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INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION IN ARTS
AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION, AND
THE RELATIONSHIP WITH WELLBEING:
RESULTS FROM THE 2014–15 NATIONAL
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER SOCIAL SURVEY

N BIDDLE AND H CRAWFORD

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Dr RG (Jerry) Schwab
Director, CAEPR
Research School of Social Sciences
College of Arts & Social Sciences
The Australian National University
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Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression, and the relationship with wellbeing: results from the 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

Nicholas Biddle and Heather Crawford

Nicholas Biddle is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and the Centre for Social Research and Methods, Research School of Social Sciences, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Australian National University. **Heather Crawford** is a Research Officer at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Research School of Social Sciences, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Australian National University.

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Abstract

The analysis presented in this report shows that, among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, better outcomes for socioeconomic indicators such as employment, education and income are positively associated with participation in arts and cultural expression. There is also strong evidence that those who participate in arts and cultural activities are more likely to have higher levels of subjective wellbeing. Notions of ‘cultural participation’ and ‘wellbeing’ are complex and multidimensional, and further research is needed to distinguish between selection effects – whereby individuals with more resources or higher wellbeing levels are more likely to participate in arts and cultural activities – and the benefits to individual wellbeing resulting from arts and cultural participation.

Keywords: arts, culture, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous

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Acronyms

ANU	The Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

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Background and context

A limited, but important, body of literature uses quantitative data to analyse participation in arts and culture among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian population. Previous research, reported in Biddle and Swee (2012) showed that:

- geography matters, with those in remote areas slightly less likely to have participated in Indigenous cultural production¹ after controlling for a range of other characteristics
- participation in the mainstream economy is not necessarily a barrier to participation in cultural production, because those with high levels of formal education were more likely to speak, understand or be learning an Indigenous language
- a positive relationship exists between participation in Indigenous cultural production and an Indigenous person's subjective emotional wellbeing.

In addition to the strong contribution that participation in arts and culture makes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, there is a very large literature (including from the Australia Council for the Arts) on the contribution that this participation makes to the rest of the First Nations community, as well as the Australian community as a whole.²

The aim of this paper is to update and extend the analysis in Biddle and Swee (2012) by describing and analysing:

- First Nations peoples' participation in their arts and culture
- demographic breakdowns of participants
- the relationship between arts and cultural participation and wellbeing, and other socioeconomic outcomes.

The paper begins with a detailed review of the available literature on participation in the arts. We then discuss the data and methods for this current study, and provide a descriptive analysis of participation in arts and culture. This is followed by analysis of the factors associated with participation, with the final set of findings looking at the relationship between participation in arts and cultural expression, and measures of wellbeing. The final section of the paper provides a summary and some concluding comments.

Literature review

This section provides an overview of research on Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression, and the relationship with wellbeing, and related topics.

The terms 'arts', 'culture' (and therefore 'cultural expression') and 'wellbeing' are broad and multidimensional, and can be used to mean many different things in various contexts. To establish the scope of our review of the research in this field, it is essential to start by looking at some approaches to these concepts.

In broad terms, Guiso et al. (2006) define culture as '... those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation'. Another perspective is the description of culture 'as the ways that "we make sense of our lives together, or in more formal terms, as the social production of meaning." By "moving beyond a focus on professional arts production, this view allows the cultural perspective to facilitate the democratic generation of and expression of society's values and aspirations through creative participation"' (Hawkes 2006, cited in Duxbury & Jeannotte 2010:15). This approach recognises the dynamic nature of culture and also implicitly acknowledges the potential for debate, tensions and conflict arising from the contest of values or worldviews. Dockery (2010:5) argues that 'all approaches to defining culture essentially involve classifying people into groups on the basis of some common connection between them, and identifying ways in which these people differ from persons without that connection, or from groups with other connections'.

That this is likely to be a difficult task, yielding categorisations that could be contested, is apparent from the views articulated by prominent Aboriginal journalist and author Stan Grant, who argues that 'culture is not static, identity is fluid'; that 'there are different types of Indigenous people' (Grant 2016).

In this paper, we allow participation in arts and cultural expression to be mainly self-identified. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise some challenges in attempting to measure cultural expression in relation to Indigenous Australians, given both the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' traditional heritages and contemporary circumstances, and their diverse economic, social and geographical environments.

We now turn to the concept of wellbeing. While international work by the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) over the past decade supports the validity of using common wellbeing frameworks to understand the quality of life across diverse populations,³ there is also a recognition that the specifics of what matters for wellbeing are likely to differ according to different 'geographic, economic, social and cultural contexts' (OECD 2013:3). Wellbeing frameworks – such as that underpinning the OECD's *How's life: measuring well-being* series – typically comprise multiple interrelated domains that can interact in complex ways to support or hinder wellbeing. Recent developments to the OECD framework have seen the inclusion of, or greater emphasis on, newer domains or concepts relating to work–life balance, subjective wellbeing, equity and sustainability (OECD 2015).

In more recent analysis, Yap and Yu (2016) attempted to 'operationalise the capability approach' by incorporating Indigenous worldviews into the study of wellbeing. The authors used a participatory approach and argued that 'utilisation of the capability approach here provides an opportunity not only to understand conceptualisations of wellbeing but also to sketch the pathways towards achieving wellbeing'. Based on a small sample of respondents from Broome, Western Australia, the authors identified 8 themes and 16 functionings. The themes were not too dissimilar to issues identified in frameworks that are not specific to the Indigenous population. However, there are some different emphases and inclusions. Specifically, the authors identified the following themes:

- family, identity and relatedness
- community
- connection to country
- connection to culture
- safety and respect
- standard of living
- rights and recognition
- health.

The remainder of this section presents a brief overview of some literature on Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression, and the relationship with wellbeing, in the context of the introductory definitional statements above.

The section begins by providing an overall assessment of the body of literature and summarising the common themes and findings. Next, we discuss previous quantitative studies of Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression, and the relationship with wellbeing. We then look at studies using qualitative and

ethnographic approaches. Finally, we describe some relevant frameworks, other reports and resources.

