

## ***The Arts and Social Inclusion***

**Mark J. Stern**

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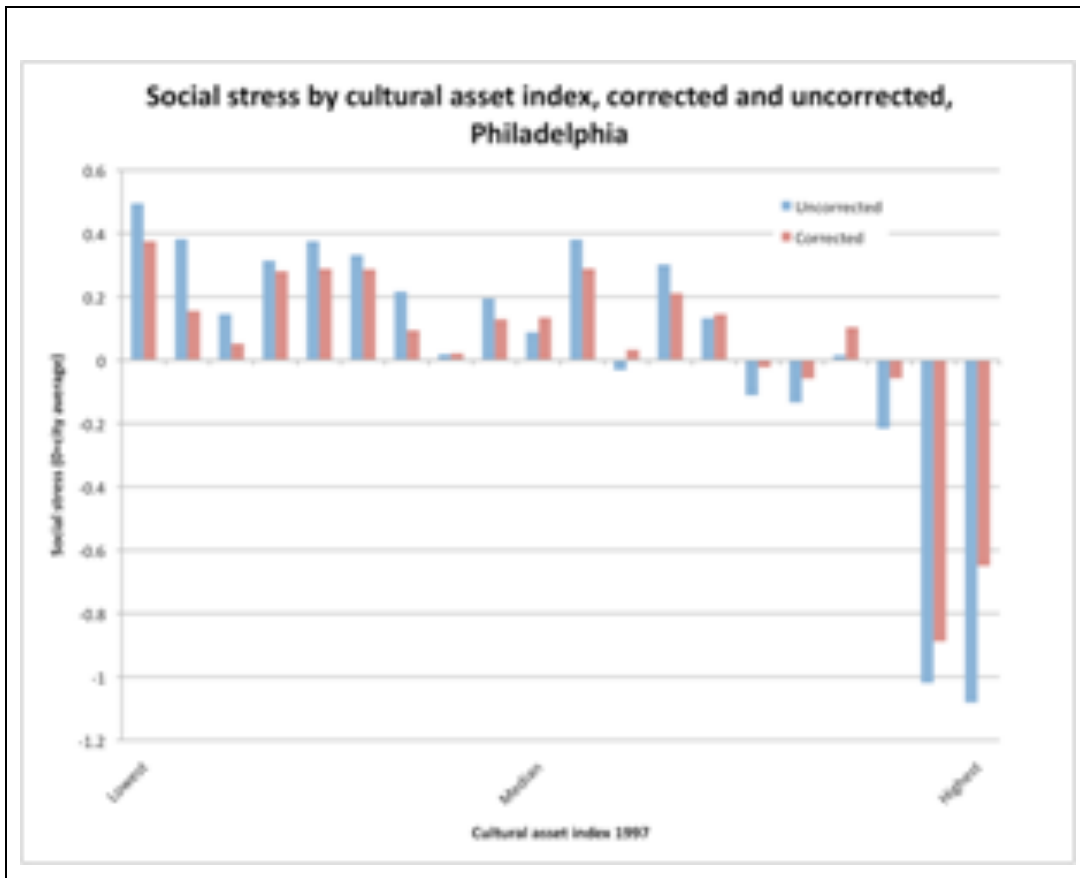
The relationship of civic participation to cultural engagement pulls us into an old controversy. Over the past decade, the arts’ research community has debated how best to understand the social value of the arts and culture. Are the arts important because they are associated with other positive social conditions (better SAT scores, higher levels of voting) or because of their *intrinsic* value? Those who advocate an *instrumental* approach have been accused of de-valuing the arts themselves. Yet, advocates of an intrinsic approach often fail to get a full hearing from urban policy makers whose interest in the arts primarily rests on these instrumental possibilities.

Recent work by an international network of scholars provides a way out of this impasse. Working at the cross-section of welfare economics, philosophy, and social welfare, these scholars have suggested that our standard for judging the well-being of the population should be a *multi-dimensional measure* that integrates economic and non-economic elements. These scholars, for example, have influenced a number of recent reports of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009) and the Eurostat (Eurostat, 2010). The most common shorthand for this multi-dimensional approach is *social inclusion vs. social exclusion*. As the European Council noted, people “may experience multiple disadvantages through unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care and barriers to lifelong learning, *culture*, sport and recreation. They are often excluded and marginalized from participating in activities (economic, social and *cultural*)” (Eurostat 2010: 6, author’s emphasis).

As of yet, this dialogue has not generated much uptake in the United States. The Obama administration’s interest in *livability* is the first effort to incorporate a multi-dimensional idea of well-being in to public policy, although up until now, this line of policy making has remained narrower than the social inclusion approach. In particular, the social inclusion approach is explicitly *relational*: social inclusion implies the existence of social exclusion in a way that livability is not related to its absence. Still, the embrace of livability by the National Endowment for the Arts provides a good starting point for viewing the arts and culture as a fundamental element of social well-being.

