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Minding the gap: Elucidating the disconnect between arts participation metrics and arts engagement within immigrant communities

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A growing gap between national metrics of arts participation and the many, evolving ways in which people participate in artistic and aesthetic activities limits the degree to which such data can usefully inform policy decisions. The National Endowment for the Arts' Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) is the primary source of arts participation data in the USA, but this instrument inadequately evaluates how members of minority and immigrant communities participate in the arts. As the USA nears a historic demographic shift to being a majority–minority nation – non-Hispanic White individuals will no longer be a demographic majority by about 2041 – obtaining more accurate measures of artistic activities that are meaningful to a more diverse population will be of increasing importance for public policy-making. To better understand the extent to which the SPPA's questions capture the range of artistic activities engaged in by members of immigrant communities, we cognitively tested a subset of the survey's questions with Chinese immigrants to the USA as a pilot case. We found that interviewees participate in a range of culturally specific and non-culturally specific arts activities that they did not report in response to the survey's questions. In this article, we draw upon these interviews to discuss the reasons underpinning the gap and suggest implications for updating research tools and future research. A better understanding of the gap between measured and actual "arts participation" will lead to improved measures and information to support artistic expression and arts more reflective of contemporary society.

Keywords: arts participation; cultural participation; cultural practice; immigrants; cognitive interviewing; survey design

Introduction

Individuals express themselves artistically through many means and engage with art in numerous ways. Such expression includes attending arts events, consuming artistic products, and creating, collecting, curating and practicing cultural traditions that involve aesthetic expression. Although the domain of artistically expressive activity is evolving due to technological advances and is complex due to the varied contexts and motivations for these behaviors, available survey data capture only a fraction of this activity. In general, available survey data provide a largely reductionist view that places disproportionate emphasis on the consumption of cultural products stemming from a Western European tradition. The origins of such bias are that consumptive activities can be relatively straightforwardly defined and thus measured (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012, p. 11). While the challenges associated with reliably measuring the broad domain of artistically expressive activity are readily acknowledged, the growing gap between what is measured and what people value and do with art is a growing concern.

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In the USA, the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) periodic Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) is the primary source of data on adult arts participation. The SPPA has been fielded approximately every five years since 1982 and while questions have been amended and expanded over time, the changes made to the most recent survey instrument fielded in 2012 are the most substantial to date. In particular, the NEA added questions designed to collect information on new ways that individuals create and interact with arts online in order to measure a broader array of arts participation behaviors taking place in the USA. However, the SPPA's instrument continues its emphasis on arts attendance, which was originally intended to provide insights to non-profit arts organizations about their health (Novak-Leonard et al., 2014; Orend, 1977; Tepper & Gao, 2008). The SPPA's aggregate measure of attendance at *benchmark arts* – which includes having attended a ballet, classical music, jazz, opera, musicals or plays, or visiting an art museum during the prior 12 months – has remained consistent throughout the survey's history and makes the survey unmatched in its facilitation of long-term trend analysis of arts attendance in the USA (Pettit, 2000). Nonetheless, the focus on measures of consumptive behavior is problematic for measuring arts-related behaviors within minority¹ and immigrant communities (Novak-Leonard & Brown, 2011; Rosenstein, 2005).

As the USA nears a historic demographic shift to being a majority–minority nation, more inclusive and accurate measures of arts participation within minority and immigrant communities become increasingly important for empowering cultural researchers and informing public policy-making. By approximately 2041, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that non-Hispanic Whites will no longer comprise the majority of the American public (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b). Hispanics are projected to comprise approximately 30 per cent of the US population, Blacks/African Americans about 13 per cent and Asians/Pacific Islanders about 8 per cent (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010). Historically, the data captured by the SPPA have suggested that arts participation is disproportionately undertaken by non-Hispanic Whites and early analysis of the 2012 SPPA's data suggests the same (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1992; National Endowment for the Arts, 1999, 2014; Nichols, 2003; Welch & Kim, 2010).²

