

Positive art:

Artistic expression and appreciation as an exemplary vehicle for flourishing

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Abstract

The relevance of the arts to wellbeing has been recognised within clinical fields, as reflected in therapeutic forms based on various art modalities, from music to drama therapy. However, there has hitherto been little appreciation in fields such as positive psychology of the broader potential of the arts as a vehicle for flourishing and fulfilment. As such, this paper proposes the creation of ‘positive art’ as a field encompassing theory and research concerning the wellbeing value of art. To show the scope and possibilities of this proposed field, the paper provides an indicative summary of literature pertaining to four major art forms: visual art, music, literature and drama. Moreover, the paper identifies five main positive outcomes that are consistently found in the literature across all these forms: sense-making, enriching experience, aesthetic appreciation, entertainment, and bonding. The paper aims to encourage a greater focus on the arts in fields like positive psychology, enabling science to more fully understand and appreciate the positive power of the arts.

Keywords: art; drama; literature; music; wellbeing; flourishing

Since positive psychology was inaugurated in 1998, numerous subfields have emerged focusing on particular aspects of flourishing. These include applied fields such as positive education (Seligman et al., 2009), physiological disciplines like positive neuroscience (Urry et al., 2004), therapeutic paradigms such as positive clinical psychology (Wood & Tarrier, 2010), and socially-focused concerns like positive social psychology (Lomas, 2015). However, among all this cross-disciplinary innovation, relatively little attention has been paid to an aspect of life that is intimately connected to flourishing: the arts. As Tarnas (1991) elucidates, artistic expression and appreciation have been a constant throughout human history, valued for reasons ranging from the facilitation of emotional ecstasy, to the creation of narratives that give meaning to existence. Indeed, Tarnas argues that religious and spiritual traditions – which have addressed humanity’s deepest existential needs over recent millennia – have been thoroughly meditated through art forms, from literary parables to iconographic paintings. Furthermore, since the gradual secularisation of Western societies from the 17th Century onwards, Tarnas suggests it has increasingly fallen to art alone to meet these deep existential and spiritual needs.

As such, this paper advocates for the creation of a subfield of ‘positive arts,’ focusing on the relevance of the arts to flourishing. Of course, there is already a great deal of relevant work dispersed throughout various academic fields. However, the value of forging a specific ‘positive arts’ paradigm is that it can provide an interdisciplinary conceptual space where research and theory relating to the positive impact of the arts can be considered as a whole. Indeed, the rationale for, and value of, the creation of this paradigm arguably mirrors that of positive psychology more generally. When Martin Seligman inaugurated the field in 1998, it was based on his contention that ‘psychology as usual’ had generally been preoccupied with disorder and dysfunction, and had not focused on topics such as happiness in a systematic, empirical way (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, this claim was subsequently challenged, not least by humanistic psychologists (e.g., Bohart & Greening, 2001), who argued that such topics *had* been investigated empirically for years by scholars working across different sub-fields within psychology. As such, positive psychology was accused of carving a professional niche for itself, by overlooking prior research, and by promulgating a ‘separatist’ agenda (Held, 2004).

However, while there may have been some validity to these claims, the subsequent rise to prominence of positive psychology indicates that it *did* fulfil some professional and conceptual need within psychology. In terms of professional needs, Linley and Joseph (2004, p.4) suggested that the field, while not a new speciality per se, offered a ‘collective identity’

unifying researchers interested in ‘the brighter sides of human nature.’ Likewise, while topics such as hope and optimism had been studied previously by scholars in disparate fields, part of the appeal of positive psychology was that it created a conceptual space where these diverse topics – all of which shared the ‘family resemblance’ (Wittgenstein, 1953) of pertaining to wellbeing in some way – could be brought together and analysed collectively. Arguably, then, the proposed paradigm of ‘positive arts’ may serve a similar value. It can potentially offer a professional identity (or one particular strand of identity) for researchers interested in exploring the intersection between the arts and wellbeing. Likewise, it can provide a conceptual space where diverse empirical and theoretical work at this intersection – which of course has already been on-going for years – can be fruitfully integrated.

There are many existing areas of research to draw on. For instance, most artistic modalities have been harnessed in therapeutic contexts, helping to ameliorate physical and mental illness, spanning art therapy (Reynolds et al., 2000), music therapy (Ruud, 2008), singing therapy (Olderog Millard & Smith, 1989), dance/movement therapy (Loman, 2005), bibliotherapy (Gregory et al., 2004), writing therapy (Pizarro, 2004), poetry therapy (Connolly Baker & Mazza, 2004), drama therapy (Schnee, 1996), and even comedy therapy (Crawford & Caltabiano, 2011). Work within these areas is certainly encompassed by positive art. However, the proposed field is not limited to the use of artistic modalities in treating disorder and distress. As per the ethos of positive psychology generally, positive art includes analysis of the role of artistic expression and appreciation in flourishing – which is not the same as an absence of pathology (Keyes, 2005) – and its potential in helping people lead more fulfilling lives.

