scholarship and community-based participatory research. This would be consistent with the commitment to centering the voices and experiences of the people who are the subject of the inquiries and who have been disempowered or ill-served by so much previous research. See "Reflections on Evaluating Creative Community Development" (https://successmeasures.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CCDE-122220.pdf).
- **Cross-sector research about arts and culture**. At the conclusion of the operations of ArtPlace America in December 2020, leaders of its cross-sector research strategies produced a new website with a framework of 13 themes which reflect and integrate the findings of the 10 commissioned research scans of fields, and which can be reached through the new site. Those themes include such intentions as Bridge Differences, Ensure Cultural Continuity, Reflect Community Identity, and Heal Community Trauma. (https://creativeplacemakingresearch.org/)

Networks of Researchers

Leaders of the institutions that fund and support research, including foundations and government agencies, are also an important audience for the memo. These institutions share the information about and create the incentives for innovation, and in an interdisciplinary, intersectoral domain such as this, those incentives will be necessary to cross boundaries and emphasize attention to racial equity and to the assets, as well as the challenges, of marginalized communities.

- The Cultural Research Network (http://culturalresearchnetwork.org/) is "an open resource-sharing community of practice for anyone involved in arts- and culture-related research." The CRN put on a webinar several months ago with speakers including Chera Reid of the Evaluation Roundtable, formerly of The Kresge Foundation, and Jeremy Liu, formerly of PolicyLink, which described the social cohesion, arts, and well-being project and *WE-Making* report. The CRN website description continues: "Our network emphasizes the practice and process of current research, and the opportunities to inform that active work among peers, academics, and fellow professionals. Our collaborative platform provides opportunities to explore project or professional connections, methodological challenges, technological innovations, standards and practices, and shared infrastructure."

- The Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (https://www.a2ru.org/) has received funding support from ArtPlace to deploy in 2021 and beyond, after ArtPlace ended its operations, to continue collecting resources about cross-sector collaboration in arts and community development. "The Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (a2ru) fosters and champions the role of the arts and design in research universities. Underpinned by research and synthesis, our mission is **connected knowledge and empowered leadership**—to uphold and advance the arts and design in research, teaching, scholarship, and creative practice."

- Imagining America (https://imaginingamerica.org/) is a network currently based at the University of California, Davis, after earlier homes at the University of Michigan and Syracuse University. "The Imagining America consortium (IA) brings together scholars, artists, designers, humanists, and organizers to imagine, study, and enact a more just and liberatory 'America' and world. Working across institutional, disciplinary, and community divides, IA strengthens and promotes public scholarship, cultural organizing, and campus change that inspires collective imagination, knowledge-making, and civic action on pressing public issues."

- The Studio for Creativity, Place and Equitable Communities, Arizona State University, (https://herbergerinstitute.asu.edu/research-and-initiatives/studio-creativity-place-and-equitable-communities?dept=1400&id=1) brings ASU faculty members and students, artists, community leaders, and visiting experts together to further three goals as described on their website:

    - Addressing current standards of practice in arts, design, community development, planning and other related fields.
    - Strengthening the knowledge base around creative placemaking and placekeeping as a critical element of neighborhood and systems change.
    - Building leaders, stewards, and supporters of the work.[11]

Although grounded in the communities in Phoenix and its metro area, the Studio has, in four years, become a venue and network of national significance for thought leaders in creative placemaking and placekeeping.

Publications and Online Resources

The learnings from innovation and theory building can be conveyed in a range of different forms and settings. The pandemic has curtailed meetings for the time being, of course, and the end of operations for ArtPlace removed some important venues, but hopefully print and online publications and convenings, both online and in person, will fully resume in the coming year.

