

Insights podcast: Arts and wellbeing
with Karen (Hei Wan) Mak and Nicky Goulder

Chris Coates

Hello, and welcome to Insights, the podcast from Understanding Society. Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that captures life in the UK in the 21st century. Every year we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about different aspects of their life. Each episode of insights, explores how people use our data. What can research tell us? And how can it change things? I'm your host, Chris Coates, and in this episode we'll be discussing the relationship between the arts and our mental health. I'm joined by Karen Mak, a senior research fellow in epidemiology and statistics at UCL and by Nikki Goulder, CEO of Create, which puts on creative workshops in schools, day centres, prisons, and hospitals.

Karen, could you start by giving our listeners a brief introduction to your research. What made you want to focus on the arts and health?

Karen Mak

So my research, it's mainly focused on identifying the patterns, predictors and health impacts of arts and culture engagement in the UK, and worldwide. So I guess my interest in arts and health came from recognising how the arts can shape our health and wellbeing. So I think the arts are so much more than entertainment. They are a way for people to connect with others, express themselves and find meanings and purposes. So it's really fascinating to me to explore how something as simple as engaging in the arts can really contribute to public health strategies and potentially change lives. And so I really wanted to dig into this area to explore different types of arts activities, and how these activities can support different dimensions of health, what the underlying mechanisms are, and how the arts can be used to address health inequalities.

My research often analysed population-based cohort data such as Understanding Society that follow thousands of people over a long period of time, and so far my research has shown that the arts are associated with improvements in happiness, life satisfaction, and social capital, and also reductions in depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation. But not everyone participates in the arts and enjoys the benefits. There is a social patterning in engagement where people with more privileged backgrounds, or those who live in wealthier areas or more culturally developed areas, engage more. And so part of my research is to identify enablers and barriers to the art, so that everyone can enjoy them.

Chris Coates

So, as I understand it, this research wants to look at the relationship between the arts and our mental health. So you know whether the arts are good for our mental health, or if happier people are more likely to engage in the arts. Is that right?

Karen Mak

That's right. So during my time researching in the area of arts and mental health, one question that pops up frequently is whether we're seeing the effects of the arts on mental health, or whether it's the other way around. So there has been evidence on both sides, but this was not tested empirically. So we weren't sure whether there was a feedback loop, and I think it was really important to understand this, and because how the direction goes could influence the design of public health strategies or arts organization policies. So, for example, if mental health affects the arts, this can inform the arts, organizations to develop strategies to ensure more equal opportunities for engagement, specifically focus on people who are struggling with a mental health condition. But if it was the arts that influenced mental health, then public health sectors can consider integrating the arts into their programs and initiatives to support mental health.

Chris Coates

So how specifically, did our data help you to study this link?

Karen Mak

Understanding Society is a really wonderful data set to explore the link between arts and mental health. And, in fact, it is one of my favourite data sets to work with. The data follows over 50,000 people, which is a really large sample size, and it contains repeated measures or questions on different forms of arts activities such as participation or attendance, and frequency of engagement, as well as different mental health dimensions, such as mental distress and wellbeing. And also Understanding Society collects thousands and thousands of variables which were very helpful for us to identify instrumental variables, to disentangle the causal relationship between arts and mental health. And also because of the data collection, and it's so rich, that we were able to adjust for many different variables or factors when exploring the relationship.

Chris Coates

So this is my layperson's non-academic interpretation. But are we essentially saying that because our data follows people's mental health over time and also follows their arts engagement over time that you can then look at the relationship between the two over time. And you can see, theoretically, if somebody's arts engagement increased last year, whether that has an effect on their mental health this year is that a sort of – is that about right?

Karen Mak

That's right. So because of the nature of the data set which follows participants over time, we were able to look at the relationship between arts and mental health longitudinally. But one thing that is really, really important is that – different to experimental study where we can control everything – observational study, so like using data from survey questions, we were not able to control everything because people have different lives, and it's just unethical to, let's say, to have people in the treatment group who engage in the arts compared to those who don't engage, and then to look to look at their mental health. And so in order to make sure that we control for a lot of things, we need really rich data sets that collect variables – such as their demographic and socioeconomic factors and health profiles, behaviours, lifestyles – in order to really see the relationship between arts and mental health. And the reason why Understanding Society is a really good fit of this research is that it also helps us to identify instrumental variables, which is a quite common approach to understand the causality. And causality is often one of the challenges when looking at associations. And so, because of how rich the data is, and how many questions that they asked, we were able to kind of like, create a randomised control trial, and to really understand the causality between arts and mental health.