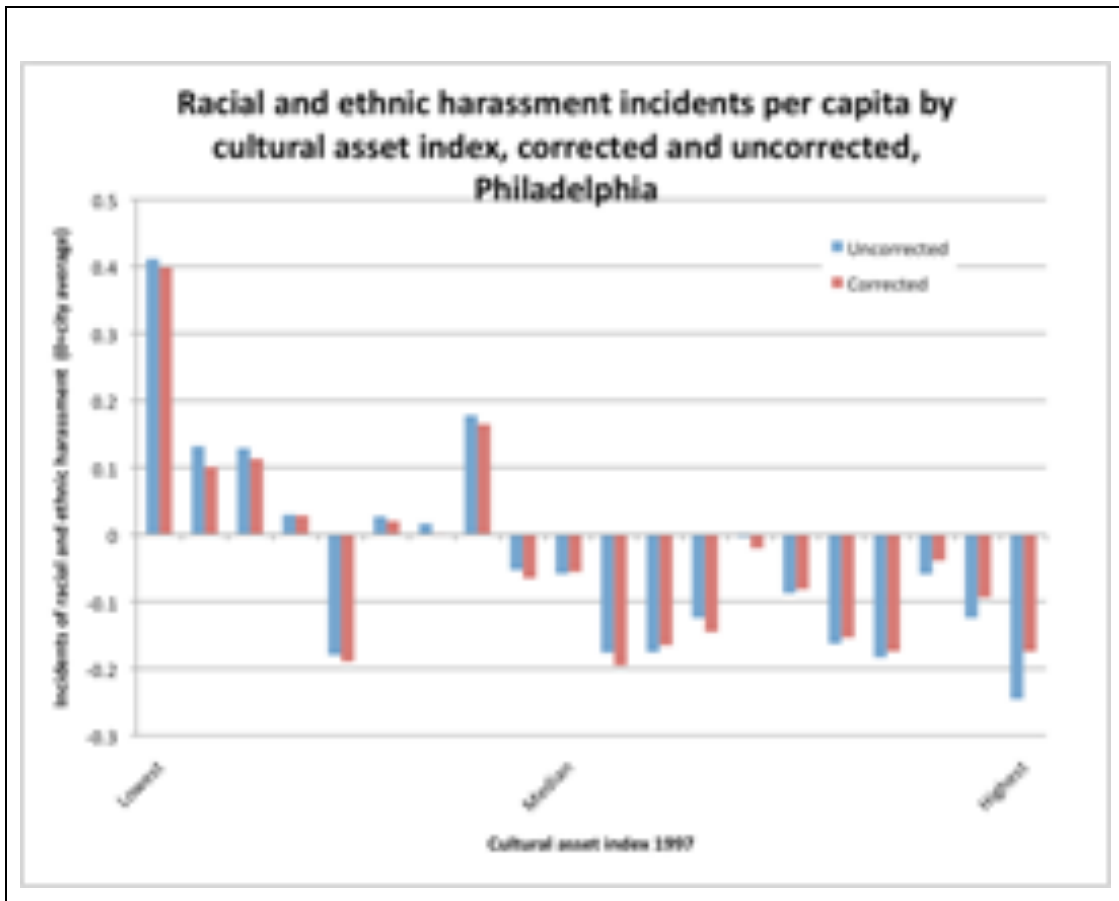
Viewing the arts and culture as a dimension of social inclusion changes the kinds of policy questions we ask about the sector. First and foremost, it focuses us on questions of *access* and *opportunity* to participate in the arts and how these are distributed across the geographic and social landscape. Second, by viewing the arts and culture as part of a multi-dimensional idea of well-being, we can ask how *cultural inclusion* may provide a means of reducing other forms of social exclusion.

Based on our research in Philadelphia, and some more recent work in Baltimore, we can provide some preliminary answers to these questions. Not surprisingly, we know that socio-economic status and geographic location (distance from downtown) influence access and opportunity. Yet, if we control for these factors, the presence of cultural resources (nonprofit cultural organizations or commercial cultural firms) has a powerful impact on cultural participation. In 2010, for example, among low-income census block groups, the cultural participation rate was 17 per 1,000 residents for those living in block groups with a large number of nonprofit arts programs, but only 3 per 1,000 in those with few resources. In other words, neighborhood cultural resources are associated with increased levels of community cultural participation.



Second, communities with high-levels of cultural resources appear to do better on other types of social inclusion. Using 2006 data on “social stress” (an index that includes measures of low-weight births, births to younger teenagers, infant deaths, substantiated incidents of child abuse, and out-of-home placements for delinquent and other dependent children), we found a strong relationship between a neighborhood’s cultural assets and its level of “social stress,” even when corrected for the neighborhood’s economic status.

Finally, using somewhat older data on the level of ethnic and racial harassment in Philadelphia’s neighborhoods, we again found a strong relationship.



What are the public policy implications of these findings? There may very well be a relationship between cultural resources and economic development. Certainly, many cities—including Chicago—have acted *as if* this relationship exists. Yet, a recent study of big downtown arts development in five U.S. cities reached the rather luke-warm conclusion that arts-based economic development was a “viable” strategy. In contrast, we have strong and persuasive findings that the arts and culture have a measurable impact on a variety of dimensions of social inclusion. At a point in American history when ordinary citizens are continuing to bear a heavy burden for the excesses of the financial, real estate, and insurance sector, public policy makers would be wise to embrace the real benefits of culture for social inclusion rather than their often-illusory benefits for downtown development.