Overall assessment of the body of literature

There are a number of literature reviews and other types of studies about Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression, and the relationship with wellbeing. Overall, previous reviews (mostly not focused on the Indigenous population) have concluded that there is some, albeit weak, evidence of a link between arts participation or creative expression and wellbeing (McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras 2002, AEGIS 2005, Stuckey & Nobel 2010, Leckey 2011, Bungay & Vella-Burrows 2013, Ware 2014). The reviewers noted the difficulty of defining such broad concepts as 'arts', 'cultural' and 'wellbeing'; the lack of common models or a systematic approach for assessing outcomes; and the challenge of selecting outcome measures, so that studies examine a diversity of arts practices and outcomes. AEGIS's review of the literature for the Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group provides a detailed discussion of the limitations of this broad field of research. These limitations include a lack of clarity around purpose, a lack of theoretical grounding and a lack of attention to mechanisms (2005:28). Another review notes that 'it is difficult to make generalised claims about [the health impacts of] community arts in general based on the literature surveyed' (McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras 2002).

Other limitations include an absence of strong evaluations (Ware 2014) and a lack of quantitative studies (AEGIS 2005). A number of reviews or studies noted the difficulty of establishing the direction of causality (Dockery 2010, 2011; Biddle & Swee 2012; Ware 2014). Some research identifies a need for longitudinal studies to assess long-term effects (McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras 2002, Ware 2014) and provide stronger evidence of causal associations (Dockery 2011, Biddle & Swee 2012).

Bearing in mind these limitations, the following sections of this report provide a summary of common themes and findings from the research.

Common themes and findings

A recent report titled *Supporting healthy communities through arts programs* (Ware 2014), produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, provides a very useful and accessible assessment of literature relating specifically to Indigenous Australians. The scope of the review is formal arts programs (specifically, performing arts, visual arts, literary arts, and traditional or

nontraditional crafts). Some of the benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of participating in arts programs identified by Ware are listed below. The list is supplemented by references to additional literature or research that are broadly relevant to our review, including studies focused on Indigenous Australians and studies that cover Indigenous populations of other countries, or non-Indigenous populations of Australia or elsewhere.

Benefits identified by Ware (2014) are:

- improved physical or mental health and wellbeing (Chandler & Lalonde 1998; McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras 2002; AEGIS 2005; Dockery 2010, 2011; ABS 2010, 2012; Biddle & Swee 2012; Cuyppers et al. 2012; Currie et al. 2013;)
- increased social inclusion and cohesion
- improvements in school retention and attitudes towards learning
- increased validation of, and connection to, culture (Edmonds 2007)
- improved social and cognitive skills
- crime reduction
- economic development.

Although some common themes and findings emerge from many of these studies, some may not be applicable to the specific circumstances of all Indigenous Australians or their communities. From this list of benefits, the complexity of relationships between various factors becomes apparent. Although economic development may be considered an outcome in its own right, it is also a potential mechanism for improving wellbeing according to other measures. Altman's body of work on a hybrid economy model includes the 'customary economy', which 'is constituted by non-monetised activities, such as fishing, hunting and gathering, that emerge from and reaffirm dynamic Indigenous connections to country and ways of being' and which 'for Altman ... is central to sustainable livelihoods on the Indigenous estate' (Russell 2011). Russell notes that art is often used by Altman to illustrate the intersections between the customary, market and state sectors of local economies, particularly in remote Australia. Altman's research is therefore highly relevant to questions about the relationship between Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression, and wellbeing. Some of the quantitative studies described in more detail in the following section also highlight interactions between cultural participation and mainstream socioeconomic outcomes.

Other studies highlight the therapeutic effect of creative activities (Leckey 2011) and, interestingly, the role that

arts can play in facilitating communication between service providers and service recipients to facilitate therapy – overcoming the misalignment of western 'therapist–client' relations with Indigenous worldviews and communication styles (Muirhead & De Leeuw 2012).

Quantitative studies

Studies relating to Indigenous Australians

A small group of quantitative studies have analysed results from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) to examine links between cultural participation and wellbeing. The NATSISS was a national survey conducted in remote and nonremote areas, including discrete Indigenous communities.

The most recent of these studies examines the 'sustainability' of Indigenous land (recognising an area as their homeland or traditional country; living on homelands or traditional country; participated in hunting, fishing or gathering over the previous 12 months), Indigenous language (spoke, understood or were learning an Indigenous language) and Indigenous culture (undertook cultural production in previous 12 months; participated in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations in previous 12 months), and the links between these and wellbeing (Biddle & Swee 2012). The outcomes examined are aspects of emotional wellbeing: the probability of being happy all or most of the time in the previous four weeks, and the probability of being so sad that nothing could cheer you up at least some of the time over the same period. The authors point to continuing Indigenous attachment to land, languages and culture as a way of maintaining, expressing, embracing and taking pride in their Aboriginal identity. They also draw on previous literature to highlight mechanisms that might explain some benefits of cultural production and wellbeing, such as generating economic resources and physical activity, as well as potential costs, such as exploitation (Biddle & Swee 2012:12–13).

Using multivariate models to control for basic demographics, socioeconomic variables and removal from natural family (because of its disruptive effect on a person's relationship with their language, culture and homelands), the analysis showed significant positive links between the measures of sustainability and emotional wellbeing. The authors note the difficulty of establishing the direction of causality (does maintaining cultural attachment make people happy, or are happier people more likely to engage in these activities? – it is likely that there are effects in both directions). The

authors identify a complicated relationship between the measures of sustainability and emotional wellbeing. The study does provide evidence of a positive relationship between cultural attachment and participation, and emotional wellbeing, even after controlling for a range of socioeconomic and other variables associated with wellbeing such as mobility, education, employment, self-assessed health, experience of violence in the previous 12 months, having been arrested in the previous five years, or living in a house that does not meet the occupancy standard. However, there is a significant positive association between living in remote areas and feeling happy over and above these measures of sustainability. Also, having higher levels of formal education was associated with greater language and cultural maintenance. The authors argue that, while formal education can take Indigenous Australians away from their land, language and culture, it can also give them the resources to pursue sustainability (Biddle & Swee 2012).

Work by Dockery drawing on the 2002 NATSISS (Dockery 2010) and the 2008 NATSISS (Dockery 2011) also examines links between culture, socioeconomic variables and wellbeing. In the 2011 study, Dockery states that ‘the role of culture in shaping Indigenous socio-economic outcomes and wellbeing remains a critically under-researched area’ (2011:3). He also notes some limitations with his earlier work that are similar to those discussed above as being some of the general limitations of this field of research: that culture is likely to be a multidimensional construct, that no explicit mechanism for the relationship between cultural attachment and wellbeing was specified, and the lack of outcome measures collected as part of the 2002 NATSISS.

