

Cultural Participation, Relational Goods and Individual Subjective Well-Being: Some Empirical Evidence

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the role of cultural participation as a source of individual subjective well-being in terms of the sociability orientation of different cultural activities. In previous works, we have found a strong association between subjective well-being and cultural participation. Here, we want to test to what extent such an association can be ascribed to the fact that cultural participation allows individuals to engage in non instrumental forms of social interaction, which are conducive to genuine forms of interpersonal relations. The test is conducted through two different evidence bases: on a survey covering Italian population and focused on the relation between culture and well-being; and an online survey of experts, ranking the 14 culturally related activities of the previous survey in terms of their sociability orientation. Our findings show that cultural participation tends to be oriented preferentially toward relatively sociable activities, thereby contributing to the production of relational goods and social capital.

JEL Classifications: A12; D11; I31; Z10

Keywords: Cultural participation, Relational goods, Individual subjective well-being, Psychological health

1. Introduction

There is a growing awareness that culture may be a developmental factor of primary importance in the current global scenario, both for socially and economically advanced and for emerging countries. Some economic impacts are pretty evident both from the supply and demand sides (see e.g. KEA, 2006). However, the economic and social relevance of cultural access and participation is not limited to market-mediated activities, and there is reason to believe that in the coming future social platforms will play a driving role in the generation of social *and* economic cultural value, even outperforming markets themselves (Benkler, 2011). In particular, culture is going to play a major role in such diverse and crucial fields as social cohesion, welfare, entrepreneurship, and sustainability, and an increasing amount of evidence is being collected to support this claim (Sacco, Ferilli and Tavano Blessi, 2011, Tavano Blessi et al., 2012). In a nutshell, in a 21st century perspective, culture's social and economic sense connects primarily to the spheres of soft power, human and social capital creation, and individual and social well-being, and not just to the sphere of leisure and entertainment where it has been mostly confined so far with obvious consequences in terms of political decision-making, policy relevance, and social perception.

Among the many intriguing implications listed above, one of the less explored and understood is the one concerning individual and social well-being (Grossi et al., 2012). In particular, the actual process through which cultural participation affects the well-being dimension, and the social channels that enable this, remain at least partly unclear. The most important aspect to be inquired is the non-instrumental character of cultural experience, which leverages upon intrinsic motivation and consequentially, fosters authentic personal engagement and social relationships (Ferilli, Sacco and Tavano Blessi, 2012). In this sense, one can regard cultural participation as a powerful platform for the production of relational goods (Becchetti and Trovato, 2011) – and thus, of welfare improving public goods whose consumption further benefits the accumulation of valuable social assets, such as social capital (Booth, 2009), while at the same time bringing about greater individual satisfaction with respect to rival material purchases (Carter and Gilovich, 2010).

In the relational goods sphere, the production and consumption sides of the activity can be separated with difficulty, and most often conceptually coincide. As a consequence, 'producers' and 'consumers' are the same – which explains why the production and circulation of these goods are not amenable to be mediated by market interaction. Also, the production/consumption of such goods cannot be sustained by self-interested optimization but relies upon an articulate set of pro-social attitudes (Benkler, 2006). Cultural participation then becomes a natural role model for relational goods production/enjoyment, in that access to cultural experiences is mainly driven by the intrinsic interest for cultural contents themselves, and is typically reinforced by the possibility of sharing one's interests and passions with others – both in terms of voluntary pushes and involuntary pulls, in Danna-Lynch (2010) terminology. In this paper, we aim at elucidating the relationship between cultural participation, well-being and relational goods-oriented sociability, by evaluating two distinct, complementary sources of empirical evidence: a representative sample of the Italian population, and an online survey conducted on the participants to two international conferences on socio-cultural and socio-economic issues.

The two surveys have different purposes. In the first case, we take as a reference a generic population with no specific bias toward cultural participation and assess the relationship between cultural access and subjective well-being. In the second, we consider individuals whose personal and professional interests are more directly related to culture and to attendance to cultural initiatives and events, and ask them to evaluate different culturally related activities in terms of their sociability orientation. This second piece of evidence is therefore a source of expert evaluation that can be used to interpret the results of the first survey in terms of their implications for social

orientation and the production of relational goods. The evidence thus collected provides support to the idea that cultural participation is positively related to well-being, and that socially oriented forms of participation play a particularly prominent role in this respect. We consider this evidence an encouraging first step toward a more systematic study of this fascinating issue.

