Rural empowerment through the arts: The role of the arts in civic and social participation in the Mid West region of Western Australia

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A B S T R A C T

To combat social and economic inequity in rural Australia, governments, communities, and policy makers are seeking ways to empower local residents to find local solutions to local problems. Through an exploratory review of the literature and semi-structured interviews conducted in the Mid West of Western Australia, this research examined the role of the arts as a vehicle for increased social and civic participation to build resilience to inequity. For those interviewed, the arts were observed to strengthen sense of place and community identity. The arts were utilised as a means for encouraging and enabling civic participation, as well as providing opportunities for social interaction and networking, which are essential for the health and wellbeing of rural and remote residents. While providing a context for civic and social participation, the arts were viewed by several of those interviewed as a means for facilitating understanding between divisive and disparate groups. Yet, it was noted that the execution and drive for arts activities and events was dependent on the availability of human capital, but also on support from governance and funding authorities to build capacity to sustain these activities. If, as suggested by this exploratory review, the arts are a vehicle for building resilience in rural Australia, then further research is needed to support these claims to enable continued and future support for not just the arts, but the capacity of communities to engage in the arts.

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1. Introduction

To combat social and economic inequity in rural Australia, governments, communities, and policy makers are seeking ways to empower local residents to find local solutions to local problems. Rural Australia, and in particular, the Mid West region of Western Australia, is facing many challenges. These challenges stem from economic and policy reform, placing remote and often isolated communities in a globalised competitive market. As the financial viability of rural small businesses and family farms declines, the social, infrastructure, and wellbeing aspects of community declines in parallel. This situation is further compounded by environmental concerns, such as dryland salinity and other environmental degradation resulting from the combination of a highly variable climate, with an exceptionally fragile landscape making traditional European-based farming practices unsustainable. Health, service, and infrastructure provision is, in turn, hindered by the low population density and remoteness, or inaccessibility of the region. There is also a notable social dynamic in these communities, including the

changing role of women, Indigenous disadvantage, and other divisions and social problems, which are overrepresented in rural and remote Australia (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2005).

Many small towns in rural and remote Australia are subject to forms of social and economic disadvantage not experienced by their metropolitan counterparts. Yet, some rural and remote communities have managed to reposition themselves and have thus experienced a turnaround in the face of changing economic conditions (Baum et al., 2005). These communities could be referred to as resilient. A term often used in health promotion and psychology literature, resilience refers to protective factors against adverse outcomes, despite the presence of known risk factors (Mitchell, 2010; Wolff, 1995). It is thought that the arts may be a means for strengthening these protective factors. The arts, for the purpose of this research, have been defined as the product of creative expression and includes, but are not limited to, the visual arts, design and craft; the performing arts, such as music, dance, and theatre; film, photography and digital media; and the literary arts, such as creative writing (Anwar McHenry, 2009b). It has been demonstrated that the arts provide opportunities for networking, self expression, and sense of achievement, along with economic opportunities through tourism and supplementary income provision (Gibson, 2002; Mills and Brown, 2004; Pearn, 2007). The arts

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engage a diverse cross-section of the community, including disadvantaged and lower socioeconomic groups, and thus because of their broad appeal and flexible application in a variety of contexts, the arts are well placed to engage and empower residents through the development of a stronger sense of place, increasing individual confidence, and facilitating understanding (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006; McQueen-Thomson et al., 2004).

This research aims to explore the role of the arts in social and economic inequity in rural Australia. This is achieved through an exploratory review of the role of the arts in empowering Australian rural communities as a means for strengthening the protective factors that enable them to combat inequities. This includes the role of the arts in culture and sense of place, and as a means for social and civic participation. The barriers to the establishment and continued support of arts-related activity within communities themselves are also considered. The literature review provides a theoretical framework for the role of the arts in resilience and reviews rural Australia as the context for this research. Methods for the collection of primary qualitative data and their analysis are explained followed by a review of the case-study focus region, the Mid West of Western Australia. The results and discussion are presented according to the following themes: culture and sense of place; civic participation and exclusion; social participation and division, and; sustaining support for the arts. Finally, the key findings and future implications are summarised in the conclusion.