In the first of these studies, some of Dockery’s findings are that those with strong cultural attachment were more likely to have better self-assessed health, less likely to have been arrested, less likely to have consumed alcohol at risky levels and more likely to have been in employment. There is also some evidence that those with minimal or weak attachment have better outcomes than those with moderate attachment.

Dockery’s later study expands on this work to further explore the concept of ‘cultural attachment’, which he breaks down into ‘participation in cultural events and activities’, ‘cultural identity’, ‘language’ and ‘participation in traditional economic activities’. He also extends the outcomes examined to include measures of subjective wellbeing. In this study, he focuses on how cultural attachment may affect outcomes, and identifies ‘the importance of culture in strengthening one’s sense of

self-identity’ as the main mechanism for improved life outcomes that emerges from the literature (2011:4–7).

The results of this study generally confirm the earlier findings that ‘Indigenous peoples’ stronger attachment to, or engagement with, their traditional culture is associated with more favourable socioeconomic outcomes’ (Dockery 2011:10). Interestingly, this later study finds an independent role of cultural identity. Dockery argues that, although positive associations between participation in cultural events or activities and wellbeing are most likely to arise because of reverse causation or omitted variables, the cultural identity factor is less susceptible to this explanation. The study found that participation in traditional economic activities (hunting, fishing, gathering) was associated with poorer outcomes in relation to education, risky alcohol consumption and the chance of being arrested (Dockery 2011).

In examining the links between culture and the added measures of wellbeing (happiness, mental health, psychological distress), Dockery finds that the positive relationship between strong cultural attachment and wellbeing occurs primarily in remote areas, whereas experience of discrimination among those living in nonremote areas offsets the positive association between strong cultural attachment and wellbeing (Dockery 2011).

The salient finding from these studies is that, in general, there are positive associations between most aspects of cultural attachment or participation examined and wellbeing. There are also important links between cultural attachment or participation and better socioeconomic outcomes. Therefore, as the authors of these studies argue, it is important to pay attention to the complex ways in which different aspects of cultural attachment and participation interact with socioeconomic determinants to influence Indigenous health and wellbeing (Dockery 2011, Biddle 2012, Biddle & Swee 2012).

International studies

Most, but not all, of the international studies reviewed have found a positive link between cultural participation and health or wellbeing outcomes (Chandler & Lalonde 1998, Wilson & Rosenberg 2002, Cuypers et al. 2012, Currie et al. 2013,). Three studies relate to Indigenous people in Canada. Two of these find that attachment to traditional culture has a protective effect – in one case against illicit drug use (Currie et al. 2013), and in the other against suicide (Chandler & Lalonde 1998). In contrast, the study by Wilson and Rosenberg (2002) found associations between socioeconomic determinants and

health, but inconclusive evidence about cultural factors and health. Again, this appears to be a good example of the limitations of this field of study in general, with these three studies using different outcome measures; Wilson and Rosenberg note the broad definition of 'traditional activities' in the data source that they used. As seen in the Australian studies described above, different aspects of cultural participation can have different relationships with health or wellbeing (Dockery 2011, Biddle & Swee 2012).

Qualitative and ethnographic studies

A number of qualitative and ethnographic studies add to the body of evidence about the ways in which cultural participation might affect health and wellbeing.

One recent article used qualitative analysis to examine textual information from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children in parental responses to the questions 'What is it about Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture that will help the child grow up strong?' and 'Apart from health and happiness what do you want for the child?' (Colquhoun & Dockery 2012). Themes identified by the authors included cultural identity, cultural pride, understanding of culture and a sense of belonging, as well as a group of themes that they interpreted as 'reflecting a balance of desires for success in mainstream society (including education and success) and in their "traditional" culture' (Colquhoun & Dockery 2012:2).

Another article relating to Indigenous Australians (Guerin et al. 2011) considers the mechanisms by which various forms of cultural attachment or participation may be linked to mental health or social and emotional wellbeing outcomes, drawing on a review of the literature and the authors' research with Indigenous communities. The authors argue that there is a need for more detailed research to explore the 'multiple pathways' that are provided in different contexts (this issue was illustrated by the quantitative studies discussed above). The article presents a framework for conceptualising the benefits from engagement in creative activities, which include employment opportunities, social engagement, expression of thoughts and feelings, skill development, confidence and self-esteem, travel, achievement of goals and positive coping strategy. Again, some of the examples discussed illustrate the complexity of the task of linking cultural participation with health and wellbeing outcomes.

Some work looks at the contribution of arts and creativity to the revitalisation of rural and remote communities in Australia, including economic development, social

wellbeing and empowerment (Anwar McHenry 2009, 2011; Dunphy 2009). One study highlights the role of arts participation in supporting civic and social participation to build resilience against inequity and as a way of 'facilitating understanding between ... disparate groups' (Anwar McHenry 2011:245). This study also notes the importance of human capital, governance structures and funding arrangements in supporting community arts participation. Although these studies do not focus on the Indigenous population specifically, they do refer to rural and remote areas where relatively large proportions of the Indigenous population live.

Dunphy (2009) examines the way that models and approaches differ depending on whether research is focused on the economic impacts or social outcomes of cultural activity, as well as arguments about the intrinsic value of arts and creativity. The author draws on other resources to identify factors identified as significant for the success of arts development in regional Australia, including peak body activity; presence of artists, arts supporters and volunteers; and better funding support (viewed as investment) in the arts. Some of the barriers identified include poor facilities, lack of community resources, changing populations, lack of status for the arts, and 'city centric' approach of funders and gatekeepers (Dunphy 2009:11). Again, while not specifically focused on the Indigenous population, many of these or similar issues are also familiar in the Indigenous context, with these studies having some common themes with Altman's work relating to the arts and economic development in remote Indigenous communities (see, for example, Altman et al. 2008).

Finally, qualitative research, using both unobtrusive and ethnographic methods, by Edmonds (2007) for her doctoral thesis leads her to the conclusion that 'For participants in this project, the reinvigoration of knowledge and practices from the past, along with the freedom to express their Aboriginality in ways determined by them, contribute significant "meaning and value" to their lives as contemporary Aboriginal Australians' (Edmonds 2007:329). An interesting contribution of this work is its references to issues such as political activism, self-determination, and the use of art by more urbanised Aboriginal people to assert their cultural identity. The role of cultural participation in cross-cultural exchange is also discussed, echoing Anwar McHenry's observation about the role of the arts in facilitating discussions between disparate groups. The role of the arts in cross-cultural exchange and, potentially, reconciliation is also discussed in another study of 'service learning' or cultural exchange among creative and performing arts students in Australian universities (Bartleet et al. 2014).

