



Arts & Kindness SUMMARY

People United believes that the arts and culture have a powerful and unique role to play in bringing about social change, through inspiring the conditions for kindness to grow. In this summary document, Jo Broadwood outlines how theories of prosocial behaviour and altruism can help us understand the impact of the arts on individuals, communities and society as a whole.

Introduction

We are living in turbulent times and confronting profound challenges such as climate change, rising inequality and resource scarcity. Both the global situation and circumstances closer to home such as the current austerity programme means difficult questions are being asked about fairness, entitlement and who is most deserving. Underneath these questions is a consideration of our values – our deepest motivations and guiding principles, and how they influence our everyday actions and behaviours.

At the same time, new research in areas such as evolutionary biology, neuroscience and genetics draws attention to the importance of character and its role in the development of personal resilience and well-being. Wider connections are also being made between individual happiness, how people treat each other, and participation in civil society.

Why kindness?

At first kindness can seem rather lightweight, particularly if it is understood as only referring to individual acts of generosity and thoughtfulness. However, a deeper examination reveals it as a muscular concept with a rich heritage. Stemming from the old English word 'cynd', kindness indicates a common humanity emphasising our connections in the present and across time¹. People United believes that in order for us to live well together in our increasingly interconnected and complex world we need to strengthen our capacity for empathy, friendship, social connection and concern for others, including future generations.

Our definition of kindness is rooted in theories of altruism and prosocial behaviour. Straightforward kindness is something that most people can understand and appreciate, and as such it can be a stepping-stone towards other attitudes and behaviours that may help us tackle some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Since ancient times human beings have been studying and debating what motivates and drives concern for their fellow human beings. The importance of kindness and compassion is a central strand of all the major world religions, and philosophers from as far back as Aristotle have been arguing about why people help each other. Some anthropologists argue that there is a biological foundation for social interaction which is not motivated by selfishness, i.e. it helps our evolution as a species to act in the interest of others. Economists are also intrigued by kindness; recently Layard² has evidenced the links between relative inequality and levels of happiness, and Wilkinson and Pickett³ have demonstrated that the quality of social relations is worse in less equal societies.

¹ Ballatt, J & Campling, P. (2011). *Intelligent Kindness: Reforming the Culture of Healthcare*. RCPsych Publications

² Layard, R. (2006) *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. Penguin

³ Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2010). *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. Penguin

The disciplines of social psychology, developmental psychology, sociology and neuroscience have perhaps made the most significant contribution to our understanding of the factors that influence kindness. Our emotions, for example, are key in influencing prosocial behaviour, and empathy in particular is fundamental to different kinds of helping. Theories of social identity and social capital can help us understand how our motivation to help others is influenced by the groups we feel we belong to. Recent research and thinking about our values has identified the beliefs which are more likely to lead to prosocial attitudes and behaviours, and how and what we learn from others plays an important part in deflecting or reinforcing our motivations to be kind.

A study of kindness can open the door to a body of literature and knowledge that is fundamental to human existence. At the same time some clear themes emerge, such as empathy, expression, collaboration, communication and cooperation. These lie at the heart of many kinds of arts practice.

How might the arts inspire kindness?

The arts can entertain and delight us. They make us think and feel. They can challenge, surprise, disrupt, provoke and cause offence. They tell stories of our own and others lives, and help us imagine other worlds and other ways of being. Over the centuries people have believed that the arts have profound effects, both positive and negative.

We are not arguing that every encounter with the arts can or should be expected to have a positive impact. However, for organisations like People United, which are setting out purposefully to promote social change, it makes sense to try to understand what can happen when people experience the arts in terms of whether, how and in what circumstances kindness might be inspired.

Drawing on the research, People United is proposing a model for understanding how the arts might inspire kindness. This model will allow us to take an informed approach to developing projects, evaluating the results and increasing their impact, whilst leaving space for the unpredictable outcomes that are inevitably part of arts practice and experience. We think this model may have relevance for all those who are engaged in social change, helping us to think creatively about how to explain the effects and benefits of what we do.

Arts as a superconductor for kindness

We have identified four main themes or *mediators* (a technical term from psychological statistics) that connect the arts to kindness. Our central proposition is that the arts can create the conditions for kindness to grow through activating one or more of these mediators. They are:

Emotions – the arts can engage people's emotions directly and powerfully and therefore can spark feelings such as empathy, key to influencing kindness.

Connections – arts experiences can bring people together creating immediate strong connections between individuals and groups.