The paper will focus on four broad areas of the arts: visual art; music; literature; and drama. In order to gather the material for this paper, a quasi-systematic review of relevant literature was conducted (cf. Lomas, 2016). It was *quasi*-systematic in that one could not hope to systematically review every relevant paper, since this would have been impractical and unmanageable. Nevertheless, there was some systematisation to the process. Firstly, in terms of collating relevant material, a rigorous search was conducted using Google scholar. Three separate searches were conducted for each of the four art forms (art, music, literature, and drama), in each case pairing the word (e.g., ‘music’) with three different search terms (‘wellbeing,’ ‘happiness,’ and ‘flourishing’). As such, 12 separate searches were conducted in total. For each of these 12 searches, the abstracts of the first 50 items (i.e., the first 5 pages of the search result) were read in detail, as were the papers themselves (if accessible). As such,

around 300 abstracts were reviewed (as many papers were duplicated across the 12 searches), and about 170 papers.

Then, in terms of reviewing and interpreting this material, the analytic process was based on grounded theory (GT) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). GT is a qualitative methodology designed to allow theory to ‘emerge’ inductively from data, featuring three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. First, open coding involves examining the data – which in this study were the abstracts and papers obtained, as outlined above – for emergent themes. Thus, as I read through the papers and abstracts, I would note down themes as they occurred to me, a process which generated around 30 separate themes. The next stage is axial coding, in which themes are compared with each other, and clustered into categories on the basis of conceptual similarity. As a result of this process, five main categories were identified, each of which constituted a broad type of positive outcome relating to artistic expression or appreciation: (a) sense-making (enabling people to comprehend existence and find meaning in it); (b) enriching experience (facilitating new or elevated emotional states); (c) aesthetic appreciation (enjoyment of beauty or skill); (d) entertainment (pleasure and fun); and (e) bonding (connecting with others through art). The final GT stage is selective coding, in which a single ‘core’ category is identified, which in this case was wellbeing. Attempts are then made with GT to elucidate how the main categories relate to this core category, thus telling a ‘narrative’ which makes sense of the data.

Before exploring these five categories below, it is worth noting that other scholars may have interpreted this literature in other ways, possibly resulting in different categories. Indeed, it would have been possible for me to have organised the analysis differently myself. In qualitative research, there is a commitment to ‘reflexivity,’ in which scholars endeavour to bring transparency to their methodological and analytic choices, and to reflect critically on how these choices were influenced by their own personal bias and ‘situatedness’ (Cutcliffe, 2003). Thus, reflecting critically on my own interpretative decisions, I recognise that I could have possibly identified other categories beyond the five included here. Indeed, in the analytic process, two other categories did suggest themselves, but were both discounted, for separate reasons. Firstly, there were certain themes which were suggestive of a category of cognitive development (e.g., the cultivation of critical thought through activities such as reading); however, I felt that this category was only tangentially and indirectly related to wellbeing. Secondly, I contemplated a category of physical health, since there were a number of themes relating to this, particularly in relation to modalities like music (e.g., singing) and drama (e.g., dance); however, these themes did not stretch across all four art forms, and so

health was also not included as a distinct category. Nevertheless, the themes that would have comprised these two categories are still included in the analysis below, but have simply been subsumed within the five selected categories.

The presentation below takes each art form in turn, exploring in sequence how it relates to each of the five categories identified above. Thus, for each art form, the paper explores the relevance of that particular modality to wellbeing, doing so by selectively highlighting indicative research and interventions. One must preface the presentation with the caveat that not all people find art rewarding, a ‘condition’ that has been operationalised as ‘physical anhedonia’ (Nusbaum et al., 2015). Nevertheless, most people can arguably derive at least some value from art (in one form or another), as this paper hopes to show. While it is clearly beyond the scope of any paper to comprehensively cover all relevant work, this paper nevertheless shows the scope of possibilities afforded by the arts, highlighting their considerable potential in facilitating flourishing.

Visual art

Visual art is used here to cover the multitude of forms of visual expression that people have created over the centuries, from painting to photography. The urge towards self-expression using visual media is a constant in human history, with the earliest works of art dating back at least 40,000 years (Than, 2012). Speculations on the significance of such art range from these being petitionary representations of desired outcomes, e.g., fertility (Prins & Hall, 1994), to vehicles for shamanic mystical experience (Lewis-Williams, 1995). Subsequently, visual art has been integral to human culture, particularly in providing a potent medium through which religious/spiritual traditions have communicated their teachings and inspired their adherents (Jensen, 2013). In more recent centuries, as religiosity has waned in parts of the world, visual art has continued to be culturally vital, including as a vehicle for some of the existential and spiritual yearnings that were previously channeled through religion (Tarnas, 1991). Indeed, De Botton and Armstrong (2013) argue that galleries and museums are the new ‘cathedrals’ of the secular age: awe-inspiring buildings that facilitate collective ‘worship’ of objects that are sources of reverence, value and meaning. The value of visual art is manifold, and the five main positive outcomes identified as relating to art— sense-making, enriching experience, aesthetic appreciation, entertainment, and bonding – certainly apply here.

