

A virtuous circle: The positive evaluation phenomenon in arts audience research

Katya Johanson,
Deakin University, Australia

Hilary Glow,
Deakin University, Australia

Abstract:

Arts impact evaluation is the subject of widespread criticism, ranging from a detailed critique of methodology to a wholesale rejection of the very purpose of the endeavour. In particular, it is often identified that audience evaluations are almost always positive. Yet whatever the critique, arts impact evaluation is becoming more and not less prevalent as a condition of public and philanthropic funding. This article explores both the methodological and conceptual problems that contribute to the perceived positive character of social impact research, in two parts: (1) an investigation of the critical literature on audience evaluation, particularly in relation to the argument that evaluation is inevitably positive and as such leads to a confusion between the goals of evaluation and arts advocacy; (2) a reflection on our practices as audience researchers in the performing arts and the practical factors that contribute to the dominance of the positive in audience evaluation.

Keywords: audience evaluation, arts impact, arts advocacy, theatre

Introduction

For several years, discussions about the intentions and merits of public programs that fund the arts have been beset by a tension about what such funding aims to achieve, and both the fact of and appropriateness of measures to assess whether these aims have indeed been achieved. Debates over the purpose of public funding have focused on the extent to which it is appropriate for such programs to focus on arts for 'instrumental' economic and social goals, and can be found in both policy and scholarly literature (Caust 2003; Belfiore &

Bennett 2010; Gray 2009). The tension over the appropriateness of measures to evaluate publicly funded arts programs is the broader subject of this article. The problem of how to measure the success of performing arts programs is widely recognised. It is now well-established that the traditional quantitative methods of audience studies are not sufficient to gain an understanding of what it is that sitting in an arts event does for individuals and communities, and more qualitative, detailed and probing evaluations have been established instead (Keaney 2008; Brown & Novak 2007; Sauter 2002; Radbourne, Johanson, Glow & White 2009).

Some efforts at identifying the benefits of arts experiences for audiences have led to a range of criticisms. It is asserted that arts impact evaluations tend to be poorly conceived and implemented, and that they are biased towards the delivery of a positive result and culturally specific ideological ends. The major reason given for such a bias is that evaluations are initiated and often conducted by agencies with a vested interest in a successful outcome, whether that be the funding agency or the organisations funded to run the arts programs. Other criticisms acknowledge the common policy problem of conducting rigorous evaluations in a real world context.

After examining the literature that identifies these two ostensible culprits behind the predominance of positive evaluations, this article suggests that there is a third important factor at work here, at least in the case of the live performing arts. The very nature of the audience experience in the live arts event and the relationship between the researcher and audience research participant in qualitative arts impact research strategies also contribute to the likelihood of a positive evaluation. Based on our own experience conducting evaluations of the impact of a range of live performing arts events on the audience, we suggest that the audience member's sense of their own responsibility for the experience of a live arts event, coupled with a lack of affective language for describing the impact of being in the audience, make evaluative research difficult. We discuss our experiences evaluating a range of performing arts events in Melbourne, Australia, and then focus on an evaluation conducted at a contemporary performance by Indigenous artists. The results of this particular evaluation highlight the positive role that the arts are often seen as playing in reinforcing social values. We argue that the conflation of 'value' (in the sense of a cultural benefit), with the notion of 'values' (as an expression of political beliefs) contributes to a positive evaluation outcome. In this sense, the attribution of a positive value to cultural experiences, such as attending a live performance, is at least in part a function of the audience's belief in the values they perceive to be encapsulated in the cultural experience itself.

The 'positive evaluation' phenomenon

The emphasis on positive impact in arts audience evaluations is the subject of consistent criticism (Davies & Heath 2014; Merli 2003; Selwood 2002). One of the chief reasons given for the phenomenon of the positive evaluation is the fact that those who initiate the evaluation often have a stake in advocating for the programs and projects evaluated. Sara

Selwood argued that by 2002 in the United Kingdom, following the Department of Culture, Sport and Media's growing efforts to measure the value of the cultural activities they funded, there was evidence of 'the politicisation of the gathering of data and the state's blurring of the relationship between advocacy and research'. Selwood asserted that although there was by then 'a mass of primary data' claiming to measure the impact of cultural policy, none the less 'data collection in the UK cultural sector is currently a long way off being a disinterested, objective or even well-regarded pursuit' (2002, n.p.).