2. The role of the arts in resilience

At an individual level, the arts contribute towards resilience by facilitating the development of social and interpersonal skills, and providing opportunities for achievement and self expression (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Staricoff, 2004). The concept of resilience at a community level, however, is complex and thought to be linked to sense of belonging, networks and connectedness, identity, and place (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). It is assumed that participation fosters collective action which, in addition to benefiting individual health and wellbeing, can also increase social capital through the development of relationships, networks, and collective norms (Torjman, 2004). While traditional arguments on the role of the arts have focused on beauty and aesthetics, the arts are primarily concerned with meaning and are utilised as a form of communication (Dissanayake, 1988). Thus, the arts can be a vehicle for participation, for example, as an agent of social change through their use as a social marketing tool to raise awareness of a particular issue, to make a statement, or in protest (Jermyn, 2001; Kagan, 2008; Mills and Brown, 2004; Shaw, 2003). This approach utilises the arts to engage local people to work towards solutions to local problems as a means for addressing inequity experienced as a result of globalisation (Tonts, 2000; Wiseman et al., 2005).

Bush and Baum (2001) suggest that there are two types of participation, social and civic, both of which can be seen to contribute towards community resilience. Civic participation is a predictor of empowerment or 'sense of community control' and refers to political or community action-based participation. Civic participation can occur on an individual basis or through group participation such as charity groups or organising committees, which combine both civic and social elements (Bush and Baum, 2001). Social participation, on the other hand, contributes towards health status and refers to informal participation. This includes activities like visiting friends, family or neighbours, and public social activities, such as going to the theatre, participating in sport, hobbies, or other groups. Wiseman et al. (2005) suggest engagement at a community level is key to the sustainability and revitalisation of small, rural, and remote communities. Further

outcomes of participation include personal and professional development, and employment, which builds individual capacity and community solidarity through promoting cohesion, identity, and sense of place (Coalter, 2001).

While the benefits of the arts for individual resilience and recovery in a clinical and health setting are well known, more recent research focuses on the role of the arts in community settings and their impact at a societal level, in particular, the role of the arts as a means for participation. The arts can be considered a means for both social and civic participation. People come together to create art, rehearse, or take part in performances both as a profession, but also for recreation (Anwar McHenry, 2009a). Furthermore, public art, festivals, and other public celebrations can contribute towards a collective sense of identity and place and is therefore of interest to the sustainability of rural communities with respect to revitalisation, empowerment, and wellbeing.

3. Rural Australia

Australia underwent economic reform in the mid 1970s, which saw a shift in political ideology from the "welfare state", to free markets and economic rationalism characteristic of neoliberalism. Under the welfare state, agriculture and other primary industries were subject to heavy state regulation and subsidisation. Stability in small rural communities was maintained through State and Federal Government intervention by the presence of various agencies and offices, which were also a local source of stable employment. The trend towards neoliberalism, characterised by free market ideology and user-pays mentality, was a policy response to globalisation (Alston, 2007; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). It required the centralisation of Government services by removing agencies from small towns, coupled with the outsourcing and privatisation of services previously provided by State and Federal Government (Tonts, 2000). When coupled with developments in technology and environmental degradation, neoliberal policies have seen the declining profitability of the family farm (Tonts and Jones, 1997). Farmers who remain have increased their landholdings, yet because of advancements in technology there is a reduced need for farm labour. The decline in income and farm labour employment has seen a reduction in spending in town-based businesses and services. This further compounds the subsequent withdrawal of infrastructure and public resources, which are no longer subsidised with State and Federal Government support (Haslam McKenzie, 2000). Alston (2007) goes further to suggest that current rural circumstances combined with an inadequate policy response has exposed rural people to increased risk of ill health.

Even with the challenges, not all rural towns are suffering from decline. The greater competition in regions with relative low density population has led to some towns thriving, while most decline as they cannot outcompete their neighbours (Furuseth, 1998; Tonts and Atherley, 2005). Small non-metropolitan communities which are not suffering from decline can be categorised as either income and employment advantaged, or population growth advantaged. The income/employment advantaged communities are communities whose primary industry is mining, characterised by high incomes and a largely transient workforce (Baum et al., 2005). The population growth advantaged communities are characterised by small sea-change communities. They are located on or near the coast in what would be considered traditional retirement regions for the lifestyle they offer as the urban–rural interface. These communities have characteristically more employment in new economy and professional industries (Baum et al., 2005). The disadvantaged small non-metropolitan communities are characterised by communities based on agriculture, and those experiencing population stagnation

or employment disadvantage. These communities have fewer jobs and, therefore, fewer available services, low income and wages, and an increase in unemployment and the number of single parent families (Baum et al., 2005).