Beginning with sense-making, this refers to the way art can help people process and understand their existence (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). As with all artistic modalities here, we can approach sense-making from two perspectives: appreciation and expression. First, even if one does not create art oneself, its contemplation can facilitate sense-makings efforts. It has

been argued that the power of great art resides partly in its ability to articulate messages of existential importance and provide an opportunity to reflect on these (Silvia, 2005). Consider, for example, the role played by religious iconography in propagating religious teachings, providing a visual articulation of theological doctrine (Jensen, 2013). Alternatively, more recently, people have found symbolic meaning – albeit dark and disturbing – in the fractured portraits of Picasso, which have reflected the chaos and fragmentation of the 20th Century (Tarnas, 1991). The ‘effort after meaning’ theory holds that the reward of viewing art stems precisely from the act of trying to interpret and decode it (Russell, 2003). The potential for sense-making is perhaps even stronger in self-created art. This is a key premise of art therapy, in which art creation is used to help people process distress (e.g., trauma), and perhaps to even find some meaning in their suffering (Reynolds & Lim, 2007). This mode of self-exploration is particularly valuable for people who may struggle to express themselves in language, such as older adults with dementia (Jonas-Simpson & Mitchell, 2005).

These sense-making qualities of art are augmented by the second main positive outcome, enriching experience. This refers to the potential for art to add new depth, texture, and colour to reality, to open new emotional and existential vistas. Perhaps the most famous example is the 1968 ‘Earthrise’ photograph, taken by Apollo 8 astronauts Frank Borman and William Anders. In showing earth as a ‘fragile oasis’ in the vastness of space, and moreover a ‘biosphere of immense diversity,’ the photo is credited with raising humanity’s consciousness of their precarious and contingent existence, fueling the fledgling environmental movement (Henry & Taylor, 2009, p.194); as such, Williamson (2006, p.11) suggests this single shot is ‘the most significant legacy of the Space Age.’ The power of visual art in this regard is not limited to epochal moments like Earthrise. Indeed, the emergence of new technologies such as the smartphone have democratized art production, enabling the general population to explore and document aspects of their lives that may have hitherto gone unnoticed and/or forgotten, using photo and video. These technologies have been used by researchers and clinicians to help people explore and understand issues relating to their lived experience, such as adolescents with chronic health problems (Rich et al., 2000).

The third main value of art concerns aesthetic appreciation. The potential for beauty to evoke positive mental states – explored in depth by the philosophical field of aesthetics – is beginning to be recognized in positive psychology, with ‘appreciation of beauty and excellence’ being one of the character strengths in Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) ‘values-in-action’ taxonomy. Indeed, art can be a powerful route to some of the more elevated states of wellbeing. For example, Keltner and Haidt (2003) discuss the significance of the complex

emotional state of awe, in which one can be moved profoundly by experiences that challenge one's understanding of the world. They argue that works of art have the power to induce this state, and thus can facilitate transformative experiences. At a less rarified level, the appeal of aesthetics is attested to by the popularity of galleries – the National Gallery in London alone attracted nearly 600,000 visits in 2014-2015, for instance (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2015) – and by the ubiquity of phenomena like home decoration (Melchionne, 1998), and the prevalence of blogs devoted to aesthetic appreciation (e.g., www.patternity.org). Similarly, the value of aesthetics to wellbeing is beginning to be recognized in occupational settings (see e.g., Dalke et al. (2006) on the impact of colour schemes in a hospital on the wellbeing of staff and patients).

The fourth key positive outcome is entertainment, i.e., pleasure or interest through appreciating or expressing art. Engaging with visual art may be enjoyable for diverse reasons, from a pleasant distraction, to an engrossing intellectual experience (Funch, 1997). The wellbeing value of appreciation was highlighted by Clow and Fredhoi (2006), who found that visits to galleries can help reduce cortisol and self-reported stress. The creative act can be enjoyable too. For instance, artistic pursuits are effective at engendering flow, a state of mental absorption identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that is consistently rated by people as among their most valued life experiences. Similarly, creative self-expression can satisfy other key psychological needs, such freedom and autonomy (Reynolds, 2010). Moreover, the benefits of creativity are not only within reach of people who self-identify as being 'artists'; in addition to the voluminous literature on the value of art therapy in treating mental illness (Reynolds et al., 2000), there are emergent art-based interventions for use in the community to promote wellbeing, like Swindells et al.'s (2013) initiative for older adults. Moreover, such interventions can impact on other aspects of wellbeing, particularly in at-risk populations: Renton et al. (2012) found that an art intervention with people from lower socioeconomic groups (who tend to have less engagement with the arts) had positive changes in other areas of life (e.g., health behaviours).

Finally, the fifth main positive outcome is bonding with others. This can occur at varying levels of scale, from a general sense of interconnectedness to intimate relationships forged through shared experiences of art. With the former, the power of art to crystallise some sense of shared humanity ranges from the kind of global connection sparked by the Earthrise picture (Henry & Taylor, 2009), to more local instances of artists contributing to a national or regional identity, e.g., as Andy Warhol did in New York (Currid, 2007). At a more intimate level, art offers opportunities for interaction: for instance, Reynolds (2010)

reports that an art-making intervention for older adults was highly valued for facilitating rewarding relationships. We might also mention the emergent intersection of creative arts and social media, as highlighted by the rise of art-based (e.g., photography) platforms such as Instagram, the world's fastest growing social media site in 2015 (Mander, 2015). Also relevant is the rise in social computer gaming, such as 'massively multiplayer online games'; these involve interactive immersion in a 'rich, textured graphical framework,' and so are an example of relationships being forged through engagement in art (Thomas & Brown, 2009). The latter examples also illustrate how visual arts not only continue to be relevant in the 21st Century, but actually help spearhead the emergence of new technologies and phenomena.

