**Sculpting: Contexts for successful arts-based community resilience-building initiatives**

Dalmar Yusuf

University of British Columbia

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Dr. Rebecca Carruthers Den Hoed

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**1. Introduction**

Resilience thinking and the contexts in which it can be applied has been growing in popularity over the past decade. One specific factor, social capital, or the value found within social networks, has been found to positively correlate with an increase in resilience (Bahadur et al., 2013; de Bruijn et al., 2017). Both Bahadur et al. (2013) and de Bruijn et al. (2017) point to the importance of social capital in determining resilience, yet look at community resilience, or the resilience of those facilitating the social capital, to varying degrees. Bahadur et al. (2013) examine the role of communities as tools in resilience-building processes through collaboration with governmental institutions as well as community resilience itself as being foundational to the resilience of broader socio-economic systems. Despite this, they note that community-based resilience-building efforts often have difficulty in producing more resilient communities. On the other hand, while de Bruijn et al. (2017) acknowledge a correlation between resilient societies and improved recovery capacity, the discussion on the impact that public policy has on the resilience of communities is largely dismissed in favour of general suggestions focussed on broader socio-economic development, such as “poverty-alleviation, health improvement, and education” (p. 25).

In merely treating communities as a means to a socioeconomic end (de Bruijn et al., 2017) or vaguely describing reasons why community-resilience-building efforts fail to succeed (Bahadur et al., 2013), a gap emerges in which the factors that contribute to successful resilience-building efforts are poorly understood. The aim of this paper is to mend this gap and explore the *contexts* in which community-based resilience-building efforts are perceived to be successful. I will focus my study on four peer reviewed articles and a book chapter that deal with arts-for-resilience research, particularly because community arts are thought to exist outside of modern-day capitalist socioeconomic systems and would thus not be subject to the means-to-an-end mentality adopted by de Bruijn et al. (2017).

In conducting a small-scale literature review, I will first evaluate whether or not arts initiatives are successful in building community resilience, then I will highlight the two main trends that emerged from the literature. Ultimately, to build upon Bahadur et al.’s (2013) claim on the limitations surrounding the success of community-based resilience-building initiatives, I will showcase how the relative success of arts-for-resilience research is not only shaped by the involvement of the communities in the arts initiatives, but also by researchers themselves and the ways they define and communities they interact with.

**2. Methods**

A small scale literature review was conducted exploring different contexts in which arts initiatives were deemed successful at building resilience. The search terms “(art) AND (community) AND (resilience)” were entered in the UBC library database and four peer-reviewed articles discussing various arts initiatives with group components ranging from visual to performance to spatial art were selected based on their discussion of impacts of community resilience (Rhodes and Schechter, 2012; Philips et al., 2016; Beauregard et al., 2019; Baumann et al., 2021). Additionally, a book chapter (Van der Vaart et al., 2017) was selected as it applied resilience thinking to two pre existing case studies (Askins and Pain 2011; Carrey and Sutton, 2004). Various aspects of each case, such as location, community, system disruption, type of arts initiative, magnitude and duration of project, degree of community involvement, and perceived authorial success were tracked and the most notable findings were discussed.

**3.0 Community Resilience-Building Through Social Capital and Community Networks**

To lay the groundwork, each of the articles either explicitly or implicitly corroborated the notion that arts-based community initiatives were successful in fostering community resilience, most notably through social capital (Vander der Vaart el al., 2017; Rhodes and Schechter, 2012), community networks (Philips et al., 2016), or with factors that can be attributed to both (Baumann et al., 2021; Beauregard et al., 2019).

Van der Vaart et al. (2017) explicitly looked at the ways in which their two case studies were able to foster social capital, with social capital being the main lens through which they measured resilience. Rhodes and Schechter (2012) found that the arts community centre was able to foster community resilience by strengthening connections between facilitators and participants. Philips et al. (2016) noted that their study was able to explicitly develop community networks in a rural community. More implicitly, Baumann et al. (2021) described an increase in community cohesion, and communication throughout the Kathmandu valley in Nepal. Moreover, Beauregard et al. (2019) used “Deborah Barndt’s (2008) approach to community arts, consisting of [collaboration, creative artistic practices, commitment, and social critical analysis]” (p. 450) to suggest that their study worked at building community networks.