The Urban Institute's 2005 national survey of cultural participation in the United States provides an example of the relationship between positive evaluations of arts impact and the advocacy motives behind their commission. In this case, the survey was commissioned by the philanthropic Wallace Foundation, which assists arts organisations to build audiences in order to expand participation in the arts. The Urban Institute surveyed over 1200 Americans to investigate their motives for attending live arts events. The results of the inquiry were that: 'People overwhelmingly reported positive experiences at their most recently attended event'; so much so that the report's author, Francie Ostrower, was forced to focus her subsequent analysis on 'intensity of positive experience' (2008: 94). In fact, 93 per cent of research participants agreed or strongly agreed with at least four of a total of six statements designed to indicate audience engagement. While the Urban Institute report is centered on the intrinsic benefits of the arts, similar positive evaluations are common when instrumental benefits are measured. The evaluation of the state-funded *Arts Recovery Quick Response* program in the Australian state of Victoria, for example, which was part of the state government's contribution to the recovery efforts in communities affected by bushfires in 2009 (funded jointly by Arts Victoria and Regional Arts Victoria), found that 'the arts play an important role in disaster recovery and [...] contributed to personal healing, re-building communities, and [...] galvanising community support and unity' (NSF Consulting 2010:3).

We can identify here a virtuous circle whereby government or philanthropic funding sets out criteria for arts project funding; funded projects are designed to deliver explicit messages which embody agreed objectives, to audiences who are familiar with and amenable to the idea that arts attendance is a positive thing to do. Thus the relationship between advocacy and evaluation has come under scrutiny. While audience evaluations may ostensibly be used to critically evaluate the costs and benefits of funding, in all likelihood such evaluation is used to justify established funding patterns. But, Selwood argues, the arts sector is under pressure 'to provide 'robust' evidence' (Selwood 2002). Furthermore, arts organisations increasingly recognize that 'for good evaluation to occur, there has to be a willingness to consider failure as a possible outcome' (Jackson n.d.: 4).

With its roots in advocacy, the positive evaluation phenomenon is seen to give rise to biased research design. In another overlapping virtuous circle, evaluators commissioned by the government agencies who have committed funds to the project frame their research questions in what Belfiore and Bennett (2010: 137) call 'advocacy-friendly terms' in order to justify the funding. The Urban Institute report discussed above, for instance, asks research

participants to respond to leading statements: ‘The artistic quality was high’; ‘This was an enjoyable social occasion’; ‘You learned or experienced something new from it’; ‘You liked the place where (the event) was located’; ‘You found it emotionally rewarding’; ‘You would like to see (an event) like this again’ (Urban Institute 2005: 34).

It has now been over twelve years since Selwood identified that the arts sector was under pressure to break the advocacy–evaluation nexus in the interests of research rigour. While evaluators continue to confront pressure from advocates in the course of their work, it is difficult to imagine that after such time these calls have not been heeded and that the results of evaluations universally continue to be predetermined. Yet the positive evaluation phenomenon continues. While we might posit a host of possible reasons for this, including the confinement of negative evaluations to the bottom drawer and the possibility that most arts programs are in fact worthy of their positive evaluations, this article posits another partial explanation. It argues that there are inherent difficulties in qualitative audience research, at least in the live performing arts, that make eliciting, identifying and documenting any responses *other* than the positive, unusually difficult.

The difficulty of audience evaluation

Practical and methodological reasons for the prevalence of positive evaluations have been widely recognized. One of the obvious reasons is that, as Paul Clements argues, ‘it is impossible to measure what has not happened, which may be just as important (for example, not to engage in anti-social activities)’ (Clements 2007: 332). The category of ‘what has not happened’ is expansive; in Clements’ example it is itself a positive result – the avoidance of socially undesirable behaviour – but in other cases it may be inadvertently neglectful. It includes the potential audience experiences of those who have chosen not to attend an arts event because they do not believe it will contribute to their lives in any way, as well as those who did not know that choosing to participate in the arts event was an option because they were not exposed to information and publicity beforehand. It also includes the people who choose not to answer calls for audience members to become research participants, on the grounds that they do not have much to say, perhaps because they did find the work in question engaging, or perhaps because they believe they lack the cultural capital to make an informed comment.