Adding to the strain caused by global economic forces are problems associated with salinity and general environmental degradation. Australia has ecologically fragile flora and fauna due to the age and isolation of the continent, which has resulted in an abundance of endemic species in small pockets across the Australian land mass (Raven and Yeates, 2007). Despite the current and potential effects from climate change, the Australian climate is naturally highly variable, and thus difficult to predict, so that current farming and agricultural techniques based on European practice are considered high risk and largely unsustainable (Stafford Smith, 2005). Gray and Lawrence (2001) argue that the colonial legacy of exploitatively unsustainable European-based farming practices, coupled with the lack of social, political, and economic resources of an industrial base, has contributed towards the global misfortune of Australia's agricultural sector.

Special mention must also be made of the plight of Indigenous Australians who often fall under the radar when considering the wellbeing of rural Australia, generally. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 36 per cent of Australians live outside the metropolitan areas of the State and Territory capital cities (ABS, 2008c). Indigenous Australians represent only 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population, yet when looking at the distribution of Australia's Indigenous population only 32 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in major cities, that is, considered highly accessible or accessible according to the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), and 24 per cent live in areas considered remote or very remote (ABS, 2008b). Thus, the majority of Indigenous Australians reside in rural Australia and therefore are subject to the global misfortune experienced by rural Australia, but with the additional misfortune brought on by the legacy of Australian policy towards Indigenous Australians (Sutton, 2001).

Indigenous Australians have a much lower life expectancy when compared to non-Indigenous Australians, and as such have a higher proportion of young people. For example, in 2006 the Indigenous population had a median age of 21 years, compared to 37 years for the non-Indigenous population (ABS, 2008b). This produces population by age distribution patterns akin with third world and developing countries. Disadvantage and inequity is arguably compounded by the additional disadvantage afforded by residing in rural Australia. This includes poorer health and lower socioeconomic status resulting from a lack of services, facilities, infrastructure, limited access to health care, housing and other services, and overall lower education and employment opportunities (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2005).

4. Data collection and analysis

A total of 32 semi-structured interviews was conducted with 65 people, individually and in small groups (the largest group consisted of 10 participants, the majority were around three to four people), over a six month period in 2008. Local residents, farmers and pastoral-lease holders, Indigenous representatives, Local Government employees, welfare workers, teachers, and artists were targeted from the inland agricultural shires of Three Springs, Mingenew, Perenjori, and Mullewa, the coastal shires of Irwin and Northampton, and the mining/pastoral shires of Meekatharra, Cue, and Mount Magnet. Specific contacts residing in the City of Geraldton-Greenough were also targeted, due to their previous place of residence, and their knowledge of, and importance to the community (e.g. Indigenous elders, prominent artists, key service

providers, etc.). A snowball method of participant recruitment was used through initial contacts and introductions from Country Arts WA (a non-profit regional arts touring and funding organisation) and the Mid West Development Commission (a State Government agency). Guiding questions were used for the interviews (see Appendix A), however, the interviews were largely informal and in several cases it was deemed inappropriate to ask specific questions. In particular, a general conversation style- interview was preferred for conducting interviews with Indigenous people and with groups of four or more people. The interviews lasted in duration for an average of 30 min, to a maximum of 1 h. The interviews were transcribed and collated. Common themes were identified from interview transcripts, conversations, and observations in the field, which were related back to the relevant literature. In order to protect the identity of respondents some personal details, not relevant to the context of the research, have been changed.

5. The Mid West region

The case-study area for this research was the rural Mid West region of Western Australia (WA) as shown in Fig. 1. The state of WA is expansive (2.5 million square km) with almost three quarters (73.8%) of the population of 2.17 million people in the metropolitan centre of Perth (ABS, 2009). Only two per cent of the total state's population resides in the Mid West region, the majority of whom (68%) live in the City of Geraldton-Greenough, yet the region covers nearly 20 per cent of the state in land mass (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The state's Indigenous population is 3.0 per cent of the total population, yet only 36.3 per cent of the state's Indigenous population lives in Perth, representing 1.5 per cent of the total population (ABS, 2007). The Mid West region has a higher proportion of Indigenous residents (9%) when compared to WA overall, and is also home to several Indigenous communities (ABS, 2008a).