The SPPA has been deemed inadequate for measuring arts-related behaviors within minority and immigrant communities for two key reasons. First, the SPPA's emphasis on arts attendance, given that members of immigrant communities tend to favor participatory forms of engaging with art (Alvarez, 2005; Moriarty, 2008; Rosenstein, 2005; Wali, Severson, & Longoni, 2002). Rosenstein (2005, p. 3) argues that “the relatively narrow and passive definitions of arts participation used in the [SPPA] disproportionately affect the results measured among Hispanics and people who are not white, systematically producing lower rates of arts participation among these groups”. Additionally, studies using attendance measures typically find that higher levels of educational attainment and income strongly predict participation while race and ethnicity have little net predictive power (Love & Klipple, 1995; Welch & Kim, 2010), but recent research that looks closely at measures of participatory forms of engaging with art finds that identifying as a minority or as an immigrant has significant net effects on participation (Novak-Leonard, Reynolds, English, & Bradburn, 2015). A second reason is the implied meaning of the term “arts participation”, which connotes Western artistic forms, and the practical emphasis on these forms, given significance of the *benchmark arts* for trend analysis (Novak-Leonard et al., 2014). In some minority and immigrant communities, the concept of “art” is not distinct from the aesthetic elements of daily, cultural or ritual practice (Brown, 2001; Jones, 1971; Novak-Leonard et al., 2014). However, relatively little research has looked at this in depth or as it relates to studying “arts participation”.³ While this lack of clarity between what is artistic and what is a meaningful activity or object that embodies aesthetic qualities or creative expression applies across society, understanding how these distinctions are meaningful is particularly important for “arts participation” research relevant to racial and ethnic minority groups within the USA.

In this investigation, we applied cognitive testing to the 2012 SPPA in order to elucidate the process by which immigrants perceive and respond to these questions about arts participation. The SPPA's instruments have previously been subject to pilot testing with general population samples, but, to our knowledge, this is the first effort to explore how members of immigrant communities understand the SPPA's questions (Keegan, 1987; Robinson, Keegan, Karth, & Triplett, 1987; Triplett, 2011). Specifically, we sought to understand whether immigrants would report culturally specific activities in response to the SPPA's questions and if not, why not. As researchers and federal agencies seek to update their surveys of arts participation and develop complementary forms of research, on the basis of our pilot case, we argue that greater attention needs to be paid to the forms of artistic and aesthetic expression that are happening within and across diverse populations. This pilot study thus provides a foundation for developing improved and different research tools for understanding and measuring "arts participation".

Methodology

The objective of our study was to discover the extent to which the SPPA captures arts engagement within immigrant communities and to describe the reasons underlying any identified gaps. As a case for studying immigrants in the USA more generally, this article draws upon interviews conducted with 14 adult Chinese-Americans and Chinese immigrants who reside, work or utilize immigrant social services in Chinatown in Chicago, Illinois in the USA.⁴ Eleven interviewees were recruited with the help of the Chinese American Service League, a social service agency for Chinese-American immigrants, and three interviewees were recruited by the Chinese-American Museum of Chicago. Both organizations are located in the heart of Chicago's Chinatown. Interviews were conducted onsite at each location in February and March 2014, and were conducted with the assistance of translators who spoke English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Interviewees were paid a \$10 incentive to participate and each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Interviewees were asked a subset of questions from the 2012 SPPA's question series about attendance at arts events and about making art. Given the importance of the benchmark arts throughout the SPPA's history, these questions were used in the interviews. The subset of questions about making art were primarily selected on the basis that they had been used relatively consistently across the SPPA's waves. [Table 1](#) lists the SPPA's questions tested in the interviews. Although the question about social dancing is new to the 2012 SPPA, it captured one of the highest rates of arts participation at 32 per cent (National Endowment for the Arts, 2014).

