

# Chapter 106

## The Arts as Public Service: A Critical Analysis Exploring the Relationship between the Arts and Wellbeing

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper will argue that the arts can contribute to wellbeing by supporting positive mental wellbeing as demonstrated in the breadth and quality of current arts and mental health practice. This practice challenges existing notions of evidence-based policy used to inform the development of public services. The exploration of relationship between arts and mental health highlights the specific interventions that demonstrate effective engagement with people experiencing mental health issues. The paper outlines the contextual background of arts and mental health and makes reference to the ongoing influence of earlier art movements like Outsider art. Then, the following examples of practice: art therapy, social prescribing, community arts projects and art in public spaces, will be brought together in order to classify arts and mental health as a distinct field which can be compared and contrasted to the wider arts and health movement. Finally this paper will deconstruct and analyze what arts and mental health practice means in terms of understanding mental health; challenging what is accepted as artwork and the role of people with mental health needs as artists. This paper asks for new and appropriate ways to measure the outcomes of the arts as a public service that recognize the expertise of the people and communities creating and experiencing the art.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper asks to what extent can the arts be considered a public service?

This paper will argue that the arts can contribute to wellbeing by supporting positive mental wellbeing as demonstrated in the breadth and quality

of current arts and mental health practice. This practice challenges existing notions of evidence-based policy used to inform the development of public services. In order to address this question an initial concept of wellbeing is outlined along with current priorities. The paper will then identify the arts and mental health field as a form of public

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8358-7.ch106

service and deconstruct the aspects of policy and practice that are relevant to wellbeing.

The examples discussed will focus mainly on the visual arts in order to directly reflect the influence and legacy of historical visual arts movements on current arts and mental health practice. The paper can be viewed within the current debate about public funding, engagement and value of the arts. The paper aims to progress the debate about intrinsic and instrumental value of arts and also challenge the dominant positions on the role of evidence about the benefits of arts to wellbeing. This paper will focus on artistic and management concerns within arts and mental practice and not specifically on health and social care outcomes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This methodology outlines the approach to conducting research, discusses why particular research methods were used and the merits and limitations of these methods. The chapter concludes with a summary of key theoretical concerns that inform the reliability and validity of the research. In developing this research I have been able to reflect on my own personal experience of working in local government and in the arts and mental health field. Further information was gathered through policy documents and discussion with contacts which signposted me to additional information. The research has been conducted within appropriate ethical boundaries to avoid potential conflict or risk to participants (Schloss, 1999). Participation in interviews was optional so that participants would not feel coerced. Each participant was given an information sheet and consent form which explained their rights and confidentiality.

Policy analysis was selected as the overall research strategy because this paper is looking at the nature of public service and policy analysis it is concerned with what is considered 'public'. Policy analysis using critical or discourse analy-

sis also allows the opportunity to investigate the meaning of public service as described in policy documents or the delivery of services and what this means for the arts. This approach brings together a broad range of sources to provide an in depth analysis of the policy at work and its future direction from different perspectives. To analyse policy also requires a definition of policy, which can be understood to describe as the attitudes, values and responses to a situation that are broader than a specific document. The process of policy analysis can be difficult to articulate and specific models of policy analysis can seem complex and too theoretical and therefore difficult to apply to practice. The policy analysis process is also broad and covers the different stages of the policy process, from identifying the problem to evaluating service delivery and outcomes.

In this paper the research was gathered from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are described as "observations and experiences or information gathered personally or from other people" (Dawson 2002, pp.28). The primary sources of data collection were attendance at two conferences hosted by Arts Development UK, the professional membership organisation for local government arts officers. The two conferences focused on topics which were relevant to the research aims of this paper: Arts and Health in 2010 and Outside In: One Year On in 2011. This provided useful background information on local government arts services, which helped inform the research objectives for this paper. The content of the conferences helped to build a current picture of the policy in practice to compare with my own knowledge and experience in the field.

Interviews were then selected as an appropriate method to identify areas where practice or perception of the policy conflicted with the dominant discourse of the policy. Candidates for interviews were selected through my own contacts from my work in local government and mental health and also suggestions from my supervisor.

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