This emphasis on social capital and community networks corroborates Bahadur et al. (2013) and de Bruijn et al.’s (2017) claims that social capital is integral to building resilience as well as the former’s claims that community-based projects are theoretically able to develop community resilience. However, Bahadur et al. (2013) also claim that community-based resilience building projects are difficult in bolstering community networks due to the inherent differences within communities and that their success is limited to funding and time constraints. While it is true that multiple articles in this study pointed to the issues of resources (Philips et al., 2016; Van der Vaart et al., 2017) and time (Philips et al., 2016; Van der Vaart et al., 2017; Beauregard et al., 2019) in negatively impacting the outcomes of their arts initiatives, I bring forth the notion that the perceived success of each project is dependent on the ways in which the researchers themselves navigate the arts initiatives at hand and their various modes of imposing and letting go of control.

**3.1 Inter-community Networks and Setting Parameters**

The perceived success of each arts initiative was dependent on the parameters through which the researchers defined the communities they interacted with. Resilience building between distinct communities was a common theme through a majority of the selected pieces, more so than fostering resilience among a specific community. Beauregard et al. (2019) explicitly set out to tackle issues of xenophobia by building resilience between culturally diverse members of the same geographic location: refugees in montreal. On a similar note, both of Van der Vaart et al.’s (2017) case studies aimed to build resilience between separate communities, either through bringing two disadvantaged neighbourhoods together (Carrey and Sutton, 2004), or also between host community locals and incoming refugees in the UK (Askins and Pain, 2011). Furthermore, Rhodes and Schechter (2012) found that their arts initiative was not only able to develop resilience among members of the inner-city black neighbourhood that the community arts centre served, but also acted as a “cultural oasis” for the black community where participants from other neighbourhoods as well as outer-city suburbs came to partake in the group activities, fostering resilience between geographically disconnected community members. The two latter articles also invoked the concept of “bridging capital,” or building social capital between communities (Rhodes and Schechter, 2012; Van der Vaart et al., 2017).

This emphasis on inter-community resilience building is of note as it highlights two issues commonly found in researching community-resilience building efforts: recognizing the inherent individual differences present within communities (Van der Vaart et al., 2017; Beauregard et al., 2019) as well as discrepancies on measuring resilience (Bahadur et al., 2013). It appears that in order to better assess whether or not each arts initiative was able to foster community resilience, the researchers used the flexible parameters of what constitutes a community to “draw lines” in a sense and classify participants based on inherent characteristics. For instance, Askins and Pain (2011, as discussed in Van der Vaart et al., 2017) decided to divide their broader community into british locals and african refugees in order to determine if community cohesion occured.

I use “drawing lines” intentionally here as every single community in these studies was determined *geographically* before being further subdivided: “a small rural community in Victoria [Australia] exposed to bushfire risk” (Philips et al., 2016); “two socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods [in] Montreal” (Beauregard et al., 2019); etc. That’s not to say that individual nuances weren’t considered; after all, Beauregard et al. (2019) made it a point to work between language and cultural barriers. However, this broader emphasis on inter-community resilience could point to methodological choices to arbitrarily divide and group people in order to bridge gaps found in defining and evaluating communities. As such, this would suggest that arts initiatives are more successful when the community at hand is more easily defined, whether organically or explicitly, because it is easier to measure and evaluate on the part of the researchers.

**3.2 Community Self-Determination and Letting Go**

Another trend that emerged across the articles was that arts initiatives were considered to be more successful when community members were given more agency in producing and orchestrating the projects than the researchers and or institutional organising bodies. Beauregard et al. (2020) not only let the communities involved decide which projects to carry out, but also found that one of their case studies became more successful in facilitating community resilience when one of their facilitators stepped back and let participants alter the arts practice at hand. Philips et al. (2016) noted their project was able to build community-agency trust while simultaneously claiming that the community pushed back against the notion of getting the local fire brigade involved in the arts practice itself. Van der Vaart et al. (2017) point to issues that arose with Carey and Sutton’s (2004) project in which community members felt left out in planning the community initiatives, ultimately leading to the mixed success of the multi-faceted community revitalization projects. Given that it is a retrospective article, Rhodes and Schechter (2012) were not directly involved in the planning of the art initiative; their findings entirely describe the positive impacts that it has on the community, emphasising the agency that the community has on facilitating the project. The arts initiatives described by Baumann et al. (2021) all arose organically in the aftermath of a system disruption, an earthquake, such that the community could cope and thus the relative successes of each project were not dependent on the planning of researchers

The relative perceived success of each project correlating to the degree of community self-determination corroborates Bahadur et al.’s (2013) principle on the importance of community involvement. However, this could be owed to a variety of factors other than what these findings entail. Firstly, the studies in which the researchers were not involved in orchestrating the project (Baumann et al., 2021; Rhodes and Schechter, 2012), couldn’t have been able to comment on the limitations that arose during the planning of each arts initiative, so the lens through which the projects are viewed is limited, despite the fact that each project appears to have been planned and executed by the communities involved. Furthermore, this could also be owed to selection bias as the authors explicitly chose to observe the arts initiatives *because* they were already successful in order to determine the characteristics that made them successful. Additionally, the large scale of each arts initiative, either through time (Rhodes and Schechter, 2012) or magnitude of projects (Baumann et al., 2021), suggests that their success could be owed to other factors that influence community arts projects, linking back to the limitations of community-based resilience-building tactics brought forth by Bahadur et al. (2013).