The contents of the paper are organized along three basic lines. In the first part, we present a short review of the relevant literature on relational goods and on their relationship with culture and subjective well-being. In the second part, we present and analyze the results of the two surveys. In the third part, we discuss our results and draw some conclusions.

2. Conceptual Background:

Well-being, Relational Goods, and Culture

Individual subjective well-being is a puzzling field of inquiry and one of the most debated topics currently. While Western, post-industrial societies are enjoying ever more comfortable material standards of living, evidence on the intangible dimensions, and in particular on the social one, are mixed: affluence may be conducive to social isolation and loneliness, with a drastic loss in the capacity to establish and enjoy social relationships (Prouteau and Wolf, 2004). The trade-off between material and relational motives for spending in a socio-economically advanced environment is basically a trade-off between self-serving actions and behaviors, and actions and behaviors targeting the well-being of others (Dunn, Aknin and Norton, 2008). Material consumption calls for harvesting of private goods and services supplied by the market to satisfy personal needs and wants, whereas relational consumption is generally fulfilled by a mix of private and public goods and services, most of which are socially provided and enjoyed, and aimed at satisfying social needs and wants such as connection to others, recognition, friendship, sense of belonging, and so on (Antoci, Sacco and Vanin, 2005). Material consumption does not generally require non-instrumental interaction, whereas the meaning itself of relational consumption is most often destroyed in the absence of non-instrumental interaction, so that the market typically fails in securing the latter (Easterlin, 2005). Relational needs cannot be satisfied on the market in that the very fact of selling or buying connections, recognition, or friendship totally alters the nature and implications of such relationships. Thus, the more important this dimension becomes for individual and collective well-being, the more socio-economically advanced societies will have to resort to mechanisms and platforms other than the market to address it properly, in order to generate a socially efficient level of relational goods (Becchetti, Degli Antoni and Faillo, 2010).

Relational goods are generated by interactions among persons, and may be identified with the dispositional, affective and communicative outcomes that emerge as the result of a certain social situation (Gui, 2000; Pugno, 2007). Two are the peculiar aspects of relational goods. The first one is related to the fact that they cannot be enjoyed alone, which makes of them a specific instance of a local public good, since they are non rival and exclusive but only with regard to the people who participate in their production (Bruni and Stanca, 2008). The second one is that it is very difficult to separate the production from the consumption side, since they naturally coincide. In this respect, contributing to their production typically takes the form of a cooperation problem, and their value depends on the social orientation of the involved individuals (Antoci, Sacco and Vanin 2007). Although relational goods could be produced in principle in almost every circumstance, there are in fact preferential contexts for their production, due to the nature of the specific interactions that characterize them. Most cultural activities are certainly one of them, in that they entail the concurrent presence of many people who are generally prompted by an intrinsic motivation to participate (O'Sullivan, 2009).

The link between culture and relational goods seems therefore to be warranted enough. As to the link between relational goods and well-being, the social psychology literature has extensively shown, both theoretically and empirically, why, how, and to what extent interpersonal relationships may be regarded as a key determinant of subjective well-being. The relational dimension is so important that some scholars speak of *relatedness* as a basic human need whose fulfillment is essential for well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2001). In particular, many authors acknowledge a fundamental association between the quality of relationships and well-being (Diener and Seligman, 2002), and other research displayed that relational goods are correlated with reported well-being on national scale survey (Helliwell et al., 2009). In the economics literature, the allocative implications of the relational dimension and their effect on well-being have been discussed quite extensively (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010; Ariely, 2011), not to speak of the sociological side, as the issue touches one of the fundamental aspects of sociological reasoning and inquiry and where even a cursory list of basic contributions would amount to a whole review essay; it is worthwhile, though, to cite the recent study of Donati and Solci (2011) which is especially centered on a thorough sociological analysis of relational goods. Interestingly, the issue finds an interesting coverage also in fields such as the evolutionary biology of group selection (Sober and Wilson, 1998). Also in the field of happiness and well-being studies the relational dimension has received considerable attention; see e.g. James (2007) and Keltner (2009) for recent comprehensive analyses. In spite of this, when comparatively evaluating the effects on well-being of wide ranges of economic and socio-demographic factors, from income to age and gender, to education, housing location and health status, relatively little attention has been paid so far to the relational dimension (see Grossi et al., 2006, for a critical review); the same can be said, moreover, of the cultural activity dimension. The third link in the triangle, then, i.e. the link between culture and well-being, has been poorly understood until recently (Grossi et al., 2011).