Music

As with visual art, music is intrinsic to the history of humankind. Following Darwin's (1871) speculations on the topic, ethnomusicologists have noted the common evolutionary links between music and language, referred to as 'musilanguage' theory; for instance, Morley (2002) suggests this musical protolanguage emerged from tonal affective primate calls between 1.6 million and 50,000 years ago. Over subsequent millenia, while evolving into its own branch of communication, separate from conventional language, music has remained at the heart of culture. It has served as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting oral histories and cultural folk memories (Berry, 1988). It has been central to many religious/spiritual traditions, with functions ranging from bonding people together in song, to facilitating 'altered' states of spiritual ecstasy (Sylvan, 2002). It has figured in esoteric philosophies, e.g., the Pythagorean school, which connected harmonic properties to mathematical ratios that structure the universe (Tarnas, 1991). It has played a key symbolic and ceremonial role in civic institutions and processes, from protest songs inspiring progressive movements, to the significance of the national anthem in the creation of nation states (Gilboa & Bodner, 2009). Finally, music matters to many people on a personal level today, with a majority of adults deeming it 'important' in their lives (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013).

Starting with sense-making, as with visual art, music can serve as a prism through which complex life events can be digested and interpreted. In religious contexts, inchoate spiritual feelings can be given voice through song, enabling worshippers to articulate the emotional currents flowing through them (Sylvan, 2002). Similarly, most cultures have used song to create foundational myths and stories; indeed, before written language, such songs were essential to these being passed through the generations (Berry, 1988). In a related way today, national anthems can be powerful vehicles in forging a sense of national identity (Gilboa & Bodner, 2009). The potential of music in helping people make sense of who they

are is perhaps even more pervasive and powerful on a personal level, particularly for younger age groups. Analyses of youth culture highlight the intense importance music can play at this age, where factors like affiliation to musical subcultures and activities like gig attendance play a central role in the formation of identity (Bennett, 2000). Similarly, many people draw on songs to help them understand their own emotional dynamics and make sense of their lived experience (North et al., 2000). As with the other art forms, creating music oneself can be particularly helpful in this regard; indeed, this is one premise of music therapy, especially ‘resource-oriented therapy,’ in which patients are helped to write songs (thus drawing on their own ‘resources’) to help them process their issues (Ruud, 2008).

Music is especially potent with regard to the second main positive outcome: enriching experience. Indeed, it has been argued that, of all art forms, music is particularly powerful at inducing intense emotions and elevating listeners to spiritual/existential peaks. In philosophy, Nietzsche (1872) argued in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* that through music modern humans could reattain the balance (lost since Classical Greece) of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of life. Music has likewise been deployed by religious/spiritual traditions to help people enter rarefied or unusual states of trance and ecstasy (Leuba, 2013). Here there is often an emphasis on rhythmic music, accompanied by dance, in which the body is aligned with the music as a vehicle for self-transcendence (Highwater, 1992). From a more contemporary perspective, there is an emergent psychobiological literature on why music is able to elicit the ‘chills’ (shivers down the spine); this work tends to focus on neuroaffective circuitry involved in pleasure/reward, e.g., endorphin bursts combined with the type of galvanic skin response prompted by emotional stimuli (Panksepp & Bernatzky, 2002). From a musicology perspective, the chills are seen as being elicited by phenomena such as ‘enharmonic change,’ i.e., when a note stays constant, but is re-contextualised harmonically (Sloboda, 1991). The potency of music to evoke strong emotions, often in somewhat foreseeable ways, means that people often use it strategically to alleviate dysphoric moods and more generally self-regulate their emotions, which Ruud (2008) refers to as ‘musical self-medication’ (p.50).

Our third key outcome, aesthetic appreciation, refers to enjoyment of beauty (in the music) and/or skill (in the composers or players). The value of musical appreciation has been recognised in liberal arts education, where it is seen as a gateway to more general aesthetic appreciation (Goolsby, 1984). Its value in other developmental respects is also beginning to be acknowledged. For instance, since Rauscher et al. (1993) found that students who listened to a Mozart sonata performed better on cognitive tasks, there has been interest in the so-called

‘Mozart effect’ (the impact of music listening on cognitive development). While the potential of music in this regard may be somewhat overhyped (Črnčec et al., 2006), meta-analyses suggest there may be some validity to the idea (Hetland, 2000). Likewise, an enriched sound environment via music exposure can assist neurological cognitive rehabilitation following a stroke (Särkämö et al., 2008). Given the value of music appreciation, there are efforts to create interventions to enhance aesthetic responses, such as through mindfulness meditation (Diaz, 2013). Aesthetic appreciation has also been harnessed in clinical settings: for instance, Baker et al. (2007) used music therapy for substance use disorder, where music was used to elicit the kinds of positive emotions that patients would normally seek through substance use. Music appreciation extends to accompanying factors such as lyricism, which is where music intersects with the third great art form here, literature. Indeed, there are scholars who deem the very best lyric writers to be equal to the literary greats, such as Christopher Ricks (2011), who argues that Bob Dylan’s lyricism is on a par with the poetry of John Keats.

