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# Rethinking Social Impact: "We Can't Talk About Social Well-Being Without the Arts & Culture"

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# Rethinking Social Impact: "We Can't Talk About Social Well-Being Without the Arts & Culture"

## **Abstract**

Mark Stern wrote this blog post as part of Animating Democracy's "Social Impact and Evaluation Blog Salon" in 2012.

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Public Policy | Social Welfare | Urban Studies and Planning

## **Comments**

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# Rethinking Social Impact: “We Can’t Talk About Social Well-Being Without the Arts & Culture”

Posted by [Mark Stern](#)

May 1, 2012

## Animating Democracy: Social Impact & Evaluation Blog Salon

Susan Seifert and I began the [Social Impact of the Arts Project](#) (SIAP) in 1994 in response to the attention that *economic impact* studies were gaining at the time.

We felt—in addition to their methodological flaws—that these studies captured only a fraction of the importance that the arts held for society. We committed ourselves to think through the theoretical and methodological issues involved in documenting the contribution that arts and cultural engagement have for community life.

Over the years, we’ve discovered many connections between the arts and social well-being, some of them quite surprising.

It turned out that the arts were associated with preserving ethnic and racial diversity in urban neighborhoods, lower rates of social distress, and reduced rates of ethnic and racial harassment. Perhaps most surprisingly, we found that the presence of cultural assets in urban neighborhoods was associated with economic improvements, including declines in poverty.

We used the concept of “*natural*” *cultural districts* to study neighborhoods where we found unplanned concentrations of arts organizations, cultural enterprises, artists, and cultural participants and documented that it was the *social* and *civic* engagement associated with the arts that seemed to drive these economic benefits and revitalization.

Over the past several years, we’ve been trying to re-conceptualize our findings and their meaning for the cultural community, urban public policy, and scholarship.

We were struck, on the one hand, by the debate over the *instrumental* versus *intrinsic* value of the arts that our work and that of other scholars often provokes. On the other hand, we were uncomfortable with the tendency to see social impact as residing in individual artists and organizations rather than in the *cultural ecology* of neighborhoods and regions.

We’ve been aided in this rethinking by our association with an international group of scholars associated with the *capabilities approach*. The perspective, often associated with the philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the economist Amartya Sen, argues that we should understand social well-being as a product of people’s *opportunities to be and do* in certain ways.

Most importantly for cultural research, it suggests that we must move beyond purely economic yardsticks in judging well-being. In her work, for example, Nussbaum has suggested a list of ten core capabilities that includes: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment.

There has been a lot of debate over the composition of the list and about whether it’s even a good idea to limit ourselves to a single list.

The capabilities approach has gained wide influence over the past several decades. The United Nations adopted it as the basis for its [Human Development Index](#), and the [European Union](#) and [Organization for](#)

[Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD) took it as the starting point for studies of social inclusion and social justice.

The application of the approach to measuring social well-being was given a huge boost by the 2009 report of the [Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress](#), chaired by Sen and Joseph Stiglitz. The report spelled out in unprecedented detail how one might translate the ideas of the capabilities approach into the actual measurement of well-being.

We've come to realize that the Sen-Stiglitz framework not only provided a practical way of measuring social well-being, but also provided a way out of the intrinsic/instrumental debate. If we use the lens of capabilities, the question is no longer about whether the arts promote social well-being. Opportunities and access to the arts *are part of social well-being*.

Just as we wouldn't imagine talking about social well-being without discussing health or adequate food, housing, and income or the opportunity to pursue meaningful activities, we can't talk about social well-being without the arts and culture.

This conceptual change has implications for studying the social impact of the arts as well. Rather than pursuing a set of separate little studies—the arts and social capital, the arts and public health, the arts and quality of life—we need to place the arts in a frame that includes all of the dimensions of social well-being. The questions become less about *whether* the arts matter to society and more about *how* the arts matter for various dimensions of well-being.

Thanks to grants from the National Endowment for the Arts' *Our Town* initiative and ArtPlace, SIAP—in collaboration with The Reinvestment Fund and the City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture, and Creative Economy—has been able to begin translating these ideas into findings about Philadelphia.

