

Community Art and Health Promotion

Heather Gridley

School of Psychology, Victoria University,
Melbourne, VIC 8001, Australia
e-mail: heather.gridley@vu.edu.au

Abstract. Participating in ‘the arts’ has been variously claimed to offer individual, social, and community health benefits. But what is meant by ‘the arts’? What is health, and what activities does ‘health promotion’ encompass? How can the impacts of arts initiatives be evaluated? This paper considers one particular community arts activity, group singing, that has potential for community health promotion. While there is evidence that singing is beneficial to the health and wellbeing of individuals, less is known about the communal benefits of people coming together to sing as a group. This paper describes a study designed to investigate the mental health benefits of community-based singing programs. A qualitative case example of a community choir is also presented to ‘give voice’ to the singers themselves.

Keywords: Community art; group singing; health benefits; evaluation

Abstrak. Berpartisipasi dalam “seni” dianggap melalui berbagai cara mampu memberikan manfaat bagi kesehatan individu, sosial, dan komunitas. Namun, apa yang dimaksud dengan “seni?” Apakah kesehatan itu, dan aktivitas apa yang diliput “promosi kesehatan?” Bagaimana dampak keterlibatan dalam seni dapat dievaluasi? Makalah ini menilai sebuah aktivitas seni komunitas yang khusus, kelompok nyanyi, yang potensial untuk promosi kesehatan komunitas. Sekalipun ada bukti bahwa bernyanyi bermanfaat untuk kesehatan dan kenyamanan individu, tak banyak yang diketahui tentang manfaat komunal dari orang-orang yang berkumpul untuk bernyanyi dalam kelompok. Makalah ini menjelaskan sebuah studi yang dirancang untuk meneliti manfaat kesehatan mental dari program bernyanyi yang berdasar komunitas. Sebuah contoh kasus kualitatif dari sebuah paduan suara komunitas juga dipresentasikan untuk “memberi suara” pada para penyanyinya sendiri.

Kata kunci: seni komunitas, nyanyi kelompok, manfaat kesehatan, evaluasi

Participating in ‘the arts’ has been variously claimed to offer health benefits, social benefits, and community benefits. In Australia at least, there is a wave of interest in art as a tool for therapy, social justice, health promotion, enhancing community wellbeing and boosting local economies. This increasing attention has been both welcomed and resisted by ‘artists’ of all kinds. And as governments consider calls for increased funding of artistic initiatives on the basis of their purported

benefits for individuals and communities, a number of questions arise.

What is art? What do we consider to be ‘the arts’? Is ‘art in the community’ the same as community art? Does art have to have a social purpose, or does that defeat the purpose of ‘art for art’s sake’? Is it the audience that matters or the act of doing/creating? In this paper, I take singing as an example of the performing arts, which can include music, theatre and dance, as distinct from the creative arts, which might include poetry, sculpture, or painting. But such distinctions are not crucial to the discussion of art in the context of health and community. Community arts emphasise participating more than entertaining, and consider process as important as outcome.

Another set of questions clusters around the nature of health promotion. Health promotion is not a new concept, and for many years it was di-

This paper has been presented at the International Convention Exploring the Role of Psychology in Creating Healthy Society, June 25-26, 2008 in Surabaya. This work was sponsored by VicHealth (The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Heather Gridley, School of Psychology, Victoria University, Melbourne, VIC 8001 Australia.