Data and methods

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics website:⁴

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) was conducted from September 2014 to June 2015 with a sample of 11,178 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in private dwellings across Australia. The NATSISS is a six-yearly multidimensional social survey which provides broad, self-reported information across key areas of social interest for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, primarily at the national level and by remoteness.

The survey includes information on both children (aged 0–14 years) and adults. The analysis presented here relates to respondents aged 15 years and over (7022 respondents), so excludes children.

With the release of data from the survey, the analysis of First Nations peoples' participation in their arts and culture follows a four-step process:

1. Identify a subset of participation measures and develop an index or set of indices. The participation measures are incorporated in the analysis as a nested hierarchy of variables. At the lowest level (level C) are individual participation measures. These 11 measures are then grouped into middle-level variables (level B), with the first three level B variables further grouped into an 'overall participation' measure (level A) and the last three level B variables grouped as a separate 'further participation' variable. The structure of the variables is

- A) overall participation
 - B) cultural events⁵
 - C) festivals or carnivals involving arts, craft, music or dance (excluding NAIDOC week activities)
 - B) arts participation⁶
 - C) made Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander arts or crafts
 - C) performed any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander music, dance or theatre
 - C) wrote or told any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander stories
 - B) economic participation
 - C) sale of paintings and art works
 - C) sale of weaving, dyed cloth, sculptures, pottery, wooden art and craft
 - C) arranging or participating in cultural dancing or performances
 - A) further participation
 - B) mainstream participation⁷
 - C) visited library, museum or art gallery
 - C) attended theatre or concert
 - B) Indigenous broadcasting
 - C) watched Indigenous television
 - C) listened to Indigenous radio
 - B) learning an Indigenous language.
2. Analyse the distribution of participation by remoteness, sex and age. Using descriptive and graphical analysis, the overall participation variable constructed in step 1 is presented by the main demographic variables in the NATSISS
 3. Use multivariate statistics (Greene 2008) to analyse the association between the level B variables within overall participation and a range of demographic/socioeconomic characteristics. In addition to sex, remoteness and age, factors include marital status, family status, mobility, education levels, education participation and employment. An additional set of variables is included that relate to a person's attachment to traditional country (recognition of homelands and living on homelands), as well as their history of experience with removal from one's natural family (either self or relatives).
 4. Analyse the relationship between arts participation and individual-level outcomes, while holding the demographic/socioeconomic characteristics outlined above constant. Although participation might be considered an outcome itself, it is also important to consider whether it predicts other key outcomes. Outcomes considered come under a number of categories
 - health
 - self-assessed health
 - emotional wellbeing
 - felt so sad that nothing could cheer respondent up at least some of the time in previous four weeks
 - happy person all or most of the time in previous four weeks
 - life evaluation
 - overall life satisfaction (0–10 scale)

- human capital development
 - currently participating in education or intends to participate in short term
- life purpose and meaning
 - feels able to have a say within community on important issues at least some of the time
 - has contact with family or friends outside household at least once per week
 - feels able to find general support from outside the household.

in other activities that may have related to Indigenous arts and cultural expression, including attendance at arts venues and events such as libraries, museums, galleries, theatre or concerts (40.6%), or engagement with Indigenous broadcasting (either Indigenous television or radio) (73.0%). A small but non-negligible percentage (7.3%) of the Indigenous adult sample was learning an Indigenous language at the time of the survey.

As will be shown in the remainder of this section and the next, participation is not spread evenly across the population. We begin the analysis of results by looking at the overall participation measure (reporting at least one of the individual items from the cultural events, arts participation and economic participation measures). Fig. 1 summarises the variation across the adult population as the proportion of the population who either attended cultural events, participated in arts production, or had one of the selected forms of economic participation (the level A – Overall participation measure) in the previous 12 months.

Fig. 1 shows a reasonably stable level of participation in cultural activities across the age distribution. A small dip occurs for both males and females in the 20–24-year cohort (potentially representing a break from formal education), and then a much larger decline occurs in the 75 years and over population. However, for the most part, there is a bigger difference by sex than there is by age within the two sexes, with females

Results

Distribution of participation in arts and culture

Around two out of every five Indigenous adults surveyed were involved in some form of overall participation – either through attending Indigenous arts festivals, or creating or selling art (Table 1).

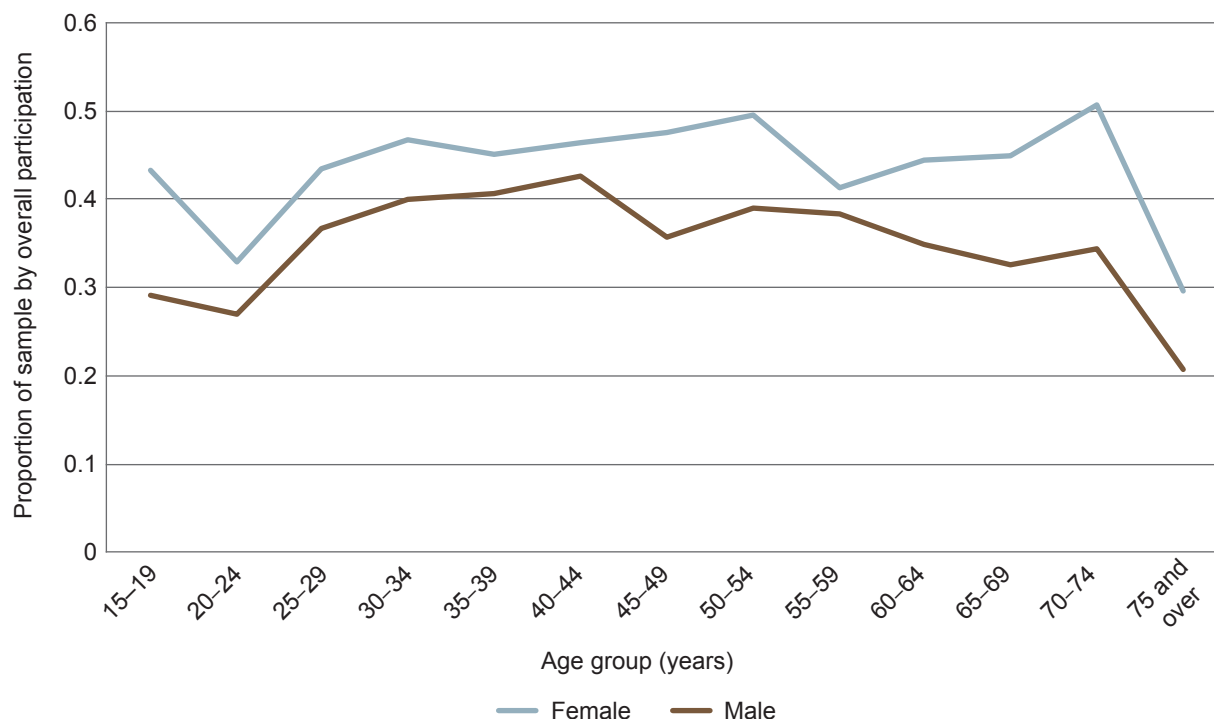
The percentage of the sample that attended an Indigenous arts festival (25.3%) was roughly similar to the percentage that were involved in some form of arts participation (28.7%). A much smaller percentage (5.1%) was involved in economic participation in the arts. A very high percentage of the sample (81.5%) was involved