With a group of Penn students, Ira Goldstein of The Reinvestment Fund and we are translating the Sen-Stiglitz framework into a map of social well-being at the census tract level.

In my next post, I'll give a more detail description of our current work and (if my students turn in their papers on time), some of our initial findings.

## [The Arts, Culture, & Social Well-Being](#)

Posted by [Mark Stern](#) On May - 3 - 2012



Mark Stern

As part of its collaboration with The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) and the City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture, and Creative Economy (OACCE), Penn's Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) is leading an effort to develop an index of livability/social inclusion for the city.

Our goal is to create a series of maps that identify several dimensions of social well-being across the city and to locate the arts and culture within the broader idea of social well-being. This semester, Ira Goldstein of TRF and I have co-taught an Urban Studies seminar focused of clarifying the conceptualization of social well-being and gathering the data necessary to create the index.

The project was inspired by the federal government's—including the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—recent interest in promoting *livability*. As we looked at the question, we realized that our measure needed to move beyond livability to include more comprehensive measures of social justice, inclusion, and well-being. Rather than start from scratch, we used the 2009 report of the [Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress](#) as our starting point.

The commission proposed an eight-dimension framework for social well-being that included material standard of living, health, education, personal activities (including work and leisure), political voice and governance, social connections and relationships, environment, and economic and physical insecurity. Our first adaptation of the framework was to add housing as a separate dimension, giving us nine potential sub-indexes.

During the seminar, Ira, the students, and I have been able to develop preliminary version of seven of the nine indexes. Some of them were easier than others.

Material standard of living, which focuses on levels of income and wealth, was the easiest because the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey provided extensive data at the census tract level. All of the other indexes required us to incorporate other data sources, ranging from the city's vital statistics data to estimates of workplace injuries, residents' involvement in their neighborhoods, and reported crime.

In many respects, this preliminary estimate of social well-being is deeply depressing. Although we have a commitment to move “beyond GDP” in estimating well-being, the data demonstrates that other dimensions of inclusion are strongly related to income and wealth.

For example, our measure of education includes broad measures of educational attainment, elementary school’s standardized test scores, and truancy. In an ideal world, educational opportunities would counter existing social inequality by providing a path for social mobility. However, in Philadelphia today, educational opportunity is limited. A neighborhood’s economic status is a very good predictor of its educational opportunity.

From the standpoint of arts and culture, our estimate of social connection and relationships in the city has been most provocative. Here again, we have a dimension of social well-being that is not easy to measure. Ultimately, our index included measures of neighborliness (whether residents feel that they trust their neighbors or feel like they “belong”), civic participation, the presence of social organizations, and some demographic characteristics (percent of single person households, residential mobility).

The analysis produced two sub-indexes of social connection. One index was associated with neighborliness, for example, whether you trust your neighbors or participate in local organizations.

The other index is primarily associated with demographic characteristics like single person households and high rates of residential mobility and with the presence of social organizations in a neighborhood.