Also the literature regarding the mechanisms of generation of relational goods is somewhat scanty. Prouteau and Wolff (2004) explored to what extent intrinsic individual motivations related to generation of relational goods can be invoked to explain participation to associational and volunteering activities. Their empirical investigation is based on a representative survey conducted in France by INSEE, the TIME Use survey, which focuses on the allocation of time by individuals in daily activities. Their results show that the frequency of gathering with friends for households is higher when at least one of its members takes part in associational or volunteering activities, and this effect is linked in turn to the existence of intrinsic benefits in term of relational goods generated by participation to socially recreational activities.

Becchetti, Pelloni and Rossetti (2008) investigated the impact of relational activities on individual life satisfaction in terms of relational goods production from community participation. Their evidence comes from the GSOEP – the German Socio Economic Panel, a cross-sectional and longitudinal information extraction from 1984 to 2004 survey waves. Their results show that all relational activities under investigation, namely attendance to social gatherings, cultural events, religious events, sports events, and volunteering activities, are positively associated with self-declared happiness. In particular, participation to cultural events generates a positive externality in terms of community feeling and subjective empowerment, thereby reinforcing the decision to participate to the gatherings and increasing subjective enjoyment.

Bruni and Stanca (2008) evaluated the implications in terms of subjective well-being of a set of leisure activities, such as church-religious, sport-recreational, art-educational, TV watching. Based on the World Value Survey dataset, the analysis has evaluated the alternatives in terms of their implied level of social involvement, and has measured their impact in terms of subjective well-being given the production of relational goods associated to each. Results show that participation to socially oriented activities such as art-related ones has a positive and significant effect on life satisfaction, whereas one finds a negative correlation between time spent watching television and

the propensity toward the development of relational activities. Socially oriented activities then have a positive impact on well-being, whereas one witnesses perverse lock-in phenomena that cause the motivational self-reinforcement of solitary leisure activities. These preliminary findings, although intriguing and encouraging, are not systematic enough to draw a conceptually compelling picture. More research needs to be carried out to achieve deeper insights and better understanding of the relationship between participation to relational activities, and particularly culturally related ones, and subjective well-being.

In this paper, we aim at providing another piece of evidence that may be of help in the construction of the global picture, by evaluating differences in terms of well-being from the participation to relatively more or less socially oriented types of cultural activities, using the production of relational goods as a potential key explanatory variable. A few studies have previously tried to evaluate the effect of cultural participation on well-being (Diener 2008, Michalos and Kahlke, 2008, Grossi et al., 2011; 2012), but none of them has considered the role played by sociability and production of relational goods. Also, none of the previous studies a part for Grossi et al. has been based on a statistically representative sample. Moreover, some of the studies have reached somewhat inconclusive results, whereas in others the evidence suggests that the relationship between cultural access and subjective well-being is positively significant. The marginal benefit of a further study based on statistically representative data is therefore substantial and may provide a useful contribution to the debate.

3. Methodology and Data

Our analysis is based on two distinct databases, collected in different ways.

Table 1. Cultural activities considered in the survey

1. A cross-sectional survey assessing modes and intensity of participation to 14 culture-related activities, and their relations with psychological well-being, has been carried out in fall 2008 on a relatively large sample (n=1500) of Italian residents living in non-isolated areas. The survey has been conducted with the assistance of Doxa, an Italian pollster company, through telephone interviews, according to the CATI system, and has been stratified in order to design a statistically representative sample of the Italian population. A detailed presentation of the sample and of the sampling method is provided in Grossi et al. (2011). Measurement of well-being is based on the Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI)². The variables related to cultural access have been chosen so as to ensure a broad coverage of the most common cultural activities; such variables are to be jointly meant as a proxy of individual levels of ‘cultural access’ (see Table 1).

1. Cinema
2. Classical music concerts
3. Disco dance
4. Jazz music concerts
5. Museums
6. Novels reading
7. Opera/ ballet
8. Paintings exhibition
9. Poetry reading
10. Rock concerts
11. Social activity ¹
12. Sport practice
13. Theatre
14. Watching sports

¹ Social activities: volunteering and community oriented activities

² The Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI) has been validated by decades of clinical practice. PGWBI has been developed as a tool to measure self-representations of intra-personal affective or emotional states reflecting a sense of subjective well-being or distress, and thus captures what we could call a subjective perception of well-being. The short version adopted for the study has been validated in a long-term project carried out from 2000 to 2006 in Italy (see Grossi, et al., 2006).