TABLE 1. Summary of participation in arts and culture

Level A variables	Level B variables	Level C variables	Percentage
Overall participation			40.2
	Cultural events (festivals)		25.3
	Arts participation		28.7
		Made Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander arts or crafts	17.6
		Performed any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander music, dance or theatre	9.4
		Wrote or told any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander stories	15.9
	Economic participation		5.1
		Sale of paintings and art works	3.4
		Sale of weaving, dyed cloth, sculptures, pottery, wooden art and craft	1.4
		Arranging or participating in cultural dancing or performances	1.5

Source: Customised calculations using the 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey. These variables are unweighted, and describe variation across the sample. Results later in the paper control for the observed characteristics used in the weighting process.

FIG. 1. Distribution of overall participation, by age and gender



Source: Customised calculations using the 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

being more likely to have participated than males (43.7% and 35.7%, respectively).

The differences by broad remoteness category are larger still, particularly for males. Specifically, 29.7% of males living in nonremote Australia had participated in one of the activities in the previous 12 months, compared with 46.7% of males living in remote Australia. For females, the difference is smaller, with 39.5% of those in nonremote Australia having participated compared with 51.2% of those in remote Australia. Putting this another way, there is a relatively small difference in overall participation by sex in remote Australia, but quite a large difference in nonremote Australia.

There is also significant interaction with other kinds of arts and cultural engagement. In particular, of those who reported that they attended Indigenous arts festivals, 66.0% reported attendance at libraries, museums, galleries, theatres or concerts. This compares with only 36.0% of those who did not attend Indigenous arts festivals. This might be because some of the festivals occurred at a library, museum, art gallery, theatre or concert. That is, the individuals are reporting one form of participation in multiple locations. It may also be that attendance at mainstream arts venues and events supports and enhances attendance at Indigenous arts festivals, or that there is a third factor or set of factors

that affects both. Although it is difficult to separate the alternative explanations with the data available, the evidence does suggest a strong association.

Factors associated with participation in arts and culture

The factors associated with the first three level B participation variables in arts and cultural expression measures are provided in Table 2. Results are presented as marginal effects, or the difference in the probability of participating compared with the base case, while holding other variables constant. These marginal effects are calculated using maximum likelihood estimation of the probit model.

As shown in the descriptive statistics (but confirmed with the multivariate analysis), females are more likely to have participated than males, with that difference greatest for attendance at cultural events and arts participation. However, there was no difference by sex in economic participation. Interestingly, there was no difference in the first two of the measures by remoteness, despite there being quite large differences in the simple descriptive analysis outlined above. This is because a large number of the characteristics of the Indigenous population that vary by remoteness are held constant in the analysis. As discussed below, it would appear to

TABLE 2. Factors associated with participation in cultural activities

Factor	Coefficient		
	Cultural events (festivals)	Arts participation	Economic participation
Female	0.032***	0.023***	0.000
Aged 15–24 years	–0.014	–0.005	–0.002
Aged 25–34 years	–0.005	–0.008	0.000
Aged 45–54 years	0.003	–0.002	0.002
Aged 55–64 years	0.003	0.013	0.003
Aged 65 years and over	0.010	0.015	0.007**
Lives in remote area	0.016	–0.010	0.006***
Not married	0.022	0.033**	–0.002
Changed usual residence in previous 5 years	–0.022***	–0.013**	0.000
Lives in a couple family with no children and no dependants	–0.024**	–0.015*	0.001
Lives in a couple family with dependants but no children	–0.036**	–0.018	0.001
Lives in a single-parent family with children	–0.020	–0.015	0.001
Lives in a single-parent family with dependants but no children	–0.042**	–0.030**	0.001
Lives in an ‘other’ family	–0.046***	–0.034***	0.003
Has non-Indigenous people living in the household	–0.023**	–0.002	0.000
Not employed	–0.021**	–0.012*	–0.002*
Completed Year 10 or 11	–0.021**	–0.009	–0.001
Completed Year 9 or less	–0.035***	–0.006	0.001
Has a degree	0.137***	0.129***	0.009**
Has an ‘other’ qualification	0.034***	0.054***	0.002
Equivalised household income in bottom decile	–0.007	0.019*	0.004*
Equivalised household income in 2nd or 3rd decile	–0.003	0.003	0.000
Equivalised household income in 7th, 8th, 9th or 10th decile	0.014	0.000	0.002
Lives in a private rental dwelling	0.009	0.011	0.003
Lives in a dwelling rented from state housing	–0.009	–0.023***	0.007***
Lives in a dwelling rented from community organisations	0.021	0.003	0.005*
Lives in an ‘other’ tenure type	–0.001	0.000	0.001
Household identified as needing additional bedrooms	0.014	–0.004	0.003*
Recognises homelands	0.130***	0.101***	0.007**
Lives on homelands	0.015	0.002	0.001
Removed from natural family	–0.008	0.018*	0.001
Relative removed from natural family	0.060***	0.057***	–0.001
Speaks or understands an Indigenous language	0.109***	0.174***	0.017***
Probability of base case	0.103	0.071	0.006
Pseudo R-squared	0.1041	0.1203	0.1205

* = coefficient statistically significant at the 10% level of significance; ** = coefficient statistically significant at the 5% level of significance; *** = coefficient statistically significant at the 1% level of significance

Notes:

1. The base case individual for all estimates is an employed male aged 35–54 living in nonremote Australia who is married, lives in a couple family without children with Indigenous Australians only in the household, speaks English at home, did not change usual residence in the previous five years, has completed Year 12, does not have a qualification, lives in an owner-occupied house that meets the occupancy standard used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, does not recognise a homeland, and was not removed themselves or had a family member who was removed from their natural family.