Chris Coates

So, so what were your main findings and did anything surprise you?

Karen Mak

Yeah. So the main findings of this study show that there is a bidirectional relationship where happier people engage more, and people who engage more become happier. Now I have to say that the effect sizes are relatively modest, but it's kind of like expected, because the arts are only one aspect of our broader characteristics, behaviours, and environment. But these effects are clearly not only present in mental health to arts, but also in arts to mental health. And we're also seeing the effects, even after considering other factors like demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. So then, this suggests that there may be vicious and virtuous cycles, and potentially widen the health inequalities between people with better and poorer mental health. And so then we in the paper concluded that the arts and public health systems could potentially, mutually reinforce one another. And it is worth considering offering intervention approaches to increase people's engagement in arts, because this is a more feasible approach to breaking any negative feedback loop. And I think one promising approach to achieve this is through the social, prescribing schemes which connect people who are struggling with their mental health to community activities such as art classes or attending heritage sites via referrals.

So I guess the take home message from this study is that there is a feedback loop between arts and mental health, and that, importantly, it isn't just about improving mental health. It's also creating a more equal society where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from the arts. And so I guess the question now is, how can we work together to make this vision a reality. And I think, Nicky might have some great ideas to share.

Chris Coates

Yeah. So turning to you, Nicky, given your role and the work that Create do, is this useful research for you? Can this influence your work, do you think?

Nicky Goulder

This is such useful research for us here at Create. I mean, there were kind of four key highlights that we found particularly interesting. The first of them was the point around the arts facilitating kind of social bonding, increased social capital and reducing social isolation. And these are the kind of findings that have inspired our approach at Create. You know, we see that creative arts have a really positive impact on mental wellbeing, and that's really at the heart of everything that we do. And we see we see that coming out when we bring people together to be creative.

I really was interested in the point about arts engagement being far from equal. Just such an important point. Those who have poorer mental health, longstanding mental health conditions, and those experiencing lower levels of happiness are less likely to engage in cultural activities. And that's absolutely in line with what we experience, and at Create our whole focus is on bringing the creative arts for free to the most marginalised and isolated people in our society.

We were also really interested that arts participation may be strongly associated with components of mental wellbeing. At Create, we definitely don't do therapy. What we do is we put on creative arts programs that bring people together. But we're constantly told that our work is really therapeutic, and lots of our participants kind of report anecdotally that being creative has helped to alleviate their anxiety and low mood, for example.

And then the final point we found really interesting was that creative-based approaches are sustainable and scalable. And this is definitely consistent with our experience. Creative arts participation can be a more sort of accessible point for improving mental wellbeing than clinical interventions, and something we would definitely like to see rolled out more broadly.

The way that we have designed our programs uses the NHS's 'five ways to wellbeing' at the kind of the core of what we do, so encouraging our participants to connect with others, to learn new things, to be active, for example. And this was just completely reflected in our own Social Value Report in '23-'24, where 100% of our participants told us that attending Create projects had improved their quality of life, and 90% of our participants said that they had enhanced their wellbeing. And I wanted to kind of read out a quote, which I just absolutely loved from one of our adult carers who told us:

"These workshops have been really uplifting for my mood. I suffer with a low mood, but doing the artwork gives me moments where I feel like my mind is creating space. I always compare it to a glass jar, and mine's really full, overflowing and cracked. I've got no more space to do anything. But when I come here and do art, it empties some of the jar, and I can use that empty space to do my caring role."

I think the single most important thing that we've done as a charity is that we've made all of our projects free to every participant. Of course, that kind of puts a huge fundraising burden on the charity, and that's an ongoing challenge. But we passionately believe that absolutely everybody should have access to the creative arts, and money shouldn't be an obstacle.

Chris Coates

That's such a wonderful quote. Going back to the point about arts participation, you know, being hands-on and making a work, rather than simply going to a gallery. I wondered if that seemed particularly relevant for you.

