

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

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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.