The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) is a standardised approach to measuring remoteness through the quantification of service access. This is achieved by combining road distance to population centres, with consideration for the size of those population centres (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001). According to this index, six of the 18 Local Government Areas (LGAs) within the region are classified as very
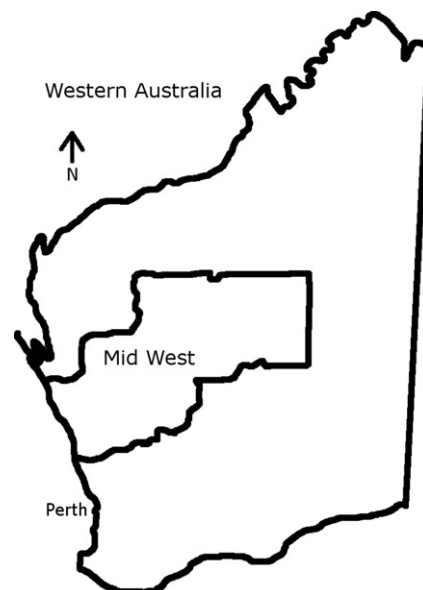

Fig. 1. Map of the mid west region of western Australia.

remote, two are classified as remote, eight are considered moderately accessible, and two are considered accessible, with none of the LGAs classified as highly accessible (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 1999). The population of the remote and very remote areas are highly dispersed with low population densities, thus the majority of the population (65%) in the accessible LGAs of Geraldton-Greenough and Chapman Valley have some restricted accessibility to goods, services, and opportunities for social interaction.

In general, the economy of rural WA, while very diverse, is dominated by primary industry. The Mid West region, in particular, represents a diverse range of industries and communities, mainly based on mining, agriculture and pastoralism, fisheries, and tourism. The unemployment rate for the Mid West and neighbouring Gascoyne region prior to July 2009 was 4.1 per cent, which was lower than the national unemployment rate (5.3%) for the same period, but higher than the metropolitan capital of Perth (2.6%) (Australian Government, 2010). The employment rate in the Mid West/Gascoyne for people aged 15–64 years was 71.7 per cent, similar to national statistics of 71.0 per cent, and comparable to the employment rate of people born overseas in non-English speaking countries (69.5%). Yet, the employment rate of Indigenous people was only 43.5 per cent, which reflects the national figure of 47.6 per cent Indigenous employment rate (Australian Government, 2010). The unemployment rate for Indigenous people nationally was 16 per cent according to the 2006 census, however, it is important to note that the ABS does not include participation in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program as unemployment. The CDEP program is equivalent in pay to unemployment benefits, however, it provides additional payments for participation in work and training activities organised by local Indigenous community organisations (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2005). Despite their exclusion from the national unemployment figures, Indigenous participants in the CDEP program are twice as likely to work part time, and one third more likely to be working in a low skilled occupation when compared to Indigenous people who are employed (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2005).

6. The role of the arts in the Mid West region

6.1. Culture and sense of place

As already noted, the arts are a means of communicating meaning and emotion. The arts are used symbolically, to make a statement, for pleasure, and the creation of beauty. Malone (2007, p. 159) promotes the significance of Indigenous-themed public art in reconciliation, cultural renewal, and identity as it 'contributes to the whole community's sense of self by acknowledging the prior occupation of the Australian continent by Indigenous cultures' through encouraging understanding between groups and providing cultural symbols and icons. This research found that this does not just apply to the representation of Indigenous people within a community, but also the community as a whole and within specific spaces and venues. As stated by a non-Indigenous artist and primary school teacher in a rural coastal town:

We've done so much public art in town that it's given the locals community icons that they're proud of. It's helped reinstate that sense of place for the residents here.

Malone (2007, p. 159) suggests that symbolically, public art provides 'an enhanced sense of mutual belonging' by enabling Indigenous people to see their cultural heritage reflected in public space. This shared sense of meaning and identity builds both confidence and understanding among different groups of people

and can therefore be useful in addressing social and economic inequity. Thus, the arts can provide a way of facilitating and encouraging civic and social engagement amongst individuals who would not normally participate. An Indigenous artist and Aboriginal healer in her mid 40s who works across the region stated:

I've always believed that identity and culture is our foundation. And if we don't teach our young people or we ourselves as older people growing up don't maintain our connection, it doesn't have to be a traditional connection, you don't get caught up in other people's definitions of culture or other people's definitions of what makes you Aboriginal or what makes your identity. People gotta believe and stick to the way they've been brought up and if you don't have that foundation, and it's all been taken away from you, then of course you're going to get lost and confused. Some people who were taken away, they say they were looking black, but they were brought up white. That's where a lot of confusion came in, so you have to be really strong. I think the arts is [sic] one of the best ways, you know, dancing, singing, painting, writing, all those things allow you to really express yourself.

The statement above supports the notion that the arts, as a means for self expression, have a crucial role in self-confidence, culture, and identity and thus, sense of place. This is of particular significance for Australian Indigenous people whose identity, sense of belonging, and culture is intimately linked with an understanding of sense of place (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Culture, and therefore the arts as an exploration and expression of culture, is an important outcome in its own right. As Belfiore (2002, p. 104) states, 'culture is not a means to an end. It is an end in itself'.