Nicky Goulder

I mean, it's just. It's such a lovely question for me, because obviously running a creative arts charity – you know, Create's 22 in July, and for 22 years the entire focus of the charity has been making the creative arts, free creative arts programs, accessible to people who have the biggest kind of challenges in their lives. So I was, I was kind of really, really delighted. I think, for me, arts engagement at all is just wonderful and important, and we do, as a charity, sometimes use visits to arts and heritage sites within our projects. So we might, for example, take a group of participants to the British Museum to see some of the incredible artefacts there, and that might be, provide the starting point for a project. But, absolutely, the the work that we do is about bringing people together to give them a chance to be creative, and through that process to kind of build their skills for life, education, and work, and also the quality of life.

For us at Create, and what we believe that people need to create. This is not some rare talent that only kind of special people, who are creative, have. We absolutely know that everybody has creativity within them, and that everybody's life is enhanced by it. And I think you know, as shown in this report, creativity can impact wellbeing, emotional and mental health. But it also it builds skills, it brings joy, it reduces isolation. Creativity allows us to think differently, to express ourselves and to be heard, and for lots of our participants having a voice and being given a chance to use their voice and to be heard is really important.

I think creativity lets us learn about ourselves and others in new ways. It's inspiring, empowering. It raises aspirations. I mean, you've got me on my favourite topic, and I could talk about this forever – and also, according to kind of industry leaders like the World Economic Forum. It's also a core skill for business. So when we're giving people a chance to be creative, we're also helping them to build those kind of all-important work skills.

Last year we actually carried out a creativity survey with Jacksons of Yorkshire. And we found in that survey that 93% of people in the UK think creativity is important for their wellbeing, and 84% of people would like to be more artistic, I mean, I was amazed at how high those stats are. But for me, one of the things that was so fascinating in the survey was that 27% of respondents told us that they can't afford the arts. And that really is where Create comes in. We know, as we've just been hearing, that access to the creative arts isn't evenly distributed, and we are absolutely passionate about making the arts accessible to those who have the least access, and in Create's portfolio that includes groups such as children in and leaving care, young and adult carers, disabled children and adults, people in prison, children in psychiatric hospital units, older adults, including those with dementia, survivors of modern slavery and other groups.

And we work across 22 different art forms and give people an opportunity to explore their creativity, whether it's through music, dance, drama, circus, or through visual arts, or creative writing, film. And I think the impact can be absolutely profound. I wanted to tell you about a young carer, called Abi, who we started working with when she was just 7 years old, and she, over the years have taken has taken part in so many of our programs. She's a carer for her older brother who has autism, for her little sister, and then her mum, who's a single parent, and because of the economic situation of their family, she just wouldn't have had an opportunity to access the creative arts. But all our programs, as I mentioned, are free, and that enabled her to take part in lots of different projects, and she told us that it enhanced her relationships with her family. It gave her an emotional outlet. It helped her to improve her mental health, and it helped with her schoolwork, and perhaps the most important thing. She told me that creativity lets her dream. I think the wonderful kind of end or not the end. But where Abi is on her wonderful journey at the moment is that she got into the BRIT, famous for artists like Adele, an incredible Arts College in London, and she spent three amazing years there doing, acting and filmmaking, and in September she accepted an unconditional offer to read film studies at Westminster University, and she's just started there, which I think is just fantastic.

We need to be giving every single young person and every single adult opportunities to be creative, and to have the benefit of the creative arts, to inspire and upskill them.

Chris Coates

That's wonderful. One of the things that the paper talks about is the unequal access to the arts, and the fact that people with poorer mental health are less likely to go to cultural events or to take part in the arts themselves. And obviously, that is, setting up a vicious cycle, and it seemed to me that the work you do is not just a chance to break that vicious cycle, but it's also an opportunity to set up the kind of virtuous cycle that you've just been talking about that. And that's probably not the only example you have.

Nicky Goulder

No, absolutely. I mean, we've worked with about 46,000 participants since the charity was set up, and there are just hundreds and hundreds of stories of people whose lives have been completely changed. And I think one of the things that's incredible is that you can work with someone for three days on a project, and they will tell you at the end of those three days that they've realised, for example, maybe they're an adult carer, that actually they deserve and should have time for themselves. And it then, like the quote I read earlier, you know it gives them the space, then, to care more effectively. Or we work with a prisoner, and they create an original story for their child, and then that helps to build the relationship back with their family, because that child realises how much that father loves them. I think the arts are just so powerful and so important.