2. Sample size is 4751.

be these variables, rather than remoteness per se, that predicts participation. The exception to this is for the economic participation variable, which has much higher values for those in remote areas, even after controlling for other characteristics.

Of the other explanatory variables, there are a few worth mentioning. Those who changed usual residence in the previous five years are less likely to have participated, potentially showing the effect of mobility on cultural participation. Family status is also statistically significant, with the base case (couple families with children) having the highest probability of participation.

There is a very large association between participation and education/employment. Those who are employed are significantly and substantially more likely to have participated than those who are not employed. One of the largest associations, however, was found for the education variables. Those who had not completed Year 12 were less likely to have participated than those who had, and those who had completed a degree were more than twice as likely to have participated than those without a degree. This reinforces the findings from previous research that mainstream participation in employment and education is not necessarily a barrier to cultural participation, and may in fact be an enabler.

There appears to be a strong relationship between recognition of homelands and cultural participation. However, those who live on their homelands have no higher probability than those who do not. One of the key variables in the analysis is the measure for speaking or understanding an Indigenous language. Those who say that they do so have higher probabilities for all three dependent variables, with the marginal effect quite large in all three cases. Language maintenance would appear to be a key support variable for participation in arts and cultural expression.

Relationship between participation in arts and cultural expression, and measures of wellbeing

Fig. 2 highlights the difference in subjective wellbeing between those who participated in arts and cultural expression and those who did not. Results are presented separately for each of the three arts and culture measures (from Table 2), although they are all included in a single model for each of the outcome measures. The first estimate uses ordinary least squares (OLS) estimation of the linear model, with the outcome measure being the individual's self-reported life satisfaction. The remaining seven estimates are based on maximum likelihood

estimation of the probit model, for the relevant binary dependent variable.

In addition to the main explanatory variables for participation in arts and cultural expression, we also controlled for the variables in Table 2. The only exception to this is the language maintenance variable, which we did not control for, given its strong relationship with maintenance of arts and cultural expression, and the potential for multicollinearity. The results are presented either as an index valuable (ranging from 0 to 1) for life satisfaction, or predicted probabilities for the remaining seven variables.

It is important to keep in mind that the data are cross-sectional (as opposed to longitudinal). This means that it is not possible to capture the temporal causality between the dependent variable and the main outcome measures. It might be that arts participation and cultural expression lead to changes in measures of wellbeing. However, it is also possible that the outcome measures are causing changes in arts participation and cultural expression. In the absence of longitudinal data or careful experimental evidence, it is impossible to make that distinction.

Despite these very important caveats, the main finding from the analysis is that there is a strong association between some of the outcome variables and arts participation and cultural expression. These associations are not, however, always consistent. Nor are they always in the direction that one might expect a priori.

Focusing on those variables for which the coefficient is statistically significant at the 5% level of significance (a standard threshold), there was a strong positive association between arts participation and education intentions, and between arts participation and feeling able to have a say within the community. Attendance at cultural events was positively associated with happiness, education intentions, feeling able to have a say, and being able to find support outside the household. However, no outcome variables were associated with economic participation at the 5% level of significance.

The above can certainly be interpreted as positive findings. Arts participation and cultural expression would appear to be supportive of, or supported by, measures of subjective wellbeing. There was one finding, however, that was a little more complex and difficult to explain. Those who participated in the arts had a significantly and substantially higher probability of reporting that they were so sad that nothing could cheer them up at least some of the time over the previous four weeks.⁸ It is impossible to rule out the explanation that participation

FIG. 2A. Relationship between cultural events (festivals) and measures of wellbeing