6.2. Civic participation and exclusion

Worthington and Dollery (2000), among others, suggest that it is the communities themselves that hold the key to the health of rural communities. Thus, as previously mentioned, fostering civic participation is essential for developing a sense of community control (Bush and Baum, 2001), and therefore resilience, and is a key part in the sustainability and revitalisation of rural Australia (Wiseman et al., 2005). Rural Australia, traditionally, has a heavy reliance on volunteers and a long standing reputation for self reliance to provide services which would not otherwise be economically feasible in a free market economy, and often too costly for governments to provide. It has become increasingly difficult to continue in this way as globalisation, and subsequent economic reform has contributed to depopulation in remote areas with already low population density. A female farmer in her early 60s lamented the loss of a key community member who was instrumental in the organisation of a national handicraft event in the local area:

A lot of our 'do-ers' have gone. A lot of our pushers and shakers have gone. There's a few of us stickers left<laughs>… She was such an organiser and a do-er, she didn't expect anything more than what she could do herself.

While the role of women in rural Australia is changing, their involvement in rural work and community life since Federation has been largely absent from research concerning rural issues, rural decision-making bodies, and the popular image of agriculture and rural life (Black et al., 2000). Black and colleagues observed that women's contribution is only visibly acknowledged in times of war, recession, or drought (Black et al., 2000), and even recently women continue to be under represented in roles that involve management and decision making (Department of Transport and Regional

Services, 2005). Yet women have always maintained vital services and support for their community through a myriad of voluntary organisations and groups (Bateman, 2006). The impact of rural restructuring has meant that women have less time for volunteering as they take on more outside physical work, whilst caring for children, taking responsibility for correspondence, record and bookkeeping, and engaging in off-farm work and other activities to alleviate financial pressure on their families (James, 1989). Hence, rural towns have difficulty providing the basic services that were once resourced and run by volunteer labour. A female senior Local Government employee noted that:

> My age group are still doing the secretaries', the presidents' jobs of the organisations whereas we started off in our early 20s doing that and sort of kept going. A few years ago we thought all the 30 and 40 year olds were taking over, but then it sort of reverted back… it's 'cos they're so busy and they've got children and it's a different way of how we were, 'cos I was always home just raising my children and I had a job at home that I did at night time. But during the day you'd go out and do everything and organise the open days and things like that.

Indigenous people have been traditionally marginalised from formal civic participation in rural communities. From the interviews conducted throughout the region, the more remote Indigenous, mining, and pastoral communities experience a different set of issues from those based around agriculture or located closer to the coast. Indigenous people are also under represented in rural governance and decision making bodies, however, they are additionally disadvantaged with respect to health, education, housing and employment (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2005). Indigenous people have been, and in some ways continue to be actively disempowered by policy, processes, and behaviour of existing procedures. It was suggested by several interviewees that Indigenous people, and often non-Indigenous residents as well, do not understand how Local, State, or Federal Government works, but that they also lack the initiative to attempt to change the situation. The wife of a local business owner in a mining/pastoral town in her early 30s stated:

> There is meanness in the mental ethos in the town. There is social responsibility lethargy, like people are happy to whinge like anything in the street and not go to council and try to implement change. There's a lack of understanding that things can be changed. You need involvement. Communities need to feel that they are involved and it's not just something that occurs way up there. There is a lot of negativity. Creative projects are the way to allow people to see that their points of view, their creative abilities, physical abilities are shown.

Thus, the arts are seen as a way of engaging disempowered members of the community while providing a means for self expression. More so than other means of civic and social engagement, there is a general sense that the arts have broad appeal, not just in the variety of ways of engaging, but also in the flexibility of that engagement. The arts do not require a minimum number of people to participate, unlike most sporting activities (Anwar McHenry, 2009a). As a farmer in her early 30s suggested:

> I have an increasing role in the farming side of things, but the arts is [sic] flexible so you're able to pick it up when there's time.

A Local Government employee in her late 20s further noted the appeal of the arts when engaging with Indigenous people:

> Indigenous people seem to have natural artistic ability in the areas you're talking about. They are often very talented and don't get the opportunity to express themselves or use these skills.