How to integrate the ‘what has not happened’ into arts impact evaluations is an important challenge. In his article ‘Black people don’t go to galleries’, David Osa Amadasun evocatively describes a personal experience of what might have been an example of ‘what has not happened’, but which in fact turned into a near-miss:

In May 2011 I took my daughter, who was 14 at the time, for a surprise trip to see the Tracey Emin exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London. We arrived at the Southbank Centre, parked underneath the gallery and walked up the stairs towards it. Shaniah glared at me as we neared the Hayward. Before I could say anything, she froze and said that she wasn’t going into the gallery. “It’s not me

dad, it's not me".

I was speechless. The daughter who I have seen hold her own in a rough school and area was visibly affected by a building. I was so upset that I nearly swore at her. I wasn't upset or disappointed with *her*, it was because in that brief moment I felt my family's vulnerability to the mundane violence of cultural value. As a parent I felt powerless, unable to protect her. Thankfully with some coaxing and the promise of a Caramel Frappuccino, Shaniah agreed to 'try' the exhibition. She loved it. The swearing and sexual explicitness intrigued her and caught her imagination (Amadasun 2013: 3).

While such examples of internalized exclusion from cultural institutions and experiences – based on class, race and cultural capital – are plentiful, Amadasun's account is particularly powerful because of the profoundly negative, in fact threatening, association he perceived his daughter experiencing: what he calls 'the mundane violence of cultural value' (Amadasun 2013: 3). His daughter's resistance to the prospect of the gallery was apparently not simply due to the expectation of boredom or lack of engagement, but was the consequence of a sense of threat. The example serves as a reminder that focusing on 'what has not happened' is not just an political obligation for evaluators, but necessary to rigorous research, because the number of people who are incidentally excluded from cultural experiences is likely to vastly outweigh the number to whom they appeal. The consequence of this is that in some cases, 'the evaluator and participant too readily conspire', by their very presence if nothing else, 'to reproduce the existing power structures and processes' by focusing on what is working rather than what is *not* happening (Clements 2007: 331, emphasis added).

In contrast, the following discussion represents our contribution to efforts to identify the limitations and difficulties of using audience responses in evaluating performing arts events with people who are in the audience. We identify a number of inter-related aspects of audience research that contribute to the positive leaning of evaluations: the responsibility of the researcher to prevent intrusion on the audience experience; the audience member's sense of mutual obligation and the related issue of politeness when contributing to research into an arts event; and the relationship between cultural capital, 'feeling out of place', and affective language in describing arts experiences.

The discussion extrapolates from data collected in the course of evaluations that took place over five years at live performing arts events. This data is sourced from focus groups at theatre, live music and dance events. The choice of qualitative interview-based methods is motivated by the fact that these are increasingly common in arts impact evaluations because they are considered appropriate to gauge 'how the public engages with the arts [and] the spectrum of attitudes' (Keaney 2008: 101). While quantitative evaluations (of, say, box office data) has the advantage of actual as opposed to reported information, qualitative interview-based approaches to the evaluation of impact provide 'a much richer

understanding of the motivations and barriers to engaging with the arts' (Keaney 2008: 107).

The purpose of our evaluations varied: sometimes they assessed social impact such as the extent to which the arts event had contributed to social inclusion; at other times they evaluated the audience's engagement in the event as an artistic event. However, all research participants were asked whether they enjoyed the performance they saw, whether they were engaged with it, and about the impact it had on them. In particular, participants were asked: What was the most important aspect of the performance to you?; Why did you come to this performance?; and What did you like best and least about the performance? Participants in the research included people who frequently attend the live performing arts and people who had rarely or never attended an arts event in that genre ('non-attenders') until they were invited by the researchers to do so in the interests of collecting research data. The inclusion of 'non-attenders' was initially designed to allow the researchers to draw findings about the qualities of a performance across a range of 'non-experts'. However, in this article, the data is used to provide examples of 'what has not happened': in the sense of when the arts cannot necessarily be shown to have engaged an audience member, and to investigate the difficulties of evaluating arts impact in such situations. We discuss 'positive responses' and 'non-positive responses' from research participants. The reason for nominating 'non-positive' as opposed to, say, 'negative' responses is that – as will become evident – responses by people who are not positive about their arts experience tend not to be negative as often as they are simply non-committal.