Aesthetics are a component of the fourth main outcome, entertainment, which also encompasses other pleasures associated with music. Here we might take the opportunity to highlight the unique value of dancing. As an expressive outlet intrinsically allied to music, dancing also taps into the positive factors outlined above. It has a role in sense-making, including as a vehicle for realizing and expressing one’s cultural/personal identity (Grau & Jordan, 2002), and in a clinical context (i.e., dance/movement therapy) as a way for people to process trauma (Loman, 2005). It can enrich experience, e.g., eliciting rarefied states as part of religious/spiritual rituals (Highwater, 1992), and it can evoke aesthetic appreciation, as exemplified by the appeal of forms such as ballet (Bond, 1987). Additionally, perhaps of all the art forms, dance has direct physical health benefits as a form of exercise, e.g., increasing cardiovascular fitness (Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012). However, of particular relevance here is dance’s particular ‘fun factor’; indeed, Lindqvist (2001) suggests dance is the closest many adults come to recapturing the freedom and joys that characterize childhood play. This fun factor means dance can appeal to hard-to-reach or at-risk populations, such as adolescent females, who may resist other forms of art and sport (Burkhardt & Rhodes, 2012). Dance is also a potent vehicle for experiencing flow (Hefferon & Ollis, 2006), as is listening to and playing music more generally (Bakker, 2005).

Finally, music is a powerful source of bonding. As noted above, music is a resource around which people can form valued collective identities, e.g., via affiliation to musical ‘scenes,’ not only in adolescence (Bennett, 2000), but throughout life (Bennett, 2006). The bonding opportunities offered by music is particularly potent at live performances. The

potential for music to evoke collective emotionality, e.g., euphoria, came to prominence in the 1960s with ‘Beatlemania,’ which was sometime euphemised as ‘adolescent enthusiasm’ (Taylor, 1966). From political perspective, Dowdy (2007) draws on Arendt’s (1958) notion of ‘acting in concert’ to suggest that hip-hop shows enable the co-creation (by performers and audience) of ‘a space of interactive engagement’ in which ‘co-ordinated political practice’ (e.g., contesting dominant cultural values) becomes possible (p.75). The potential for collective bonding is perhaps even stronger in playing music. Lutz (2009) argues that playing music together can facilitate ‘collective flow,’ also known as ‘participatory consciousness.’ Likewise, Tonneijck et al. (2008) show that choral singing is valued in part for engendering a state of intersubjective ‘wholeness’ that is conducive to wellbeing.

Literature

Our third great art form here is literature, an overarching term covering all language-based ‘text,’ from oral tales to religious scripture to poetry to the novel. As with visual art and music, literature has been integral to the development of humanity. The earliest extant works of literature hail from around 4,000 years ago, such as the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which stories possibly dating back to the Third Dynasty of Ur (circa 2,100 BC) were brought together as a single narrative and engraved on tablets around 1,800 BC (Maier, 1997). Even after this point, literature continued to mostly be transmitted orally, such as the Vedas (the founding texts of Hinduism), which were composed between 1,500 and 500 BC but took written form around 500 BC (Dyrness & karkkainen, 2008). These examples attest to the cultural importance of literature, which has served many vital functions over the millennia, from a repository of folk memory to the codification of moral schemas (Finnegan, 1980). On a more personal level, literature has played a key role in shaping subjectivities. For instance, the novel – which came to prominence as a literary form in the 18th Century (Moore, 2013) – has been credited with helping create modern modes of (self) consciousness (Lodge, 2002). Thus, while not all people ‘consume’ literature, it is scarcely possible for people to escape its influence.

Turning first to sense-making, arguably of all the art forms considered here, literature is the most efficacious in this regard, given its inherently discursive nature. Psychological theories of meaning – and of the importance of finding a sense of meaning in life – highlight the importance of narrative, i.e., stories that help us make sense of experience (Singer, 2004). This applies both in a macro sense (explanations of life in general) and a micro sense (one’s own life in particular). With the former, it is suggested that one of the main functions of religion is providing people with an overarching narrative for existence, a meaningful story of

how and why life exists (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). With the latter, it is argued that personal meaning in life is dependent upon constructing a story that provides a context for one's actions and endows one's own life with coherence and significance (Singer, 2004). Thus, it is relevant here that literature can play a role in creating meaning, providing people with macro and/or micro narratives. It can also help people make sense of social reality; for instance, part of the power of novels is that they provide explanations for characters' actions, which readers can then apply to their own social existence (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Creative writing can also be powerful in helping people process and understand their own lives (Bolton, 1999). As such, we have seen the emergence of writing therapy in clinical settings (Pizarro, 2004), as well as general writing-based interventions for wellbeing (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Literature is equally potent in terms of enriching experience, both in terms of drawing attention to dimensions of reality that had previously gone unnoticed, as well as creating new 'realities.' With the former, a prominent example is how reading can help foster empathy, giving people insight into other people's lives. Even if novels 'only' portray fictional characters, studies show that exposure to their lives can enhance readers' 'theory of mind,' i.e., their ability to take another person's perspective (Kidd & Castano, 2013). People can also be helped to discover concealed dimensions of their own lives. For instance, Joseph Campbell (1970) argued that mythological literature contains archetypal themes that have ongoing existential relevance to readers, such as the 'hero's journey,' which captures the journey to find one's 'true' self. Worth (2015) suggests that part of the appeal of modern epics, from Lord of the Rings to Harry Potter, is that readers are empowered to realise that they too are on an existential journey, allowing them to see their lives in a new and more significant light. Literature also allows people to explore new realities, giving glimpses into other times and places. A quote on the blog www.humansofnewyork.com articulates this well, 'I have only one life to live. But in books I can live one thousand lives.' Likewise, part of the power of creative writing is that people can create new narratives for their lives – ones that may be more enriching or sustaining – which indeed is one way in writing therapy exerts its benefits (Pizarro, 2004).