According to interviewees, barriers to participation by Indigenous people was attributed to the experience of "shame", which was suggested to represent shyness, low self-esteem, and a strong reluctance to show leadership or place oneself in a public forum where they are at risk of being criticised. This supports Eades (1996, p. 136) definition of "shame" as a complex cultural notion which 'refers to a mix of embarrassment and shyness, particularly when a person is being singled out from a group'. The Aboriginal English usage of the term "shame" is different from the standard English definition of the word, which according to Harkins (1990) means more than shyness, and has more to do with respect. Indigenous children are especially shy with people that are new or that they don't know, yet "shame" is more than simply being shy and is associated with rules relating to respect rather than a negative emotion. The nuances of Indigenous culture and cultural practices were not very well understood by non-Indigenous settlers and policy makers. A reluctance to speak to avoid behaviour or actions that might be culturally inappropriate were often misunderstood as a problem related to low self-esteem or negative self concept that needs to be overcome rather than a positive moral concept (Harkins, 1990). When questioned about the origins of "shame", an Indigenous employee of a language centre in her early 20s suggested that:

> It probably started from the day we were chucked into a mission and told we were not allowed to speak language, not allowed to do this, you don't do that any more, you dress like this, you wear your hair like this, go to church and things. It was "shame" if you go and do what you normally do. I think it goes back to there.

In many ways Indigenous people continue to be marginalised by the legacy of past and, in some ways, current policies of Australian State and Federal Governments. In general, however, while the availability of human capital and other social and cultural issues erode community resilience, the arts are a potential means for increasing civic participation, despite these difficulties.

6.3. Social participation and division

Bush and Baum (2001) suggest that social participation contributes towards health status, a view strongly supported by the public health sector through an increased interest in the social determinants of health (Wilkinson and Marmot, 2003). Yet, social wellbeing and social equity are relatively neglected in rural research because economic matters appear much more urgent as they relate to the survival and success of individual enterprises. As such, social wellbeing seems far too nebulous to be dealt with in short-term policy and research (Black et al., 2000). Participants in the Australia 2020 Summit[1] concluded that adequate social infrastructure in local communities is one of the principal determinants of community strength (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). It is also widely accepted that social capital, associated with networks, trust, reciprocity, and cohesiveness (Woodhouse, 2006) helps to reduce social disparities and build resilience to economic challenges (Woodhouse, 2006; Worthington and Dollery, 2000). For several of the female respondents, those social and networking opportunities manifest around craft and other creative pursuits, as suggested by a resident in an agricultural town in her late 50s:

> But this is an outlet. When I first starting coming to, well it was actually patchwork, but I'd been doing pottery. One of the women took me on one-on-one to make a quilt. But you needed

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[1] The Summit was convened by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 19 and 20 April 2008 to inform a long term strategy for the nation's future.

it. At the time I did, and it wasn't because of sewing… it was an outlet, a social [opportunity]. When someone new comes into town you do let them know, someone does… you say come along, if they want to they do, and if they don't, they don't.

Many agricultural communities in rural Australia have experienced a population decline. Farm sizes are growing (Best et al., 2000) and fewer young people are staying in rural areas due to poor education and employment opportunities (Dixon and Welch, 2000). Whilst rural communities could once rely on local sporting events and activities for socialising, the declining population has resulted in team mergers and dwindling memberships (Tonts, 2005). Sporting clubs are struggling financially due mostly to a loss in numbers of not only players, but also officials, spectators, and volunteers (Townsend et al., 2002). A local resident in her late 60s and prominent member of the local craft group lamented:

We've always had good, strong football sides. We only have an A grade side, there's no B grade side. Even the kids, they haven't got a full side. We just have not got the kids. The school numbers have dropped down… Once your football side goes and the pub, well nobody goes there. Your town's dying. That's it. We didn't even play tennis last year, we didn't have the numbers.

Despite the financial hardship, interviewees preferred to remain in their current location because the sense of community was strong. In other words, strong networks remain between residents which contributed towards feeling safe, secure, and supported. Interviewees emphasised the importance of keeping spirits high, particularly during difficult times, such as periods of drought. Social events and other activities, such as access to touring theatre productions and music concerts, were seen as essential for maintaining the morale of the local community. As expressed by a Local Government employee and town resident:

It's very important for a lot of towns to say that we can still offer this and we've still got a spirit here, you know? Whilst they probably are struggling in some areas they don't come across that they are.

A similar sentiment was expressed by a member of a painting group, which meets monthly in an agricultural town, and is made up of women from across the region:

We've got kids, but they've all got very well paying jobs so they're not going to come back to the farming. So you get to the age when you think, well, what am I doing here? As far as the arts goes it's a good social outlet for all of us. As you can see from that first half hour probably none of us stopped talking. We come from such a diverse region. We come in with different ideas, points of view, climates, colours, everything … There's a lot of catching up to do.