However, the first point to make is not so much about how research participants respond to audience research but rather about the behaviour of researchers. In his review of his own methods in interviewing children about their theatre experiences, Matthew Reason noted his difficulty in asking questions that could achieve the outcomes he wanted, noting instead that 'I was slipping into a mode of testing children's memory of the performances and rewarding them with praise when they got a particular detail or recollection correct' (Reason 2010: 50). Collecting information from young participants (8 to 20 years old) in a collaborative live performing arts project in a regional town in Victoria, we had a similar experience, although our behaviour as researchers differed. Faced with an especially shy and reticent group of young people, we felt ourselves slipping into a particular communication pattern simply in order to elicit responses, which was to over-emphasise or overly focus on their positive experiences and achievements. It was tempting to ask, 'What did you *really* like about that experience?' and to make comments such as 'Wow, that sounds very exciting!' simply in order to encourage interviewees to speak.

While this particular project represents a fairly extreme – or desperate – form of this behaviour on the part of the interviewer, it is something that we have noticed more commonly in our work on arts audiences. Not only is the 'positive tone' we give to our questions and comments designed to elicit responses, but it is also due to the researchers' sensitivity to their encroachment on the research participant's experience. Arts participants are motivated to become involved in arts events by a desire to have a positive or uplifting

experience – outside the ‘grind’ of work or family life – even if the content of the artwork is challenging. As the United Kingdom’s Department of Media, Culture and Sport 2008 *Taking Part* survey demonstrated: ‘For the majority of those interviewed the arts are a source of happiness, joy, relaxation and pleasure’ (Keaney 2008: 107), while Edelman, Sorli and Robinson illustrate how short and precious this experience is by noting the important motivation for theatregoing as being to ‘make a night of it’ (2014: 16). Approaching audience members for evaluation is not the same as, for example, approaching commuters to ask about the efficiency of train networks. Aware of participants’ generosity in giving their time to the evaluation, the researchers are wary of ‘grilling’ them.

Perhaps to contradict this point, there is also however a strong possibility that by giving research participants an opportunity to discuss their experience of a performance, the very fact of the research can improve their experience. We conduct focus groups with audiences as a primary means of ‘elucidat[ing] the subjective and elusive concepts’ that are often associated with audience experience (Walmsley 2011: 6). For the purposes of in-depth audience research, focus groups have some advantages over other methods of data collection: ‘the act of talking about the feelings associated with an audience experience brings those experiences into being’ (Johanson 2013: 163). There are benefits in providing an opportunity for audiences to reflect on the performance and to share their experiences in a focus group, which may be seen by participants as ‘an extension of the artistic event itself because their experience is inherently social, and so post-performance research can heighten their experience of that event’ (Johanson 2013: 163). At the end of a focus group run after a live music event in Melbourne in 2013, for instance, participants commented on the fact that hearing about the (positive) experiences of other audience members made them appreciate those aspects themselves, an experience which may not have occurred otherwise. Reason confirms this view when he identifies the ‘urgency to talk about (and thereby “remember”) performances experienced’ (2010: 27). Reason argues: ‘The factor at play here is the need that many of us feel to share and communicate our experiences of a performance after the event’ (2010: 26).

If our experiences can be generalised, it may be that the researcher and interviewees’ patterns of relating in live encounters for qualitative research purposes may contribute to a positive evaluation phenomenon, as indeed may the frame of mind in which arts audiences and participants enter into the arts experience. Davies and Heath note a similar phenomenon in museum evaluation: ‘It is generally agreed that visitors are often reluctant to criticise exhibits and exhibitions even during in-depth interviews and focus groups and in turn this pre-disposition to the positive may bias results’ (2014: 60).