The third positive outcome is aesthetic appreciation, which encapsulates the respect and even reverence that quality literature can evoke. Here we might pay particular attention to poetry, often esteemed as among the most aesthetically considered forms of literature, famously defined by Coleridge (1827) as 'the best words in the best order.' By way of example, consider the Japanese poetry form *haiku*. While being highly regarded in Japanese

culture generally, it has achieved particular significance within Zen Buddhism, where the best poems are regarded as ‘vital expressions of, and ways towards, spiritual experience’ (Bai, 2002, p.12). Among the complex richness of Zen is a valorisation of certain expressive ‘moods’ that Zen deems to be particularly important and reflective of reality (Watts, 1957). These include *mono no aware* (pathos at the impermanence of life), *wabi-sabi* (desolate, aged beauty), and *yūgen* (profound, mysterious grace). Japan’s greatest poets are consequently revered for being able to articulate these moods using the sparse haiku template. Widely regarded as pre-eminent among these is Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), whose haiku capturing these moods – *mono no aware* (Summer grasses –; the only remains; of warriors’ dreams), *wabi-sabi* (Solitary now —; Standing amidst the blossoms; Is a cypress tree), and *yūgen* (On a withered branch; A crow is perched; In the autumn evening) – are among the most revered works in all Japanese literature (Watts, 1957). Moreover, these haiku are seen as powerful sources of spiritual illumination for people who reflect upon them (Bai, 2002).

Turning to entertainment, there is an emergent body of work on ‘ludic reading,’ i.e., reading for pleasure (ludic derives from Latin, via French, and means spontaneously playful). For instance, Nell (1988) highlights the capacity for readers to be ‘entranced’ by reading, a quality of absorption akin to flow. Moreover, Nell argues that literature does not need to be aesthetically beautiful or intellectually stimulating to facilitate ludic reading; in fact, even ‘sophisticated’ readers can gain pleasure from works that might be regarded culturally as poor quality, e.g., as a way of ‘switching off’ that is relaxing and mentally restorative. Efforts have been made to understand how to foster ludic reading, since if reading is experienced as pleasurable, people are more likely to read and consequently to experience the benefits outlined above. For instance, Senechal (2006) highlights the positive impact of ‘storybook exposure’ in infancy (i.e., parents reading to them) on the likelihood of children subsequently reading for pleasure (and on other cognitive skills, e.g., comprehension). There are also efforts to promote enjoyment of writing, as this is associated with positive outcomes in written endeavours, such as higher grades for college assignments (Larson, 1990). For instance, Dwyer et al. (2012) outline successful efforts to promote enjoyment of writing among early career academics through writing groups.

In discussing the value of writing groups, Dwyer et al. (2012) also highlight their importance as a ‘platform of social and emotional support’ (p.129), which pertains to our final positive outcome: bonding. The popularity of book clubs and reading groups is testament to the potential of literature in this regard (Daniels, 2002). Such groups have a long history; for instance, the first known literature circle in America was founded in 1634 as a

women's Bible study group (Wu, 2011). However, they appear to be increasingly popular in recent years; according to Daniels (2002), while there were around 50,000 book clubs in the U.S. in 1990, by 2000, this had doubled to at least 100,000. This popularity has been boosted by prominent cultural figures like Oprah Winfrey, who started her book club in 1995, and which now has over 2 million members (Wu, 2011). As Daniels (2002) outlines, such clubs take reading beyond being a primarily solitary activity, and instead harness it as an occasion for social engagement and 'plural reflection' (Turner, 1979), i.e., collective sense-making. Reading is used as the basis for shared enquiry into important life themes, as well as simply a good excuse for socialising. We must also highlight communal bonding around dramatic performances of literature, from theatre to spoken word (Fisher, 2003); much like music concerts, assembly around literary performance is an opportunity for what Lutz (2009) called 'collective flow' or 'participatory consciousness.' And, it is to these types of dramatic art forms that we turn in the final section.

Drama

Our final broad area is drama, an all-encompassing term for a range of dramatic performance modalities. This not only includes obvious examples, like theatre, but also comedy, magic, the circus, and even sporting events (which Real (1975, p.31) referred to as 'a form of mythic spectacle'). We can again begin by briefly noting the significance of drama to humanity throughout its history. Arguably pre-eminent in this regard is drama as public ritual, which has been central to religious/spiritual traditions over the millennia (Rappaport, 1999). Appreciation of the pivotal role of ritual in religion, and in culture generally, came to prominence through the analyses of Durkheim (1912), who referred to the 'effervescence' of ritual experience in helping people join a shared collective existence and internalise group codes. Such rituals brought to life the kinds of oral narratives highlighted above – which are central to the formation of collective identity – allowing group members to vividly participate in these stories (Rappaport, 1999). The value of ritual in this way continues today, from religious adherents partaking in rituals like the Christian eucharist, to military personnel engaging in acts of patriotism like parading the flag (Schilbrack, 2004). More generally, public forms of drama, such as plays, enable cultures to engage in plural reflection or 'reflexivity;' as Turner (1979, p.465) puts it, such artforms are one of the main ways a group 'communicates to itself,' enabling it to 'portray, understand, then act on itself,' shining a light on its values, issues, and concerns.