Nonetheless, of the studies in which the researchers were involved, arts initiatives were still deemed to be more successful when community members received more agency over the direction of the arts initiatives (Beauregard et al., 2019), tentatively suggesting that community involvement is a deciding factor in the success of community-based resilience building efforts.

**4.0 Contradictions and Conclusions**

While the findings of this study support the notion that community-based arts initiatives are successful in building community resilience as well as interpretations that the success of each initiative is dependent on universally limiting factors of time and resources, an interesting dichotomy and seeming contradiction on the role of the researcher emerges from this literature review. On one hand, the projects were perceived to be more successful in producing results when the researchers actively defined the communities they investigated; mainly dividing in order to bring people back together. On the other hand, the projects were more successful the less control the researchers had in facilitating the projects themselves. Even though this appears to be contradictory, it should be important to remember that the former finding represents the researcher’s control on the ways in which communities are defined, not necessarily control on the overall success of each project: the prominence of inter-community resilience reflects a desire to produce more quantifiable research.

A choice made out of convenience doesn’t necessarily entail a choice for proper representation. In much the same way that Baumann et al. (2021) and Rhodes and Schechter (2012) may have seeked out their case studies because they were already successful, the studies might have selected their projects based on assumptions that these communities were not resilient to begin with due to geographically-based, socioeconomic data; an assumption that was also present in de Bruijn et al. (2017). This can be seen in the assumptions made by Rhodes and Schechter (2012), Van der Vaart et al. (2017), and Beauregard et al. (2019) in claiming that communities of visible minorities in *urban* settings were inherently prone to poorer resilience risk factors because of their geographic location. This shaped their findings in that they treated these communities as subjects to have resilience imposed upon without critically acknowledging the ways they could’ve been resilient in the first place. Nonetheless, the relative effects on resilience are not only influenced by the involvement of the researchers in facilitating each project, but on the ways in which they chose to define and subsequently represent the communities they’re studying. In turn, because of the importance of allowing for self determination in building community resilience, to further develop my second finding, research on community resilience should place the onus of defining which communities are being studied back onto the communities themselves. This echoes Bahadur et al.’s (2013) principle of “community involvement and inclusion of … knowledge” (p. 59): they need to be more involved in the knowledge-making processes on top of the art-making practices.

While this study points out issues associated with grouping by geographic location, that’s not to say that this paper doesn’t partake in that very system of categorization either; recall that one of the review criteria of this paper was to specifically look at geography as a lens of analysis. While the relative success of each arts initiative did not appear to change drastically from location to location, with the exception of Baumann et al. (2021), the case studies were all focused on the western, english-speaking sphere of influence: The UK (Van der Vaart et al., 2017); the US (Rhodes and Schechter, 2012); Canada (Beauregard et al., 2019); and Australia (Philips et al., 2016). Ironically, this study also happened to continue western traditions of bordering and categorising in explicitly seeking out research based off of geographic location.

Nevertheless, this study serves as a valuable lesson on the limits of knowledge generation and the ways in which researchers shape their findings. While it may appear that these findings claim that researchers shouldn’t be involved in ways pointed to by this paper, the prevalence of these findings points to the importance and validity of the researchers on top of attributing as much responsibility to the research participants as possible, especially when the research has a direct impact on the very communities it seeks to represent. Ultimately, these findings were limited by the small scale of the project and can be built upon by expanding into a systematic review article to better facilitate the scope of research on community arts for resilience building. Secondly, as to account for the apparent hypocrisy that arose as well as difficulties surrounding defining communities, literature made by and from members of the communities that are being studied should actively be prioritised, as trends in inner community resilience were difficult to measure and those who understand the communities the best can better attest to the effects of the initiatives. However, research from non-community authors like a majority of the articles selected here shouldn’t be ruled out altogether, as they provide insights on the limitations of research. Furthermore, while this study looked at the contexts in which research is deemed to be successful, it would be valuable to better understand the contexts in which community-based resilience-building initiatives fail as to look past the selection bias that was also pointed out in the findings. Once again, not only should governments and policy-makers increase funding and support for community-arts initiatives for resilience building, but researchers should be conscious of the ways in which they shape the work they produce because this can potentially have ramifications on the ways that their research is ultimately used and interpreted

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