The physical reach of the networks of the women who belong to the painting group are vast. Across the region, those that are able will travel large distances in order to gain access to networks and opportunities outside of their immediate town or geographical area. Yet despite depopulation, and hence much fewer community members, some interviewees stated that their communities were still struggling with division within the community. Explicit divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents are reflected through their underrepresentation on rural governance and decision making bodies (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2005), as well as discrepancies on indicators such as health, life expectancy, education, employment, and so on, when compared to non-Indigenous residents.

Family and culture are integral to the wellbeing of Australia's Indigenous people to the extent where cultural identity and strong kinship ties strengthen resilience of the whole community (Nagel and Thompson, 2010). The importance of family as an influence on individual health behaviour has prompted the call for the development of family-centred health promotion and health behaviour intervention when targeting Indigenous people (Johnston and Thomas, 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that despite limited education and employment opportunities for individual family members within the Mid West region, Indigenous residents are extremely reluctant to be separated. This contrasts with the non-Indigenous residents, particularly in the mining and more remote regions, as they are often already separated by great distances from friends and families (Rickard, 1996). There are also divisions within the Indigenous community, such as feuding between different family groups, which can effectively exclude individuals from accessing particular services and employment opportunities. Thus, existing inequities are exacerbated by cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Division among the non-Indigenous population is well documented within early Australian community studies, such as Wild's Bradstow in 1974 and Dempsey's Smalltown in 1990, among others (Dempsey, 1990; Wild, 1974). These studies typically provided an ethnographic analysis of class, status, and power relationships, including detailed patterns of inclusion and exclusion within a given rural community as a result of class or social group membership (Bryant and Pini, 2009). Division may also occur through the colloquial identification of a local in contrast to a "blow-in", that is, someone who has "blown-in" on the wind and not necessarily committed to stay (Garbutt, 2005). Yet, in some instances, the transition from being a "blow-in" to achieving "local" status may take several decades to a lifetime, thus enforcing the exclusivity of community belonging and identity.

Within the Mid West region, residents suggested divisions were experienced as a result of length of residence within the community, Indigenous identity and family group affiliation, and between land and pastoral-lease owners and town residents. Yet, there was a sense that to address inequity and work towards the sustainability of the community, these divisions needed to be overcome:

There is [sic] different sectors of the community. Traditionally, there would have been the farming community, the town community, and the Indigenous community. As you get a smaller town, you've really got to work together.

While getting the community to work together is possible, it has not always been easy. For example, a visual arts project for Indigenous artists hosted separate workshops for different family groups to maintain segregation of feuding families. The aim of the project was to create an exhibition representing the visual art of Indigenous artists from the area. However, due to ongoing family feuding, the scheduling of the workshops in this way was necessary to ensure representation of both groups. Similarly, an arts group, with the assistance of Local Government, hosted several separate segments of a larger mural project, that is, in different venues and at different times, in order to gain greater participation across the community. As stated by a key member of the arts group and local farmer's wife:

I don't think you're ever going to close the gap, I think it takes time. We have different groups in the early phases. People don't feel comfortable working together. You'll have different people working on different parts and it all comes together in the end.

The examples described above provided a social opportunity, which is relatively rare for people who live in remote and isolated areas with very low population densities. These examples also demonstrate the unique utility of the arts when used in an attempt to facilitate community unity, and reduce class divisions by providing an occasion where community members can work together towards a common goal.

6.4. Sustaining support for the arts

Communities that did have an active arts scene, or a strong arts-related group, were supportive of the benefits of the arts in the resilience and sustainability of the community. For many respondents actively involved in the arts, it was an integral part of their wellbeing, providing both opportunity for socialising, self expression, and "time out" from day-to-day stressors. The main difficulty was the limited data available on arts activities within the region. In terms of this research, arts activity in the region is often informal, sporadic, and highly dependent on the efforts and motivations of a small number of keen individuals. For many residents and community workers interviewed, the biggest difficulty was not finding programmes and initiatives that achieved the desired outcomes, as many community workers knew what was working. The main challenge was locating the people, money, and resources in order to sustain successful initiatives.