- Forecast Public Art, publishers of FORWARD, and previously *Public Art Review,* and hosts of various online resources and dialogues. (https://forecastpublicart.org/)
- *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*. Although this was a one-time edited volume published in 2021, its breadth and depth (45 chapters, 540 pages) will make it a resource for years to come and reflection of the diversity of the field.(https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Placemaking/Courage-Borrup-Jackson-Legge-Mckeown-Platt-Schupbach/p/book/9780367220518)
- National Endowment for the Arts, Research. (https://www.arts.gov/impact/research) A 2022-2026 Research Agenda for the NEA was released in draft form at the site listed above in August 2021, with public comments taken through September 24. Its development drew upon the *WE-Making* research and the dialogues on social cohesion, arts, and well-being reported on in this memorandum. NEA's Research Area # 2, "The Arts' Role in Community Transformation and Healing," reflects these themes directly: "Beyond seeking to understand and promote individual-level health outcomes associated with the arts, the NEA will encourage research proposals that examine the arts' contributions to community health

and resilience, greater livability in neighborhoods, social cohesion, and collective action. For this topic area, the NEA will invite a range of study designs and methodologies, especially community participatory research approaches."

- The PolicyLink "microsite," www.communitydevelopment.art, where this essay is located, will continue to add new materials about social cohesion and the arts as well as the ongoing impact of the ArtPlace America Community Development Investments initiative.

Conclusion

The last several years have seen a flourishing of arts and cultural strategies which support community building as well as the explication of a conceptual framework for the importance of social cohesion in advancing well-being. But recent times have also brought the extraordinarily difficult and stressful circumstances under which those concepts of social cohesion are being tested and questioned. There are important questions to be followed closely and systematically about how arts and culture help people respond to the challenges of the pandemic and the persistence of structural racism. Those questions might be about how collective healing functions or about the ways in which protest movements can connect to deep needs for connectedness and affirmation, or about many other phenomena. A modest but significant social infrastructure of support and dissemination of community-focused research has emerged, and it should be put to use to advance the generation of practical knowledge about social cohesion and well-being.

Notes

¹ The philanthropic and government supporters of the second phase of the project were actively engaged in its conceptual evolution, the connections to partners, and the dissemination of the finished report. They included staff from Bush Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and ArtPlace America.

² A working definition of equity, coined by PolicyLink, is "just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential" and the questions about whether equity is being approached can be characterized as: who participates, who benefits, who decides, and who is better off?

³ The components of the 2021 *WE-Making* report can be found at https://www.communitydevelopment.art/issues/social-cohesion. Also at that website are the other components of the second phase of the project, including Proceedings of the 2019 project convening produced by the Center for Arts in Medicine at the University of Florida and another memorandum by PolicyLink on promising practices, first posted in April 2021 and revised in November 2021.

⁴ J. Sonke, et al., "Creating Healthy Communities through Cross-Sector Collaboration," [White Paper] University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine/ArtPlace America, LLC (2019).

⁵ The COVID-19 Arts Response on the UF-CAM website includes 11 components, including links to scores of local innovations as well as to formal research projects: "Created by arts and public health leaders from across the country, the resources provided on this site are designed to support arts-based responses to COVID-19. They call for and are intended to enable cross-sector collaboration between the public health, arts and culture, and community development sectors to drive high-impact responses to COVID-19 across diverse communities." (https://arts.ufl.edu/sites/creating-healthy-communities/covid-19-arts-response/arts-covid-19-response/)

⁶ See, for example, research generated by members of Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (https://a2ru.org/), the Cultural Research Network (http://culturalresearchnetwork.org/), and Imagining America: Artists + Scholars in Public Life (https://imaginingamerica.org/). These networks are described in a later section of this memorandum.

⁷ The Call for these stories can be found on the website of the Center for Arts in Medicine at https://response.arts.ufl.edu/we-making-framework along with examples of projects, organizations, and professionals engaged in this work at https://response.arts.ufl.edu/we-making-repository.

⁸ The White House, "Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Actions to Build Black Wealth and Narrow the Racial Wealth Gap," June 1, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/01/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-new-actions-to-build-black-wealth-and-narrow-the-racial-wealth-gap/

⁹ Equitable Evaluation Initiative (https://www.equitableeval.org/); Evaluation Roundtable, Center for Evaluation Innovation (https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/evaluation-roundtable/)

[10] Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, Crown Publishing Group (2018) and *Palaces for the People: How to Build a More Equal and United Society*, Vintage (2020).

[11] For more information on the Studio for Creativity, Place and Equitable Communities, see https://herbergerinstitute.asu.edu/research-and-initiatives/studio-creativity-place-and-equitable-communities?dept=1400&id=1