Interviews were semi-structured and used probing questions in an attempt to establish context and motivation for the responses. Interviewers used concurrent and retrospective verbal probing techniques (Willis, 1999). The probes included asking interviewees to describe specific instances or events that they thought about before answering the question, and specific instances or events they excluded from their response. Interviewees were asked about where, with whom, and at what time of year the activities occurred, and about why the interviewee engaged in the activity (Brown, 2006; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004). In addition, we asked an open-ended question about the interviewees' involvement in any activities that they considered to be "creative, cultural or artistic" (Novak-Leonard et al., 2015).

"Does this count?"

From the interview data, we find a gap between what interviewees reported they do in terms of arts participation in response to the SPPA's questions and the reality of what they do. While interviewees' direct answers to the SPPA's questions suggested low levels of arts participation, all the interviewees revealed that they participated in additional artistic and creative activities via

Table 1. Interview questions drawn from the 2012 SPPA.

The following questions are about your activities during the last 12 months between {date of interview}, 2013 and {date of interview}, 2014. During the last 12 months ...

Questions about art-making

- ... did you take any photographs as an artistic activity?
- ... did you create any other visual art, such as paintings, sculpture, or graphic designs?
- ... did you work with pottery, ceramics, or jewelry?
- ... did you do any leatherwork, metalwork or woodwork?
- ... did you do any weaving, crocheting, quilting, needlepoint, knitting, or sewing?
- ... did you play a musical instrument?
- ... did you do any acting?
- ... did you perform or practice any dance?
- ... did you do any social dancing, including dancing at weddings, clubs, or other social settings?
- ... did you perform or practice any singing?

Questions about attending arts events

- ... did you visit an art museum or gallery?
 - ... did you visit a crafts fair or a visual arts festival?
 - ..., with the exception of elementary or high school performances did you go to a live classical music performance such as symphony, chamber, or choral music during the last 12 months?
 - ..., with the exception of elementary or high school performances did you go to a live ballet performance during the last 12 months?
 - ..., with the exception of elementary or high school performances, did you go to a live dance performance other than ballet, such as modern, contemporary, folk, traditional, or tap dance during the last 12 months?
 - ..., with the exception of elementary or high school performances, did you go to a live musical, or nonmusical, stage play during the last 12 months?
 - ..., with the exception of elementary or high school performances, did you go to a live opera during the last 12 months?
 - ... did you visit an outdoor festival that featured performing artists?
-

Source: National Endowment for the Arts (2012a).

subsequent probes. The gap between the direct responses given to the SPPA's questions and interviewees' actual activities seemed to stem from interviewees' uncertainty about what the SPPA's questions implied about what counts as "arts participation". Interviewers were instructed to accept all responses and to clarify for interviewees that they were welcome to share anything that came to mind during the interview. However, despite this openness, interviewees projected awareness that they were operating without a clear understanding of what was intended by the survey questions. A third of the interviewees explicitly asked "does [this] count?"

In response to a question about visiting an art museum or a gallery during the past year, a middle-aged man who primarily spoke Mandarin in the interview, quickly replied "yes", and listed the Field Museum, the Chicago Children's Museum, Adler Planetarium and the Chicago History Museum. The interviewer then asked him whether he visited any galleries in the past 12 months. He replied that he attended an exhibition of Chinese calligraphy at a library, but that he was not sure whether that could be counted as a visit to a gallery. Once probed about his own thoughts, he concluded that it should count as a visit to a gallery and ultimately added that he thought of things with historical and cultural significance when he heard the terms "museum" and "gallery".

When a middle-aged interviewee was asked if she took any "photographs as an artistic activity", she wanted to know whether pictures of "daily life when she goes outside" counted. She qualified her responses by saying that she was not sure if she would have the "right answers", and although the interviewers tried to reassure her, there was no right answer, she appeared to remain unconvinced. In her later comments, she implied that she thought there were correct answers to questions about arts participation.