Each subject surveyed in the study had to go through a structured questionnaire asking about the daily frequency of access to all of the activities listed in Table 1. The intensity of access to a specific cultural activity could thus be measured on a quantitative scale ranging theoretically from 0 to 365.

2. A survey on a large pool of researchers (n=110) in cultural sociology, cultural economics and socio-economics has been undertaken in winter 2010, with the aim to assess the ‘sociability orientation’ of each of the culture-related activities listed above. The sample has been extracted from Italian attendees (in particular, among those who actually presented a paper) of two international conferences held in 2008 in Venice and 2010 in Milan, respectively, and focused on socio-cultural and socio-economic issues, familiar with Italian cultural practice and the social function of different activities, knowing the context and thus supplying the validity for the ranking. Participants to the survey have been asked to rank what they perceived to be the ten most relevant culture-related activities among the 14 listed in Table 1 in terms of their perceived sociability orientation, making it clear that by ‘sociability orientation’ one meant the effectiveness of a given culture-related activity in enabling people to interact and establish relations with others on a non-instrumental basis³.

4. Data Analysis

We are now ready to analyze the evidence provided by the two surveys. Concerning the cross-sectional survey of Italian residents, the sample consists of 779 females and 721 males. The mean age of the sample is 46.54 years (17.24 SD); the range is 15-92 years. The average value of PGWBI, which has a range from 0 to 110 – and where 0 stands for severe distress and 110 for a sense of ‘bliss’ - is found to be 77.76 (17.73 SD) for the overall Italian population, a result that is almost identical to those from previous surveys carried out in 2000 and 2004 (78.0, 17.00 SD) (see Grossi et al., 2006). 112 individuals have not responded to all sections of the questionnaire for this specific analysis; Therefore, they are not included in the evaluation.

Table 2. Cultural consumption and PGWBI level

Feature	No. of persons	PGWBI		
		Average	S.D	C.I.
(No answers)	112	N.A	N.A	N.A
<i>No consumption at all</i>	93	65.4	22.42	60.75-70.04
<i>from 1 to 25 per year</i>	448	74.2	17.72	72.55-75.85
<i>from 26 to 100 per year</i>	467	80.14	15.88	78.70-81.59
<i>over 100 per year</i>	380	81.61	16.18	79.97-83.24

Focusing upon the cultural dimension, it turns out that cultural participation levels are associated with statistically significant, distinctive well-being scores. Table 2 provides an overview of the impact of cultural consumption on individual well-being. Results confirm what it is commonly perceived, i.e., that people with no access to cultural activities show average well-being levels – PGWBI values – statistically (significantly) lower than people with moderate access (1-25 activities/year), a category that in turn presents a statistically (significantly) lower level of well-

³ Our choice has been to rate the sociability orientation of cultural activities on the basis of expert evaluation rather than on self-evaluation of (non-expert) respondents of the first survey, due to the ambiguous and inconclusive findings gathered by previous research on the subject (compare for instance Srinivas, 2002, and Benzecry, 2012).

being with respect to people with substantial access (26-103 activities/year). Beyond this level of activity, a further increase in cultural access does not cause any further statistically significant increases in well-being.

Coming to a more detailed analysis of the effects of specific forms of cultural consumption, the univariate analysis shows that, for most cultural variables, the level of consumption is indeed highly correlated with psychological well-being. Table 3 shows the distribution of the linear correlation index between each of the cultural variables and the dependent variable, i.e., PGWBI scores. This is true in particular for Jazz Concerts, Opera/Ballet, Sport Practice, and Classical Music. There are even activities for which high access entails a negative (though modest) impact on PGWBI: Poetry Reading and Cinema. Also in this case, however, the results of the univariate linear correlation analysis provide little insight: despite the fact that most correlations have the 'proper' sign, they are generally very low and do not allow to draw significant implications.

Table 3. The linear correlation coefficient (Pearson) between each independent variable and PGWBI

The second survey among scholars provided us with the opportunity to rank the cultural variables considered in the PGWBI analysis in terms of their sociability orientation (Table 4). Given the high and specific qualification of respondents, who are experts (scholars, researchers) investigating socio-cultural and socio-economic issues, the corresponding indications can be taken as a credible expert evaluation on the issue. The ranking of the 14 cultural activities has been performed counting how many times a specific activity was voted as the most socially oriented, and sorting in decreasing order. For example, engaging in social activities resulted to be the most socially oriented 42 times, followed by practicing a sport (25 times), reading a novel (13 times), attending museums (10 times), attending a paintings exhibition (8 times) and so on.