Karen Mak

I just want to say that it's really amazing to hear how that Nicky, in your survey, you found that creativity is really important, not only for people's mental health, but also the different aspects of their life. And I wanted to say that in research, we also theorise that the reasons why arts activities can have such a profound effect on our life is because of what's the components or the active ingredients within an activity and creativity is one of them. And along with social interactions, cognitive stimulations, and also mindfulness – and because arts activities often contain these elements which then can help people to have a healthier life. And, and so I just find it's really fascinating of what your survey has found.

Nicky Goulder

Those are such great points, and it's so brilliant to be speaking with somebody who, you know, who's dedicated their life to kind of doing really rigorous research around these areas. And I was so excited that our survey backed up in a very kind of practical way exactly those kind of points that you're making.

Chris Coates

There's a point in the paper, Karen, where you talk about some of the different ways in which, in which the arts can, can help us. And we know that the arts can reduce loneliness and isolation, it can increase our happiness and our self-esteem. It can help us regulate our emotions. It can release dopamine. So there are all these different mental and physical benefits that we can get from it.

Karen Mak

One of the research area that we always are very, very interested in looking at is that is to understand what the mechanisms are connecting the arts with mental health. Research has found or has identified over 130 active ingredients within the activity that can then lead different types of processes in our body and mind, to take action. So arts activities can help us to improve our mental health through biological processes, for example, reducing our cortisol and inflammation. It can also support our mental health through social mechanisms. For example, it improves our social capital, it allows us to connect with people, to interact with others. These are things that themselves are already beneficial to our health, and the arts lead to these mechanisms to take actions. And so it's really fascinating to see how the arts can really go under our skin, and also how we can improve our different dimensions and processes in our brain and our mind, in order to support our mental health and wellbeing.

Nicky Goulder

One of the things I always love is, on projects, you know, picking up your point about kind of the social interaction of the arts. During projects, you see these relationships start to build, and then people start to, you know, swap numbers with each other, and I love it, for example, if we're doing a project with adult carers, and those projects at Create tend to run over a number of weeks, so they'll do a half day workshop, and then they'll come back a week later. And what you'll often find is that they set up maybe a WhatsApp group, and if it's a photography project, maybe they start swapping photographs of, you know, they kind of do their own work at home, not because the artist has set homework, but that they're so excited about exploring how you can create sculptures in your flat with a selection of green objects, and then looking at the lighting of those, and maybe there are reflections or shadows, or whatever. And they start creating their own work and then sharing it with each other, or the next week when they come back, they want to tell you about work that they've created or experiences that they've had, and I think that the action point that you just made is just so important that it's not just on the little project that they're taking part in. But it's, it's their excitement about the art form and about the other people that they meet and about their levels of confidence. And then they feel so much better about themselves, and having time for themselves, and time where they realize how talented they are. It's such a privilege being involved in this work.

Karen Mak

Definitely, and I agree with you that the social element of these art activities are such an important component in it. And I think that maybe stems from humans being social animals. And I think the arts can really allow people to connect with each other and really fulfil our social needs. And so it's really fascinating, Nicky, that you, you were leading a charity to allow people with different backgrounds, different professions to come together and enjoy different types of arts.

Nicky Goulder

I think another project that the collaboration is so important and powerful on is, we have a programme called Inside Stories, and we work in prisons with mainly fathers, young fathers, and they write, record, illustrate, and set to music, original stories for their children. And what I really love is we pair up two prisoners, and so there are different pairs creating stories. So they originally they work with one of our professional writers to write an original story, and then the second week they work with one of our visual artists to illustrate that story, and then, in the third and fourth weeks they set that story to music, and they record it. And what you so often find is that maybe one of the pair is really under-confident about their writing, their levels of literacy, but perhaps the other one's really strong in that area. And then in the second week, perhaps, the one who was less strong, or thought they were less strong with writing absolutely thrives with the art. And so often in the past, you know, we've had a little bit of a battle with the guys wanting to write their own story for their own child at the beginning of the project. But by the end they realise that that collaboration, the teamwork, the pulling on other people's skills and ideas. It's like that 2 plus 2 equals 5, that the stories that they come out with are more powerfully written and more beautifully illustrated because of that teamwork that's involved and drawing on other people's skills.

Karen Mak

This is really lovely to hear.

Chris Coates

We know that artists feed off each other. The social aspects of the groups and the WhatsApp groups that people set up and start sharing their work – that seemed really interesting to me.