As the last sentence indicates, dramatic art forms offer powerful vehicles for sense-making, enabling a culture '... to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature,' as Shakespeare

phrases it in Hamlet (III, ii, 21–22). In this respect, dramatic arts carry a similar sense-making potential to literature, as outlined above; indeed, many people would characterise dramatic works like plays as a *form* of literature. Moreover, as Snow et al. (2003) point out, their potential in this regard is heightened by their vividness and immediacy as a spectacle, bringing the literature to life in front of people's very eyes. However well Shakespeare may articulate the vicissitudes of existence on the page, the power of his written word is magnified by seeing these embodied by the dramatic skills of the finest stage actors. Furthermore, drama can be more accessible than literature; a recent poll found that 75% of men prefer to watch a film adaption of a book than read the original text (The Reading Agency, 2014). Indeed, the availability of drama through media such as film and TV has accelerated over recent years. These art forms have been credited with providing culture-shaping narratives that have influenced how people have interpreted their world. In America, for instance, influential reflections on society, and on the problematic notion of the 'American Dream,' have been provided by a succession of great dramas across evolving platform, from the plays of Arthur Miller (e.g., *Death of a Salesman* in 1949), to the films of Martin Scorsese (e.g., *Taxi Driver* in 1976), to the great works of TV's post-millennial 'golden age' (e.g., David Simon's *The Wire*). As Martin (2013) elucidates, surpassing mere entertainment, these works have held up a mirror to America, facilitating a powerful form of cultural introspection and sense-making.

Dramatic performance is likewise a powerful means of enriching experience. Indeed, one of the key functions of ritual, the proto-typical drama, was to enable people to access valued states of trance or ecstasy (Leuba, 2013). Modern dramatic forms can also facilitate complex emotional experiences. For example, films like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* have been credited with provoking 'transpersonal' experiences through their experimentation with altered realities and immersive viewer perspectives (Kaplan, 2005). Less conventional dramatic forms are also capable of eliciting potent experiences. For instance, magic has been found to engender sought-after emotions among viewers, like curiosity and wonder; as such, magic has been harnessed as a therapeutic intervention, particularly in paediatric settings (Hart & Walton, 2010). Likewise, the attraction of the circus has been partly attributed to its ability to foster awe through daring acts (Loring, 2007). Finally, there is a persuasive case that no other dramatic form is as capable at eliciting overwhelming passion and fervour as great sporting events: indeed, sociologists have argued that for committed fans, immersion in their team's fortunes fulfils many functions of religion, including participatory consciousness, tribal identity, and engagement with a narrative of

‘good versus evil’ (us versus them) that is rendered all the more dramatic for being unscripted (Edge, 2012).

Thirdly, dramatic spectacles are potent sources of aesthetic appreciation, with many people luxuriating in the beauty and skill of the performers and the art-form. Indeed, it has been argued that today’s screen idols fulfil similar functions to that held by religious gods in past eras, from being revered as ‘superhuman’ exemplars, to offering inspiration (Alexander, 2010). While this kind of celebrity ‘worship’ may be problematic – e.g., fostering unrealistic expectations (such as in relation to body image) that can be damaging to self-esteem (Maltby et al., 2005) – it does highlight the powerful aesthetic appeal of drama. In a more benign way, this aesthetic appeal is exemplified in the way people savour the performances of sporting greats (aside from any partisan team allegiances), such as the respectful reverence afforded to icons such as Lionel Messi (Brach, 2012). Beyond the protagonists, the ability of sporting spectacles like football to capture the interest of people, particularly those who may be less likely to engage with traditional dramatic forms, like adolescent boys, is well-documented (Skelton, 2000). While there may be many factors driving this, such as gendered peer pressure, the aesthetics of football – e.g., appreciation of spectacular goals – is an integral element of its popularity. Of course, much attention has also been paid to the aesthetic appeal of more conventional dramatic art-forms, such as theatre and cinema (Mitry & King, 1997).

The dramatic art forms above are also rich in entertainment value. Indeed, film and TV are arguably the dominant cultural form of entertainment worldwide; for instance, in the USA, TV watching is the leisure activity on which citizens spend the most time, at an average of 2.5 hours per day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). However, as an exemplar of play and fun, we might highlight the wellbeing value of comedy, and of laughter more generally. Of course, comedy is not simply about pleasure and entertainment, but can be a mirror for uncomfortable truths; indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of darker forms of comedy, like Ricky Gervais’ *The Office*, an almost nihilistic commentary on the anomie of modern work (Soper, 2009). Nevertheless, researches have attempted to understand the way in which comedy can facilitate laughter. Such analyses explore questions like what makes certain phenomena and jokes funny (e.g., the detection and resolution of incongruity; Bartolo et al., 2006), and what purpose laughter serves (e.g., its evolutionary function as a form of social bonding; Gervais & Wilson, 2005). Moreover, there is an emergent body of work on the wellbeing benefits of laughter. For instance, Berk et al. (1989) found that it modified neuroendocrine hormones involved in the stress response. Consequently, laughter has been

harnessed in clinical settings (Penson et al., 2005), and we are even seeing the development of comedy-related wellbeing interventions (Crawford & Caltabiano, 2011).