One interviewee explained more explicitly that certain activities would not count as a response to the SPPA's questions because the activity was not adequately formal. For example, one older male interviewee believed that for an activity to count as a response it "must be a public event". He added that private activities were too ambiguous to define, as they were subject to the personal definition of the participants and could be either artistic or not. Throughout the interview, he remained firm in his belief, further elaborating that for acting and singing performances, the performance must be on a public stage.

From an etic perspective, these examples suggest that the interviewees are engaged in artistic and cultural activities; however, these individuals are uncertain whether these activities are legitimate activities when responding to the SPPA's questions. In one case, the interviewee is adamant about the kinds of activities that do not fit within the implied definitional boundaries of the SPPA's questions. In the following sections, we discuss reasons underlying the uncertainty that emerge from the interview data.

Questioning culturally specific activities

Chinese culture is generally recognized as one rich in arts, in both traditional and contemporary forms. Multiple interviewees reported engaging in activities rooted in Chinese culture, yet only a few explained that they included these activities when formulating direct responses to the SPPA's questions.

Six interviewees shared that they do calligraphy, but they shared differing views as to whether it counts as art. When asked if he had created any "visual art, such as paintings, sculpture or graphic designs", a middle-aged interviewee quickly answered "no". However, when the interviewer asked him if he could "extend the realm of visual art to anything he did in the past 12 months involving visual or graphic works", he answered that he did Chinese calligraphy. In response to the same SPPA question, another interviewee who immigrated over 10 years ago hesitated before answering "no". Later in the interview, she shared that she did calligraphy. The interviewer asked her why, since she practiced calligraphy, did she answer "no" to the previous question asking about visual arts in the last 12 months. She responded that she was unclear about what "visual art" entailed. She explained, "... calligraphy is extremely dependent on the hand and gestures from the hand, ... whereas visual art is something that you look at". This same interviewee shared that she tied knots as a traditional Chinese art form. She finds the knots to be visually pretty and enjoys looking at and trying to replicate them, but seemed uneasy about considering it to be a means of engaging with art despite her appreciation of its aesthetics. She initially learned knot tying as physical therapy for her fingers while she was in the hospital back in Hong Kong. She said she found the activity fun and especially enjoyed the handmade aspect. Knot tying also gave her an opportunity to interact with friends. She said that when she gathers with her friends, everyone shares what they have learned and shows the knots they have already completed.

In another interview, when asked, "During the last 12 months, did you do any acting?", the middle-aged interviewee answered in Chinese, and the translator responded, "she [the interviewee] mentioned Tai Chi, but no acting". The interviewer then asked if she considered Tai Chi as more of a dance, or if she does it for exercise. The translator responded after the interviewee spoke, "For fitness – she does that every night".

Many of the activities interviewees engage in are hard to classify using Western definitions of art forms. As both Rosenstein (2005) and Moriarty (2004) point out, the culturally rooted arts activities of immigrant communities differ from the benchmark arts activities in the sense that they are often more participatory. Furthermore, individuals from immigrant communities show "clear difference[s] in attitudes about artistic or creative engagement" when compared to others from the majority culture of a host country (Rosenstein, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, their activities do not fit

neatly into the categories of a survey instrument that has not been designed with such activities in mind. As a result, these activities may show up as survey responses in an unexpected place, such as Tai Chi being given in response to a question about acting, or they may not show up at all.

Questioning the importance of artistic intentions

A second explanation for the uncertainty about “what counts” as a response to the SPPA’s questions is questioning whether activities undertaken for reasons besides expressing one’s self artistically or to consume others’ artistic creations count. This relates to our first suggested explanation, but goes beyond culturally rooted activities. In cases such as these, one might look at the motivation behind an activity to determine the degree of its creative or artistic nature or intent, but as has been found in other research, motivations are mixed, and not always conscious (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). The following responses were offered with some reluctance.