In this context, it is worthwhile bringing interview data from non-attenders of performing arts events – who are unfamiliar with live performance conventions – into our discussion here. Not surprisingly, we found a correlation between people who attended live performing arts events infrequently or rarely, and non-positive responses. Such responses were articulated in ways that signify a lack of familiarity with the cultural form and an apparent absence of appropriate affective language, as well as a lack of comfort in speaking

about it. For example, when asked what they thought about the event and how they would describe it, research participants commented:

I am still thinking about how I would... can you come back to me?

what I would say tomorrow? I would probably say very, very little and what I would say would be very non-descript and hopefully not prompt any further questions.

Both respondents are deflecting the researchers' attention. While the second response is reasonably confident and humorous, the first signals discomfort with the research being conducted. Other non-positive responses did comment on the performance as a whole, but not in any more detail. For example: 'I think it was slow'. That comments are delivered briefly and that the participant deflects the question underscores Bourdieu's (1984) assertion that cultural consumption is a product of an acquired capacity. Hollinshead's analysis of why some film audiences choose not to view 'art-house' films notes that the risk of 'feeling out of place' inhibits cultural consumption (2011: 394). From interviews with audiences, she finds that there is a link between 'people feeling comfortable in places and their "right" to inhabit them' (Hollinshead 2011: 404).

To extend this point, the right to inhabit the space and sense of comfort in it may also determine how loquacious the participant feels inclined to be. The first two respondents quoted above, in particular, did not feel comfortable speaking about the experience, arguably because they did not find the experience itself comfortable. The point here is that such responses are very difficult to use in reporting on the success or failure of arts events to engage audiences, simply because of the brevity and lack of information provided in their answers, and therefore are of very limited value in evaluation. In contrast, here is a response from a non-attender who found the show engaging:

There wasn't anything I didn't like about it. I certainly sensed what Vicky felt, feeling very exposed at the front, but it was sitting close seeing those facial expressions and the intensity of what they were doing. I really enjoyed the sort of buoyant parts of the music – the second half again to me was fantastic.

It is interesting that the tendency of audiences to report positively about their experiences may differ from the experience of film audience researchers. Barker and Brooks (1998), for example, found that audience respondents to *Judge Dredd* were more likely to speak at length of negative assessments of the film than positive ones and only briefly when they enjoyed the film. However, Barker and Brooks explain that their success in securing interviews with audiences was largely limited to 'Dredd-heads', or fans of the comic, who were more confident and willing to express an opinion than other audiences (1998: 23). Thus the strongly critical views identified by the researchers were an expression of the

audience's investment in the original story and their relationship to it as fans or connoisseurs. The same cannot be said about the audience members we interviewed. In fact, they expressed the kind of reticence that Barker and Brooks suggest is the result of a sense of lack of a right to an opinion. However, the mediated nature of a screened event may also be a factor. In the context of live performance, it may be that audiences, particularly in relation to smaller scale productions and those in which they actively participate, are more likely to bring a high level of politeness to their responses due to the liveness of the event and their sense of mutual obligation to the producers and performers.

Respondents, for example, talked about the need to 'understand and appreciate' the performance; and the 'synergy' and 'two-way interaction' that being an audience member entails. The sense of mutual obligation is understood as a critical part of the experience; one interviewee in our research explained that the experience of attending a performance is 'a total interaction between the audience and the stage and the actors and the lighting – the whole lot. The whole lot has to work. If one part doesn't work, the whole thing doesn't work'.

There is also a tendency for research participants to focus on individual or technical aspects of a performance. Sedgman's (2014) analysis of audiences of National Theatre Wales suggests that: 'Audiences who broke the production down and discussed it in terms of its separate elements rated it less positively than people who saw it as an experienced whole', and this is supported by our findings. For example, in response to the minimalist set design for a play, which included a spotlight on the sole actor, who sat on the staircase that was the only feature of the set, respondents commented:

I liked the lighting and I liked the staircase, I liked the carpentry and the stage craft. (Malthouse focus group).

I liked how it picked out the stairs and I liked how there was one point where he crawls backwards and goes up the stairs and he stayed flat and he created this triangle and when he sat up you could just see his face and his body was still in darkness and you could just see his face and it created this sort of distant shape behind him. (Malthouse focus group)

He conveyed that really well and the staging was amazing, the lighting was amazing but the fellow playing the piano, it was all really well put together – I just didn't really like it much. (Malthouse focus group).