Nicky Goulder

Definitely. I mean, I think being a creative arts charity, many of our projects are more than one art form – so bi-art form, or cross art form. And we've done projects, for example, where maybe one group do a photography project, and then their work inspires a group to do creative writing. And then we have these just beautiful exhibitions of, say, a collection of photographs, and each photograph is paired with a piece of writing that was created by a different artist, one of our participants who's been inspired. Or, in the example of the British Museum, I remember we did a project a few years ago

where we took a group of amazing young carers to the Africa galleries. And then they used that experience to create music and dance inspired by what they'd seen.

Chris Coates

My final question for both of you, and it's impossible to answer, because it's a huge question, but, Nicky, first: what should governments be doing to build healthier, happier communities?

Nicky Goulder

Gosh! That is, is such a huge question, I mean, for years the creative arts have been underfunded, and they are undervalued by so many of our political leaders, and I think what's been incredibly tough to see, as I said, Create's going to be 22 in July. What's been incredibly tough is over those years to see opportunities to make a living as an artist have been disappearing, and the creative arts have become less well-funded. There was a fantastic report that came out last year from the Campaign for the Arts and the University of Warwick, and this unveiled a crisis in our UK arts sector, and showed that the total culture budget has been slashed by 6%, at a time where countries like Germany, France, and Finland have increased their spending by up to 70%.

I think what's interesting is that the Labour Government have indicated an understanding of the value and importance of creativity to society and our economy, and actually, only on Friday our Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy announced a £60 million package of supports for the arts. But, interestingly, this money has been earmarked for grassroots music venues, creative businesses involved with music and film exports, and start-up video game studios – so that arts funding isn't going to be coming to organisations like ours. It's kind of commercially allocated.

I think, with the cost of living crisis, there is just a huge risk that support for the arts will fall to the bottom of the government's priority list, and we know that the arts in schools has been removed. And yet the World Economic Forum, for example, has identified the creative arts as being one of the core skills for business, and at a time where we have AI, more and more, we need to be able to be creative and to take creative approaches. And we would love to see the being a real push in school. So instead of it being STEM, which everybody talks about, we really believe that that should become STEAM, with the arts absolutely at the heart of that.

We know that society needs creativity to thrive, that it's absolutely vital for our economy and for the wellbeing of the population, and investing in the creative arts benefits everybody, and should be absolutely a priority for organisations and for institutions across our society.

Chris Coates

Karen, did you want to come in on that? Is there anything you want to add?

Karen Mak

Yes, definitely, I agree with Nicky very much on the arts programmes provided in the education. We all know that adult behaviours are usually deeply influenced by our childhood experiences, and this also happens in the arts. So where adults engagement in the arts, influenced and shaped by our childhood exposure to the arts. And, in fact, in one of our studies that analysed data from the Taking Part Survey that shows that for in-school activities, the social patterning disappeared, meaning that engagement is equalised, and it is expected in a way that, when children engage the arts in the schools, they either are mandatory or compulsory, or schools provide more affordable or subsidised cultural trips for students to engage in the arts. And so I think it's really, really important to make sure that children have the experience to participate in the arts, and to have the opportunity to cultivate the artistic skills which can then support their continual engagement throughout their lifetime.

Nicky Goulder

I mean, I just think it's absolutely key. And I think if we look back at the the story that I told about Abi and the impact it had on her own mental wellbeing, on her achievements at school, on her family relationships, and on that all-important opportunity to dream and to dream big and to be brave enough

to follow her dreams. I think our society needs the arts absolutely at the heart, and we know that if children miss out on opportunities when they're young, it can be too late. So the arts absolutely need to be at the heart of our education system and throughout life for people of all ages.

Karen Mak

Definitely, and I also think that it is also quite crucial to, to consider people who have traditionally been excluded from the arts. And I think programmes like the social prescribing schemes, are really, really helpful, because that really connects people who are struggling with mental health, for instance, to like art activities. And I think and I'm such a big supporter for social prescribing, because I think sometimes the traditional treatments for mental health, such as prescribed medicines or one-to-one psychotherapies might not be effective for everybody, and I think arts activities can come in because they bring in the social element to the treatment and also provides many different ways for people to engage with their community through the arts, to find people who shared common interests, express themselves. And I think that that's the value of the social prescribing.

Nicky Goulder

Absolutely.

Chris Coates

Thank you so much to Karen and Nicky. That's all for this episode. You can find out more about how Understanding Society data is changing practice and informing policy by visiting our website at understandingsociety.ac.uk and by following us on social media. Thank you for listening and remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.