The role of social networks in determining the nature of older people’s engagement with contemporary visual art and its relationship to wellbeing

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Theoretical framework

• Social relations are understood as representing social capital (Bourdieu, 1997)
  – Membership of a group provides its members with the backing of collectively owned capital
  • Bonding – links with families or ethnic groups
  • Bridging – links with distant friends
  • Linking – links between the powerful and less powerful
  – Social relations improve health and increase survival rates amongst older people (Fiori, et al 2007)
Theoretical framework

Questions

• What is the relationship between cultural tastes and social relationships? (Lizardo, 2006)

• How do social networks influence older people’s decisions to engage with art galleries and how they experience the visit itself?

• Are there particular forms of social capital that are associated with engagement with art and can an association with well-being be observed?
Sheltered Accommodation Group

• Closely linked together – bonding social capital evident – but little bridging
  – Very supportive of each other
  – Strong relationships with families evident
  – All had views about art, not excluded
  – Some had visited the local art gallery when younger
Sheltered Accommodation Group

- Some would not have attended without the support of the group
  - Overcoming psychosocial barriers
  - Conscious of not being able to make sense of the art pieces
  - Pieces were understood using the collective resources or cultural capital of the group
Sheltered Accommodation Group

• Becoming part of the research project was providing them with bonding/linking social capital
• Were making connections and benefiting from the resources of other networks
• Increasing the diversity of their networks
• Were beginning to absorb the grammar of contemporary visual art
  – Provided members with a sense of competence in an environment that could be confusing
    • Protecting self-esteem
Cinema group

• Group did not know each other before they were recruited
• Had dispersed social networks – bonding, bridging and linking – different to the Sheltered Accommodation Group
• Existing extensive cultural engagement
• Saw the visits as a class to increase their knowledge of contemporary visual art
• Were conscious that their understanding was partial - wanted to know more
Cinema group

- Discussed contemporary visual art with the aims of decoding it – to understand the artist’s intentions
- The others in the group were challenging ways of thinking about contemporary visual art
- Providing a debating space that was relaxed
- Social capital of the group was beneficial in a way that was different to the Sheltered Accommodation Group
Isolated individual

• 93-year-old women whose social networks had become limited because of her longevity
  – I’m lucky I have one or two friends who can come in and discuss books or something but most of my friends are dead you see, it’s horrible when you get to this stage there’s no one you know.
  – The visits were an opportunity to get out of her house and to stimulate her mind
  – Was now a wheelchair user – had become disabled
Conclusion

• Cinema group – cultural taste did influence the network type – links were with other people who enjoyed art in its various forms
  – Resources of the group were important used to form and sustain networks
• Sheltered accommodation group – the resources of the group did influence engagement – needed the support provided
Conclusion

• Sheltered accommodation group – the research visits created a network associated with gallery visiting providing access to cultural capital
• Isolated individual – research visits again established networks which were beneficial
• There is a particular sort of resource that engaging with art provides which, for these respondents, was important for their well-being