Human capital is considered the most important resource in a small community (Johnson, 2006). From the research conducted in the region, there appears to be no shortage of good ideas, however, what was lacking was the human capital, which was often in the form of volunteers, to conduct the project. Furthermore, good ideas and the availability of human capital did not guarantee the viability of a project, which was also dependent on policy and funding support from governance and funding authorities. An artist in her late 30s based in a coastal town attributed the lack of support to a lack of knowledge, understanding, and research to support their claims:

> A lot of towns need a cultural plan drawn up and then they can use the recommendations from that to get funding for a project. Chances are the arts bodies will back them because they have that plan. Lots of towns like ours don't have one, so if it's in your document, you know it's proven that in small towns that it works. People can use your document to help get them funding. That will be a bonus for arts workers to use your report as leverage to support their funding applications.

The difficulties experienced by the artist in the previous quote were also experienced by other sectors of the community interviewed for this research. It was often the case that Local Government employees and other local community members had seen the results and impacts of previous projects, yet were struggling to obtain managerial or financial support for future projects. As expressed by a senior Local Government employee in his early 50s when reflecting on the impact of a high profile arts festival:

> That was always one of the challenges. It was almost like a metaphor for something else. It wasn't about what people were doing. It was about the effect of having them doing that on community spirit and cooperation and all those other kinds of things… Because you cooperate on an arts project you've got the relationship where you can cooperate on other stuff as well.

Similar sentiment was expressed by another Local Government employee in her early 30s over her approach to local crime prevention by engaging young people in arts-based activities:

> I'm very lucky with the CEO here. He believes in the arty-farty crap, as he calls it. He's really good, and he's seen lots of outcomes from that stuff so I don't have a struggle at all here, and that's rare, that's very, very rare.

While many of the people interviewed within the region were convinced of the benefits of the arts for empowering communities and addressing inequity, frustration was expressed over the barriers to sustain arts activities and events. Human capital, namely in the form of volunteers, was considered essential for driving initiatives. Yet, support from governance bodies, in additional to adequate financial resources, was viewed as a catalyst to build the capacity to sustain these initiatives over time.

7. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the role of the arts in social and economic inequity experienced in rural Australia as a result of globalisation and subsequent economic and policy reform. Specifically, the notion that the arts can build resilience by providing an avenue for increased social and civic participation, and thus empowering communities, was explored in the Mid West region of Western Australia. For those interviewed, the arts were attributed to strengthening sense of place because of their ability to explore community identity, and communicate culture and meaning. The arts were viewed as a means for encouraging and enabling civic participation. Thus, despite various social and cultural issues, community members could be given a voice on issues that impact them. Opportunities for social interaction and networking are essential for health and wellbeing, especially in remote and isolated regions, with the arts providing a context in which these encounters took place. Furthermore, the arts were viewed by several of those interviewed as a means for facilitating understanding between divisive and disparate groups in order to work together towards common goals. Yet, despite these benefits there is limited human capital to instigate and drive arts-based initiatives. While adequate human capital is deemed essential, it was also noted that the capacity to sustain these activities, and their subsequent benefits, was dependent on support from governance and funding authorities.

This research provided an insight into the role of the arts in fostering civic and social participation in the Mid West region. While interest is growing on the benefits of the arts for rural Australia, building an evidence base to support the ideas conveyed in this research is hindered by accurate and reliable statistics on the level and extent of arts activities and the challenges of sustaining that activity in rural and remote Australia. However, if the arts are a vehicle for building resilience in rural Australia, as suggested by the anecdotal evidence presented in this review, then further research is needed to support these claims to enable continued and future support for not just the arts, but the capacity of communities to engage in the arts.

Appendix A. Guiding Questions for In-depth Interviews

What do you think about the state of your community right now?

- Has it been better or worse in the past?
- In your opinion, is there anything that needs to change to make it a better place to live?
- What are the main issues facing your community right now?

What do you think are the advantages/disadvantages of living in a rural community, when compared to say, living in Perth?

Do you value the arts? How and Why?

Do you think your community values the arts? How/Why?

How do you think the arts compares with sport within your town/shire/region? In terms of :

- Funding and local government support?
- Local community support and participation?
- Participation of women, Indigenous people or other minority, disadvantaged, or marginalised groups?

Do you feel the whole community is supportive of arts activity taking place in your town/shire/community? Why/Why not?

In your community what has been the role of the arts, if any, in:

- Tourism?
- Income generation?
- Employment?
- Community Identity?

(Please provide specific examples)

In your personal experience, do you think the arts have contributed to the social wellbeing of your community in any of the following ways:

- Feeling connected with others in the community?
- Feeling like you belong?
- Building sense of trust, security, and reciprocity?
- Getting people involved?

(Please provide specific examples)

Any other comments you would like to make?

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