What I found interesting was they covered the exit signs. (Malthouse focus group).

These responses might be interpreted as demonstrations of just how determined the respondents are to report a positive aspect to the production: in the absence of feeling engaged, they resort to their appreciation of smaller and more technical aspects of the

performance. The third quote is, in this sense, particularly insightful. Or, because these particular respondents knew they would be required to answer the researcher's questions when they went into the theatre, it may be that they were actively looking for aspects of the production on which to comment, rather than allowing for an engaged response. Alternatively, it may be that the technical aspects of the production are – with the exception of the respondent in the third quote – sufficient to constitute a positive experience. If the latter is the case, it would be worth exploring evaluation methodologies that build in the opportunity for research participants to reflect on the technical aspects of production as indicators of engagement.

Respondents whose responses were ambivalent, if not non-positive, also reflect a self-awareness of the need to understand the etiquette involved in theatre-going, and the negative consequences on their experience of not being sure about the etiquette:

From my aspect it was interesting at the start - I was more polite, so I waited for someone else to clap first. So ... instead of being involved in it and associating it with clapping – say I felt like clapping, I was busy waiting for someone else to clap first and, you know, have they finished? Is it an artistic pause? And that sort of stuff. But then again by the second half you have kind of figured it out.

I think it's more like art on the wall in that it's about how the audience perceived it without having really much interaction and you know, there were a lot of moments where you really felt like you had to be silent and every now and then there was a little bit of tearing or laughter, but you never... you can't get any information from the performer as to whether he wants people to laugh or he wants people to be silent so I find that quite difficult which may well be one of the main reasons why I don't go and see a lot of live theatre.

Perhaps, too, the sense of obligation and ownership evinced by regular attenders is lacking for these respondents, just as it was for Amadasun's daughter. Sedgman (2014) argues that there is a connection between an inability or reluctance to articulate responses and an insecurity about how much the audience member knows about theatre: 'Audiences who felt themselves to be lacking in professional (theatrical) expertise found it hardest to legitimize their responses... Maybe I just *didn't get it*. Maybe this wasn't a performance *for me*'.

'I think we're all converted, I don't think there's a racist in the room'

In contradistinction to many of the non-positive experiences outlined above, we found a specific instance of heightened positivity that deserves further analysis. In the case described here, the focus group of audience members expressed strongly positive responses to the performance they had seen and, we argue, demonstrated the connection between a

positive experience, a sense of ownership and mutual obligation, and the comfort of having their cultural capital confirmed.

The focus group followed a cabaret production in Melbourne, Australia, featuring contemporary Indigenous performers working in spoken word, music, singing, dancing and stand-up comedy. The emphasis of the work was on storytelling and showcasing the diversity of talent within contemporary Indigenous performing arts. The audience for the Indigenous cabaret were mostly white and middle-aged, and already 'converted' to the political, social and cultural importance of Indigenous arts to national expression and Indigenous well-being. The audience response reflected a perception of the cultural value of both the performance and their own participation as audience members. The focus group revealed an overwhelmingly positive response and a gaudy take-up of affective descriptions of the perceived value of the work. Cultural 'value' is a difficult term to pin down. Matarasso identified a number of common ambiguities in assertions of cultural value, all of which have implications for how it might be evaluated. In particular he argued that there is a tendency to confuse 'value' in the sense of a benefit with 'values' as the expression of ideology. Those advocating for the cultural sector are inclined to confuse these terms: they tend to see culture as having value because they 'believe in the values that they argue it encapsulates and expresses' (2014: 3).

This confusion is reflected in the responses of audiences at the Indigenous cabaret, where it took the form of a confusion between the artistic and cultural value of the performance itself and generic messages about the well-being, resilience and cultural strength of Australia's Indigenous people as a collective group, following centuries of racial oppression. For example, when asked to describe his experience of the show, one audience member commented:

I felt [the performers] were enjoying life and getting on with things in a very positive way. I sat there with a smile on my face the whole night and therefore I feel that's a very positive feeling to give to me and I picked it up, went for the ride and rode with them. In a week's time when I think about it I'll probably have another grin on my face.