In response to the question, “In the last 12 months, did you do any work with leather, metal, or wood?”, a middle-aged interviewee responded that she built a desk for her daughter. When asked about her reasons for building the desk, the interviewee explained she did it for functional and creative reasons,

... I think it’s more satisfying for myself so I get what I want, and cheaper, and more comfortable for myself because I know what I want and what I need. If I want a special design, it’s more expensive, so why not do it? Because, I can.

Another middle-aged interviewee gave a similar response in discussing photographs she took of a children’s performance of traditional Chinese dances. She noted that, on the one hand, the children were wearing traditional costumes, and they looked very beautiful, and she wanted to preserve the celebration of Chinese culture. On the other hand, “children grow up very quickly and I wanted to be able to capture the moment and have good memories”.

Of the 14 respondents, seven interviewees reported practicing weaving, crocheting, quilting, needlepoint, knitting, or sewing, but for differing motivations. One interviewee, a middle-aged woman, shared that she really liked sewing and explained that she makes hair accessories for her daughter and other embellishments for her daughter’s clothes, such as flowers that can be attached to skirts. However, another respondent explained that the sewing she had done in the past 12 months was only to help mend a garment if someone at home had a tear in his or her clothes and wanted to know if that “counted”. Fixing things was also the motivation for another interviewee. Also of middle age, when asked about leatherwork, metalwork or woodwork, he answered that he rarely did these works for artistic purposes. For practical reasons, though, the interviewee had worked with metal or wood more than 10 times in the past 12 months. When asked to describe his work with metal and wood, he mentioned using nails to fix things. As for woodwork, he mentioned that he sometimes mends furniture and chairs.

Three interviewees cited health benefits as their main motivation for engaging in Tai Chi, traditional lion dancing, and kung fu, but also recognized each of these as a culturally based art. One interviewee began lion dancing with a performance group about 10 years prior, while she was still living in Hong Kong. Since coming to Chicago, however, she no longer performs at public events, but practices lion dancing as a way to exercise. Another interviewee explained that she practices Tai Chi and light kung fu exercise every morning, as she explained “[to] feel the energy flow all over the body”.

Three of our interviewees were parents who reported that their only motivation for attending museums or concerts was to expose their children to the arts and spend time with them. In

response to a question asking about attending any museum or gallery in the last 12 months, one interviewee responded that she had visited multiple museums with her daughter and that the learning opportunities for her daughter were important to her. Another respondent confirmed that she attended concerts in the park during the summer. When the interviewer asked her why she and her friends wanted to go with their children, she replied that she and the other parents wanted to expose their children to as many kinds of culture and music as possible.

Six of the 14 interviewees reported singing karaoke when asked if they have sung in the past 12 months. One interviewee mentioned that he goes to his friend's house for karaoke every other month. An older interviewee thinks that karaoke is especially important as it allows her to spend time with people who matter to her.

The interviewees' responses suggest some ambiguity about how central the "arts" must be to the activity or experience to qualify it as counting for a response to the SPPA's questions. This creates an interesting juxtaposition with existing literature that discusses the range of motivations for engaging in various arts-related activities, including promoting one's physical and mental health and, namely, social interactions (Blume-Kohout, Leonard, & Novak-Leonard, 2015; Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Moriarty, 2004). Understanding the broad range of ways that experiences with arts and culture bring value to individuals is an explicit priority for the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012b); however, the interview data suggest that individuals may be filtering their responses to the SPPA's questions based on these same values and motivations when they feel that the "art" in the activity does not meet an implied threshold of artistic intention or awareness.

Limitations

This study takes an initial step toward elucidating the gap between what the SPPA captures in terms of arts engagement within immigrant communities and the reality. However, we recognize the limitations of this pilot study. The primary limitations to this study are considerations about translation and its limited sample. For the interviews, a subset of the SPPA's questions was translated into Mandarin and Cantonese and we acknowledge the complications introduced when translating a survey instrument (Berkanovic, 1980; Davidov & De Beuckelaer, 2010). As is the challenge with translations generally, direct translation does not always clearly convey the intended meaning. Further research is warranted to understand how well the terminology used in the SPPA translates, literally and conceptually, into other languages.