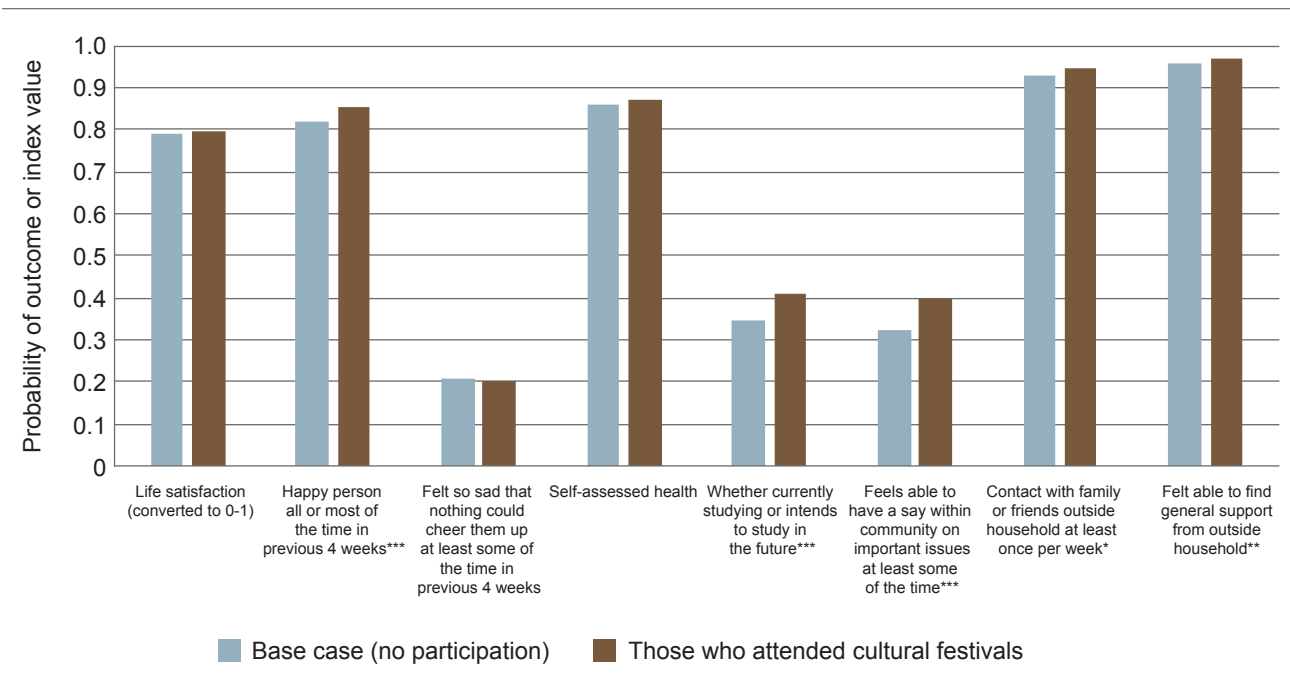


FIG. 2B. Relationship between arts participation and measures of wellbeing

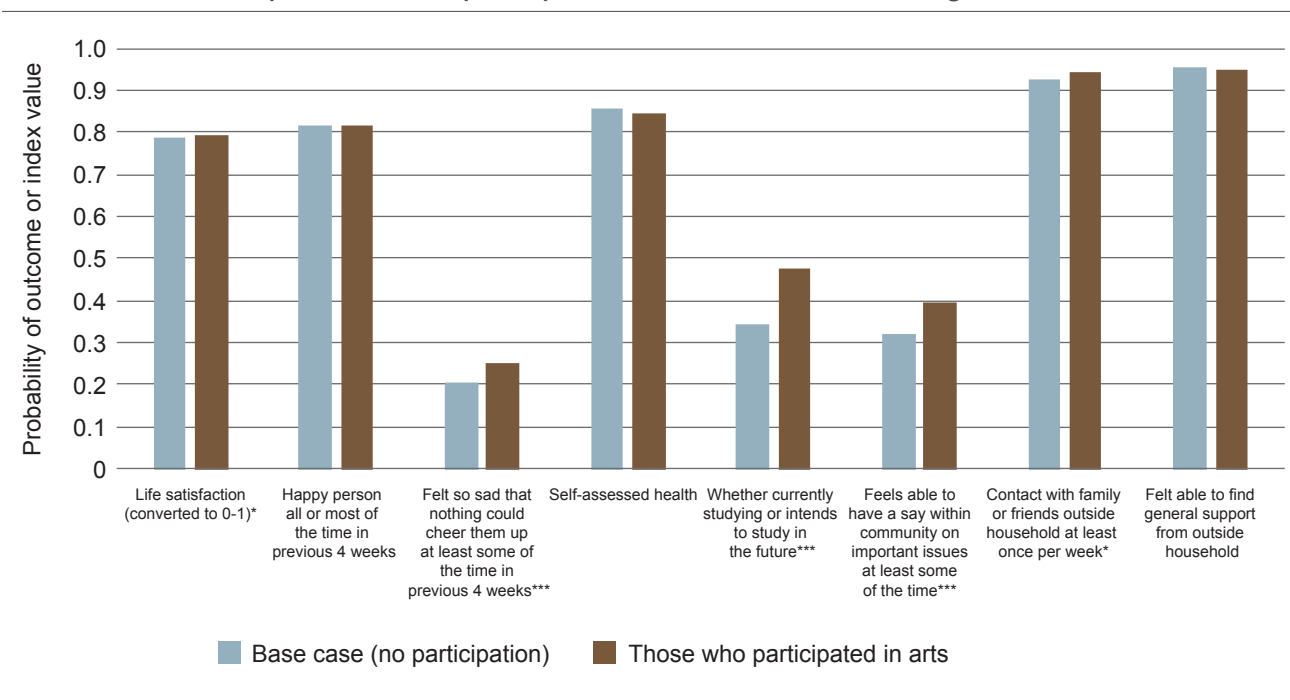
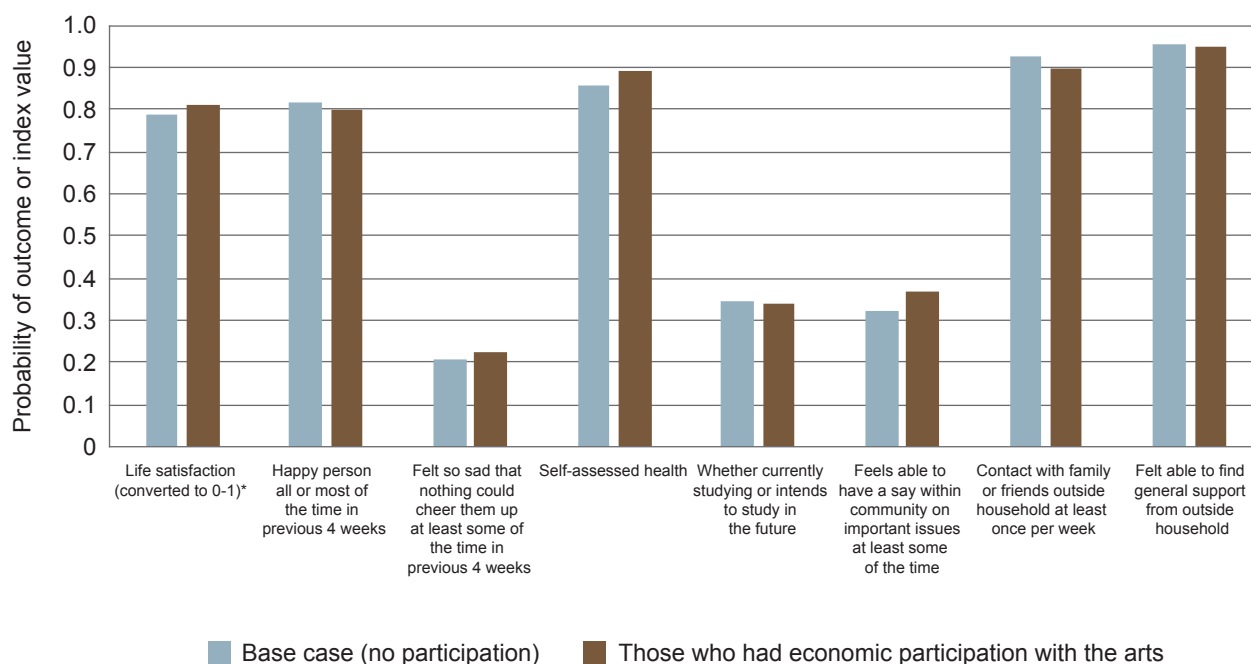


FIG. 2C. Relationship between economic participation and measures of wellbeing



* = coefficient statistically significant at the 10% level of significance; ** = coefficient statistically significant at the 5% level of significance; *** = coefficient statistically significant at the 1% level of significance

Notes: The base case individual for all estimates is an employed male aged 35–54 living in nonremote Australia who is married, lives in a couple family without children with Indigenous Australians only in the household, speaks English at home, did not change usual residence in the previous 5 years, has completed Year 12, does not have a qualification, lives in an owner-occupied house that meets the occupancy standard used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, does not recognise a homeland, and was not removed themselves or had a family member who was removed from their natural family.

leads to negative emotional wellbeing; however, there are other plausible explanations. It may be that those who participate in activities such as performing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander music, dance or theatre, or writing or telling Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander stories are more often exposed to confronting or distressing narratives, or are motivated to use arts as a medium to express their negative experiences.