Here the respondent sees the cultural value to himself as lying in the perceived value of the performance to the performers (it demonstrated they are 'getting on with things'). In this sense the respondent is articulating the confusion Matarasso identifies: the cultural value of the experience to the audience member is conflated with the perceived cultural values of the event.

Another aspect of cultural value is demonstrated in the way in which the responses of audience members evoked a clear delineation between 'us' (the largely white audience) and 'them' (the cast of Indigenous performers). Responses, for example, encapsulated this 'othering' by understanding the performance as a synecdoche for racial difference and specialness:

One of my impressions was the storytelling through their singing and their poetry and it was sort of reminding us of the journey they had been on and their resilience, and the pride they have now in singing in their own language. They're not going to hide but are actually very proud. [The performance] wasn't in your face, either, which sometimes it can be. It was a beautiful journey ... from the past to the present and the future, and it was positive. I take away a very positive experience.

The respondent sees the performances of the actors as standing for the greater whole of Indigenous culture and its resilience. The performers (through the fact of their public performance) do not 'hide' and therefore they are understood to stand for the existence of a proud Indigenous culture. Such synecdochal extrapolation of the specific instance to the general also bespeaks the conflation of perceptions of cultural value. The respondent accorded a positive value to this cultural experience because he/she agrees with the values that it encapsulates (that Indigenous people should feel positive about the present and the future).

If the responses reproduced a brave and proud 'them', the trope of 'us' was reproduced too; the audience valued the opportunity to witness the performance as evidence of how the wrongs of the past are being corrected in the present:

I thought they encapsulated [issues of race and discrimination] in a non-threatening way and brought it forward as something that was in the past.

I thought that actually with all the things that have happened to them, they've got dignity and still got a sense of humour and I thought that was impressive... I thought they've got a reason to be pretty bitter and sour but they weren't. I didn't feel any bitterness there... they didn't get too heavy, they just brought it up enough to make you realise that they're getting on with life.

The responses from the focus group provide some insights into the potential difficulty of framing and articulating non-positive comments. To say anything negative about the performance runs the (unthinkable) risk of criticising the whole project of Indigenous cultural pride expressed through contemporary performance. Furthermore, audiences are expressing a sense of self-approval in their own non-racism by the mere fact of attending and enjoying the performance (as noted by the comment: 'I think we're all converted, I don't think there's a racist in the room'). In this case of evaluating audience impact, the problem of the positive is compounded: not only is there the general sense of the audience's desire to have a positive or uplifting experience; there is also the specific desire and pleasure of having one's own world view and sense of place (as either 'us' or 'them') confirmed.

The audience of the Indigenous cabaret provides something of a contrast to Amadasun's account of 'the mundane violence of cultural value' and the sense of internalized exclusion experienced by his daughter at the Hayward Gallery. Shaniah's experience of discomfort and her eventual positive response to the challenge of the exhibition contrasts with the audience evaluated here, who appear to have experienced little discomfort because they were already acculturated to the values encapsulated by the performance and felt positively disposed to its message and to the feelings this evoked for them about their own internalized inclusion. In the teen years of the twenty-first century, it is somewhat shocking to find that the relative ease of cultural consumption is still so markedly determined by social and racial factors; while Shaniah found a culturally unfamiliar arts centre so threatening that she resisted entering the building, the predominantly white audience of an Indigenous performance saw the performance as entirely accessible, entirely within their cultural capital, and arguably made for them.

Conclusion

We began this article by drawing attention to the well-documented link between advocacy and positive evaluation. This link is thrown into relief at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania, where the concept of 'dislike' is boldly embraced by the museum. Presented with an iPod Touch guide to the artworks, visitors to MONA are able to vote to love or hate the artwork. This is one of the device's most popular interactive functions (Proctor 2011). MONA is a privately owned arts institution and its owner, David Walsh, is not answerable to government funding agencies. Walsh's interest in collecting information about what MONA visitors love or hate is not a shortcut to programming popular work; to the contrary, he has threatened to remove the most popular works from display (Proctor 2011). Although he has offered no rationale for this threat in public, we might presume it is motivated by a desire to present challenging and provocative artwork rather than easily consumable work. MONA's rare encouragement of non-positive expressions is linked to its autonomy from public or philanthropic funding. This provides a significant contrast to the examples above of a demonstrable link between arts advocacy and the privileging of the positive in impact evaluation.