Our sample is limited to one specific community of immigrants and is modest in its size. The emergent themes from this pilot study should be tested with larger samples and refined through additional interviews with other immigrant communities. Additionally, while questions about the artistic intent of an activity emerged from our interviews with an immigrant sample, further testing is warranted to understand the generalizability of this finding to the whole of the US population.

Discussion

While this article focused on immigrant communities, several core concepts apply to the US population at large. Across society, addressing the gap between measured arts participation and actual engagement in artistic expression represents a contemporary policy priority (Rife, King, Thomas, & Li, 2014). Given that many policy decisions are reliant on quantitative measures of arts participation, greater clarity about the strengths and limitations of tools measuring arts participation is important for well-informed public policy.

In this study, we summarize a pilot set of cognitive interviews with members of the Chinese immigrant community as a case of immigrant communities. The results help inform why there is a

gap between the arts participation behavior captured by the SPPA's data within minority and immigrant communities and actual engagement with arts and culture. Even though this research is a pilot, it identifies several important questions that should be considered for measuring "arts participation".

What is currently being measured? The SPPA serves as the preeminent source of data on how adults in the USA engage in art and cultural activities; however, it is important to understand the extent to which it captures the true nature of people's engagement with arts and culture. In this pilot study, we determined that even describing the survey as one about "arts participation" evoked notions about a limited set of qualifying activities and biased responses. Multiple interviewees did not think that their activities qualified as appropriate activities to report in response to the survey questions, despite the interviewees explicitly valuing the aesthetic and creative aspects of the activity, which seem like characteristics germane to much "arts participation".

At a minimum, this pilot investigation suggests that future surveys on arts participation should include questions worded in a broader and more inclusive fashion. Currently, the SPPA's questions about attendance at arts events largely ask about events of specific artistic genres, such as ballet or classical music, as opposed to asking more generally about dance or music, respectively. When more broadly stated arts participation survey questions have been employed in other research, the distribution of participants more closely reflects the racial and ethnic composition of the population (Novak-Leonard et al., 2015; Rosenstein, 2005), suggesting that such broader question phrasing reduces racial and ethnic bias in survey responses.

But, this also raises questions about the types of research needed as society and "art" evolve to be clear about what is being measured with existing survey tools, what information is needed for policy-making purposes, and what are the most appropriate methods for developing this knowledge.

What needs to be understood? If research and policy communities are aiming to understand the range of ways that people in the USA engage in art and cultural activities, then this pilot study suggests that more research is needed to understand multiple cultural frames of reference; what activities are considered to be artistic, creative and cultural within those frames; and the values that people derive from those experiences. This pilot suggests that interviewees were operating with an awareness that they did not have a good grasp of what might be deemed *American arts participation*, and in their survey responses, these individuals endeavored to describe their own activities with respect to that perceived frame of reference. As the demographic composition of the USA shifts to majority–minority, what might be deemed as *American arts participation* may shift and more research is needed to understand what creative and cultural activities matter to people living within the USA.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. We employ standard terminology used by the U.S. Census Bureau to describe subpopulations by race and ethnic identity, as well as use "minority" to refer to individuals who do not identify as non-Hispanic

- White. There is some contention about the use of these terms and the need to evolve the measures and terminology used to describe individuals' racial and ethnic identity, especially in light of the demographic shifts underway.
2. Based on authors' calculations for 2012.
 3. The Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Values research effort, which runs 2012–2017, is focused on understanding a “broader picture of how people make their lives through culture”. See: <http://www.everydayparticipation.org/>.
 4. In 2012, Asians surpassed Hispanics as the fastest growing race and ethnic group in the USA, with migration being a primary driver behind the growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Immigrants coming from China comprise the second largest subgroup of immigrants, second only to immigrants coming from Mexico. Individuals of Chinese ethnicity represent almost a quarter (24 per cent) of the Asian population living in the USA (Pew Research Center, 2013).

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