Finally, dramatic arts are effective vehicles for social bonding, whether as a spectator or as a participant. I have already highlighted the way drama facilitates ‘plural reflection,’ offering ways for cultures to self-reflect and cohere around common concerns (Turner, 1979, p465). Likewise, the type of intense group connectivity and identity afforded by phenomena like sports spectatorship is well documented, even if this does also have problematic aspects, such as hostility and even violence towards other groups (Dunning, 2000). At a less extreme level, engagement with drama-related events such as local theatre offer regular and reliable opportunities for socialising with like-minded people (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005). Similarly, actually participating in acting oneself (e.g., joining an amateur dramatics society) can be powerful in bringing people together and forging meaningful connections (Rearden et al., 1999). Likewise, from a therapeutic perspective, drama therapy can help people develop social skills, particularly those who are especially vulnerable or in need of such skills, such as homeless mentally ill patients (Schnee, 1996) or aggressive adolescent boys (Curran, 1939). Indeed, as the date of the latter citation shows, the benefits of drama to wellbeing have long been noted and harnessed.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the potential wellbeing value of the arts, spanning four major art forms: visual art, music, literature and drama. These art forms were examined with respect to five main positive outcomes found consistently across relevant academic literature: sense-making; enriching experience; aesthetic appreciation; entertainment; and bonding. The main purpose of the paper was to provide an indicative summary of relevant theorising and empirical research, bringing this together under the rubric of ‘positive art.’ However, in doing so, the paper also sets out a research agenda for the future. Currently, the wellbeing value of arts has tended to only be recognised to any extent within clinical fields, as reflected in the forms of therapy that have emerged based on various art forms, from music to drama therapy. However, the broader wellbeing potential of the arts – positively promoting flourishing, and not only alleviating disorder/distress – has remained relatively under-studied and under-utilised, at least in a collective sense. That is, a considerable amount of research has accrued over the years concerning the relevance of the arts to wellbeing. However, there has hitherto been no explicit attempt to create a broad sub-field of psychology that could allow this work to be brought together in an integrated way. The hope here is that the proposed paradigm of ‘positive art’ will encourage and facilitate just such an integration.

Indeed, the analysis above suggests that there is considerable applied potential in harnessing artistic modalities to promote wellbeing (and associated outcomes such as cognitive development). Indeed, art-based programmes are already being harnessed to good effect across a diverse range of settings and populations, including (but not limited to): early education (e.g., intercultural arts education for ethnic minority children; Khudu-Petersen, 2012); adolescent education (e.g., dance classes to reduce obesity in teenage girls; Robinson et al., 2003); at-risk youth (e.g., ‘hip-hop’ therapy for ‘delinquent’ youth; Tyson, 2002); vulnerable mental health groups (e.g., art in the community programmes; Clift, Argyle, & Bolton, 2005); women who have experienced partner violence (e.g., group music activities; Teague, Hahna, & McKinney, 2006); prisons (e.g., art-based rehabilitation programmes; Tett, Anderson, McNeill, Overy, & Sparks, 2012); homeless people (e.g., drama therapy for those who are mentally ill; Schnee, 1996); and older adults (e.g., visual art-based interventions in the community; Swindells et al., 2013).

Moreover, these programmes may not only be helpful to the participants themselves, but can be of broader benefit to society. For instance, one could envisage how initiatives to reduce behavioural issues among at-risk youth (e.g., Tyson, 2002) would likely filter out into positive societal outcomes, such as reduced anti-social behaviour and crime. As such, future research would ideally conduct cost-benefit analyses on these type of interventions, thereby highlighting their net impact. Researchers could seek to emulate recent cost-benefit analyses of ‘positive’ interventions – not involving art specifically – which have demonstrated the value of these types of programmes. For instance, Belfield et al. (2015) report that Life Skills Training, a classroom intervention to reduce violence and substance abuse, can offer a net gain of \$2,660 per pupil (based on a cost of only \$130 each), achieved through predicted reductions in current and future criminality. Indeed, there are a few emergent cost-benefit analyses of art-based initiatives. For instance, Bittman et al. (2005) calculated the impact of a 6 week Recreational Music-Making course on burnout among trainee nurses. The reductions in burnout were such that the initiative was predicted to generate annual cost savings of \$16,800 if incorporated into a typical degree nursing program, and \$322,000 if implemented within an acute care hospital. Similarly, testing the same programme with long-term care workers, Bittman, Bruhn, Stevens, Westengard, and Umbach (2003) estimated that the intervention could generate projected cost savings of \$89,100 for a single typical 100-bed facility, and annual potential savings to the long-term care industry in the United States of \$1.46 billion.

These types of analyses remain few and far between, and so represent a goal to aim for in terms of research into the positive impact of art upon wellbeing. That said, the evidence reviewed above, such as it is, certainly points towards the merit of exploring and harnessing art-based activities and interventions to promote wellbeing (and other desirable outcomes, such as cognitive development). As such, it is hoped that this paper will encourage a greater attention to the arts in fields like positive psychology, enabling science to fully understand and appreciate the potential utility and power of positive art.

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