Concluding comments

The findings of the analysis presented in this paper are complex, and should be taken with care and caution. The relationship between wellbeing and Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression is central to our understanding of what makes a ‘good life’ (Yap & Yu 2016). However, separately identifying this relationship from all the other factors that influence wellbeing is difficult, and we still do not have data that can really tell us anything about a causal relationship. Despite this, the results give rise to a number of reflections, some of which refer back to ideas or themes identified in the literature review at the beginning of this paper.

Indigenous adults who reported connections to their traditional cultural heritage, such as recognising their homelands or speaking an Indigenous language, were significantly more likely to have participated in cultural events (festivals) and to be involved in arts participation. Those with a relative who had been removed from their natural family were also significantly more likely to be involved in cultural events and arts participation.

Both these types of cultural/arts participation were significantly associated with educational engagement (currently studying or intending to study in future) and feeling able to have a say within the community on important issues at least some of the time. Using these cross-sectional data, it is impossible to determine whether there is a causal relationship or its direction. The important point is that participation in education does not appear to be a barrier to cultural and arts participation among Indigenous Australians. In addition, having a voice in the community, which indicates a certain level of empowerment, is also positively associated with both these forms of cultural/arts participation.

However, these two types of cultural participation – participation in cultural events (festivals) and arts participation – have different associations with measures

of emotional wellbeing. Participation in cultural events (festivals) was positively associated with feeling happy all or most of the time, while arts participation was associated with a greater probability of feeling extremely sad at least some of the time. This may be because of the different nature of attending a cultural festival, compared with arts participation. Cultural festivals are more likely to be collective celebrations of culture. In contrast, arts participation may more often involve solitary introspection, or immersion in and expression of traumatic histories. Of course, the two forms of cultural participation are not exclusive, and it may be that those who participated in different forms of cultural or arts activity are more likely to experience both feelings of extreme sadness at least some of the time and being happy most of the time. As noted in the literature review, the task of linking arts and cultural participation with health and wellbeing outcomes can be complex, but recognising and trying to understand the complexity can yield richer insights into these relationships.

Looking at the third type of cultural/arts participation, the analysis showed that living in a remote area, speaking an Indigenous language and living in a dwelling rented from state housing were significantly associated with economic arts participation. This is not surprising, given the focus of this survey question on traditional arts and crafts. However, even in relation to 'arts participation', the survey question directs the respondent to 'include activities done as part of your job'. So, some of those activities may also be a form of economic production, although it is not possible to distinguish between economic and non-economic arts participation for that item. However, this may explain some of the positive association with employment.

The other interesting factor associated with a greater likelihood of participation in arts and culture is being an Indigenous couple with children aged under 15 years. This suggests that Indigenous families are important hubs for the generational transmission of cultural heritage. This may be because Indigenous parents look for opportunities to teach their children about their culture, and children may be a catalyst for their parents to share stories or arts and craft activities. Opportunities for children to engage in cultural activities – for example, in schools or the wider community – might also lead to higher engagement among parents. Previous research supports the notion that children's engagement in arts experiences can foster engagement by families and communities (Gattenhof 2012).

The analysis presented in this paper is by its nature limited. It is not possible with analysis of a pre-existing survey to reveal all the nuance and detail about a specific topic or set of relationships. In no way do we pretend to do so. For example, there are limits to some of the questions asked, and it is not possible to distinguish visits to, or engagement with, libraries, museums, galleries, theatres or concerts that are specific to Indigenous Australians from visits or engagement that are not Indigenous specific. For this reason, we pay less attention to these variables than to those that specifically relate to Indigenous arts or cultural production. Another limitation of the data used in this paper is that they are cross-sectional and observational rather than longitudinal or experimental. This means that it is not possible to identify causal relationships in either a temporal or policy sense.

Despite these limitations, no other contemporary dataset in Australia has information on a representative sample of the Indigenous population across the three domains of interest: arts and cultural expression, measures of subjective wellbeing, and demographic and socioeconomic controls. Qualitative data could supplement this research by providing a rich description of specific individuals or communities, but it would not be possible from those data to make conclusions about the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Both sources of information are therefore useful.

To reiterate some of the messages from the literature review, both cultural participation and wellbeing are complex and multidimensional. The relationships between cultural participation and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be considered in the context of the diversity of their cultural heritages and historical experiences, and the diversity of their contemporary circumstances.

The cautions notwithstanding, the results highlight the strong potential flow-on effects for governments or community organisations that support the arts. Any initiatives related to this should ideally be evaluated using carefully constructed methods that take into account issues related to nonrandom selection (Angrist & Pischke 2010). However, the observational data presented in this paper show that mainstream notions of development (employment, education and income) are positively associated with Indigenous participation in arts and cultural expression and that, furthermore, there is strong evidence that those who do participate have higher values for a range of subjective wellbeing measures.

Notes

1. Biddle and Swee (2012) used a single indicator for cultural production – whether the individual was involved in the production of arts or crafts; the performance of music, dance or theatre; and the writing and telling of stories. In this paper, we use a much broader set of indicators for cultural production.
2. See www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research.
3. The OECD argues that ‘we are witnessing a convergence in our understanding of well-being with a common core set of well-being dimensions’ (OECD 2013).
4. www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/4720.0?OpenDocument
5. This variable comes from the question that asks ‘In the last 12 months have you gone to or been involved in any of these Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural activities or ceremonies?’
6. These variables come from the question that asks ‘Have you done any of the following activities in the last 12 months?’
7. In this paper, we use the term ‘mainstream participation’ to distinguish these variables from Indigenous-specific cultural events, arts participation and economic production. This could include engagement with either Indigenous or non-Indigenous arts venues and events, and experiences with either Indigenous or non-Indigenous arts and culture.
8. This result holds when the analysis is based on the Kessler-5 continuous measure of negative emotional wellbeing.

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CONTACT US

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
Research School of Social Sciences
ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences

Copland Building #24
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia

T +61 2 6125 0587

W caepr.anu.edu.au

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