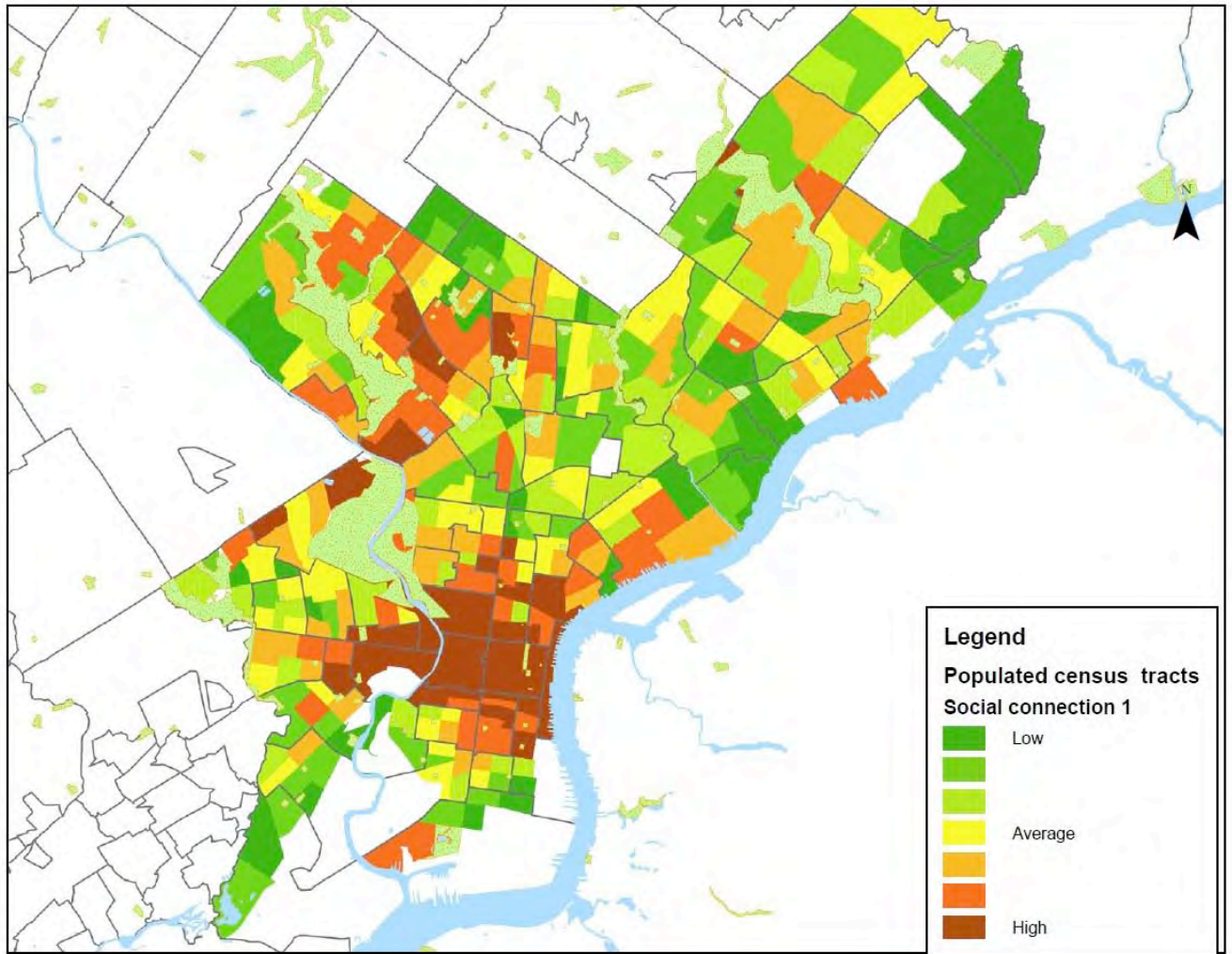
Although some measures of cultural engagement are associated with neighborliness, the primary index—what we call the cultural asset index (CAI)—is more closely associated with the second sub-index.

It’s too early to draw definite conclusions from these data. However, these two dimensions of social connection do appear to line up with the classic sociological distinction between *community* (or as the Germans say, *gemeinschaft*) and *society* (or *gesellschaft*), or the distinction between a social order based on face-to-face relationship and one based on a set of institutional intermediaries.

It turns out as well that the social connection index most closely associated with cultural engagement is one of our measures *least* associated with economic standing. This reinforces the idea that the arts and culture’s role in social connection cuts across social class boundaries.

The map of the culturally-related measure of social connection reflects this diversity. Several well-off neighborhoods in Center City have high social connection scores, but so do some middle- and low-income neighborhoods in North Philadelphia, Germantown, and West Philadelphia.

Cultural engagement often reflects socioeconomic standing, but is ultimately much more complicated.



In the months ahead, TRF and SIAP will complete the first version of its livability/social inclusion index. We still need to create sub-indexes for environment and political voice (while our state legislature is trying to suppress voting with an ID law), and we'll certainly want to refine the work that the students have begun.

In the end, we'll provide a solid empirical foundation for looking at the contours of cultural engagement and how it is associated with other aspects of livability and social inclusion in the city.

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