The phenomenon of positive results in arts impact evaluation is worthy of critical attention. Government arts funding agencies, philanthropic groups and other arts sponsors seek evidence and validation of the value of their investment through evaluations of social impact. Arguably, where the source of funding for the arts program is simultaneously the commissioner of its evaluation, there is a conflict of interest or at least a circular logic. Evaluation becomes a means of advocacy for the continuation of the arts program, and the evidence of positive social impact appears to prove the value of undertaking the evaluation in the first place. Volkerling (2012), for example, found that the Australia Council's positive review of the economic well-being of the arts sector in Australia was based on questionable evidence. Data is routinely gathered by the Australia Council and the ABS and is used to paint a picture of the cultural sector as an instance of public interest but market failure that,

taken together, justify continued government subsidy. But this picture elides a more complex truth of market decline, falling audiences, and the steep increase in casualised forms of cultural work. Researchers who are commissioned to evaluate the impact of arts programs by the agencies that funded the activity in the first place may find themselves providing boosterist accounts of the outcomes as a means of keeping the funding wheels greased.

To add to this literature, this article has argued that there is a correlation between positive outcomes and the audience's sense of comfort and familiarity with the conventions of the performance they are watching. While the importance of familiarity has its roots in Bourdieu's analysis, this article argues that by shaping what audience members are and are not willing to discuss, familiarity gets in the way of value-neutral evaluation. We argue that the elision of explicitly negative responses points to the propensity for performing arts audiences to experience a sense of appreciative responsibility for the 'liveness' of the performance. This responsibility to appreciate manifests as polite responses and self-doubt when engagement does not take place. In addition, positive responses to cultural experiences stem from the audience's belief in the values they perceive to be encapsulated in the cultural experience itself, as illustrated in the case of the contemporary Indigenous performance.

If the context, then, is a virtuous circle, the methodological issues in conducting audience impact research in the performing arts add to the problem. The cultural capital associated with attending and appreciating the performing arts inhibits the possibility of saying that you don't like what you have seen.

For future audience evaluations, efforts to address the problems identified in this article may assist in the development of more rigorously evidence-based policy. First, evaluators would do well to recognise that 'what does not happen' is as important a topic for research as what *has* happened as a result of the arts experience. Secondly, the nature of social research makes it difficult if not impossible to avoid behaviour that encourages particular – and in this case positive – responses from audiences, but researchers who are aware of and able to document these tendencies have the capacity to provide realistic findings. Thirdly, the great difficulty of investigating disengagement and non-commitment from prospective audiences identifies this issue as a valuable topic for the sharing of knowledge and techniques between evaluators. So too the relationship between appreciation of the technical aspects of the arts and artistic appreciation is a topic for future investigation. Finally, attention to the relationship between social values and cultural value, and to identifying when values and value are conflated, will provide richer opportunities to map the impact of the arts on audiences.

Biographical Notes:

Katya Johanson is Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. Her research focuses on policy issues around arts and cultural engagement with audiences and communities. She has worked with local and state

government agencies to produce work that informs public arts and cultural policy, particularly where policies seek to engage communities in arts and cultural activities. With Professor Jennifer Radbourne and Dr. Hilary Glow, she edited *The Audience Experience* (Intellect 2013). Contact: katya.johanson@deakin.edu.au.

Hilary Glow is Associate Professor and Director Arts and Cultural Management Program at Deakin University. Her research addresses the management and policy settings that frame the operations of cultural organisations, and the role of policy and public funding in supporting cultural organisations and their audiences. With Katya Johanson she has conducted research with Arts Victoria and a range of performing arts companies on audience engagement leading to a series of scholarly publications along with a book of edited essays on arts audiences, participation and engagement (Intellect, 2013). Also with Dr. Johanson, Hilary is the author of *Your Genre is Black: Indigenous performing arts and policy* (2009).

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