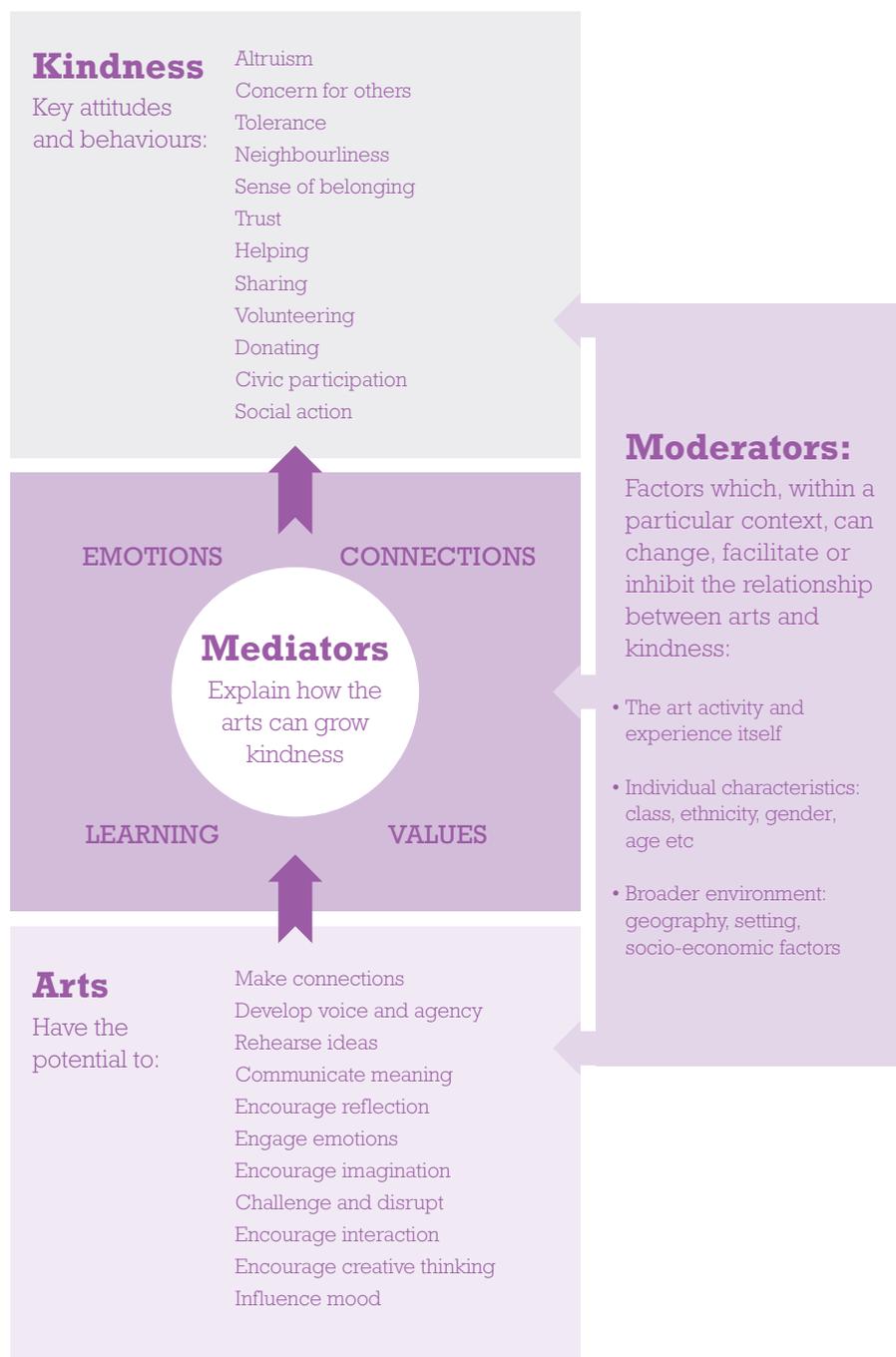
Learning – the arts can create opportunities for people to learn from and about each other and the world.

Values – many arts experiences involve a deep exploration of human values, key to determining how people live together and behave towards each other.

We suspect that when more of our mediators are involved or highlighted by an arts experience, the greater the potential for kindness.

Of course there are many things that may *moderate* the potential of the arts to inspire kindness. Factors such as the particular characteristics of the arts experience, the individual characteristics of those participating, and the wider socio-economic and political context all can play a part in moderating the impact of an arts experience on prosocial behaviour. It is also likely that an arts experience which takes place over time and involves repeated engagement of values will have a greater effect than a one off experience. It may even be that some arts experiences may activate one or more of the mediators but have a negative effect on kindness⁴.

The diagram below sets out how we think our model works. In our full paper we identify other pieces of research that demonstrate the potential links between arts and kindness.



⁴ Research has suggested that some art forms may deepen economic and social divides in communities, helping privileged people to connect with each other whilst making others feel excluded

Conclusion

This is just the beginning of our exploration. We think it has never been more urgent to look at fundamental questions of values, relationships and interconnectedness and how we live our lives together.

What is clear is there is still much more to do to understand how the arts connect with our deeper feelings and experiences, both as individuals and in our social relationships.

For People United we will be examining in greater detail how the arts might inspire kindness to grow, and will continue to develop the implications for practice and policy. We are developing new ideas: from artists' commissions around empathy and ethical frameworks for arts organisations to digital evaluation tools that measure social identity. We are excited about the possibilities and curious to learn more.

If you are interested in finding out more, please download the full paper here <http://www.peopleunited.org.uk/resources>

If you would like to work with us, please get in touch.
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