Variable	R value
Sport practice	0.21
Museum attendance	0.07
Reading novels	0.07
Sport watching	0.07
Cinema	0.06
Painting exhibition	0.05
Opera and Ballet	0.04
Classical music concerts	0.04
Disco dance	0.04
Rock concerts	0.04
Social activity	0.04
Theatre	0.03
Reading poetry	0.02
Jazz music concert	-0.01

Table 4. Sociability orientation of culture-related activities

Activity	Ranking	Times
Engaging in social activity	1	42
Practicing a sport	2	25
Reading novels	3	13
Attending museums	4	10
Attending a painting exhibition	5	9
Attending a rock concert	6	9
Going to a disco dance	7	7
Reading a poetry	8	6
Going to a cinema	9	5
Attending classic music concert	10	4
Attending sport event as spectator	11	3
Attending jazz music concerts	12	2
Attending drama theatre/musicals	13	2
Attending opera/ ballet	14	1

It is important to stress that the ranking is based on expert opinion as to which of the above cultural activities is more or less effective in enabling people to interact and establish relations, on a non-instrumental basis. It turns out that the activities that are believed to be more conducive to intrinsically motivated interpersonal contact are those related to volunteering in associations. The result is not surprising, in that according to common sense, the generation of relational opportunities and goods is a natural consequence of pro-social activities. At immediately lower top ranks, we find diverse activities such as practicing sports, reading novels, and attending museums and painting exhibitions. On the other hand, at the far lower rank we find entirely passive and possibly solipsistic activities such as watching sports, as well as highbrow activities such as attendance of jazz music concerts, drama and musicals, opera and ballet. Moreover, activities that are renowned for the socializing implications such as attending rock concerts or going to discotheques receive a middle rank only. To understand the meaning of these results, it is important to remind that an essential component of the expert evaluation of activities was their potential for *non-instrumental* social interaction.

The expert ranking thus seems to be the product of the weighing of at least three distinct criteria: the physical and social context in which the activity typically takes place, the implied cognitive requirements for participating, and the instrumental character of the interaction. The undisputed primacy of pro-social activity clearly reflects all three criteria: it is necessarily related to interaction with others; it does not normally entail demanding cognitive requirements, and it is strongly prompted by intrinsic motivation. Similar considerations hold for sport practice, although to a lesser degree, as there are sports that do not necessarily entail contact with others (e.g., running, gym workout), although this is more the exception than the rule. Reading novels is a more complicated case, in that reading is generally a solitary activity, but nevertheless, and especially so today, literary tastes and preferences are a major source of interpersonal communication, and even more so given the current, rapid growth of online literary communities and book crossing practices, not to speak of more traditional forms such as book lending, literary circles, reading clubs, and so on. Moreover, literary discussions tend to have a non-instrumental character, and do not necessarily entail demanding cognitive requirements: book bestsellers are often suitably crafted to address very large audiences and to be palatable to a very general public. Attendance of museums and painting exhibitions tend to assume more demanding cognitive skills but on the other hand imply access to populated and sometimes even crowded places, and rely upon significant intrinsic motivation. Rock concerts, as well as discotheques, are instead activities where the cultural experience per se is often instrumental to other social purposes, and therefore in spite of their relatively un-demanding cognitive requirements and the typically crowded environments that characterize them, are classified as less socially oriented than the previous activities.

On the bottom side of the rank, watching sports, which is an activity that could be in principle compared to reading novels, is deemed to be much less socially oriented in that, given the relatively low level of cognitive requirement and the relatively high level of intrinsic motivation, it is judged to be much less effective in favoring enduring personal communication – and this is easily understood thinking of the characteristics of the respective public places: libraries and bookstores on the one side, which are apt for direct interaction in a quiet and inviting context, and stadiums and sports palaces on the other side, which make direct interaction almost prohibitive given the noisy environment, the size of the audience, and the necessity to maintain constant attention to the action. In the case of highbrow activities such as jazz, theatre, opera, or ballet, the particularly demanding cognitive requirements are believed to overcome the intrinsic motivational factors, that would in itself be relatively favorable, and the mixed characteristics of the physical environment, which on the one side group together several people, but on the other hand, like for watching sports, require a very focused attention to the action and even, unlike the former, a social obligation of silence during the performance (with the partial exception of jazz).

Finally, in order to test our hypothesis, we have proceeded to a comparison between the ranking of cultural activities as to their impact on subjective well-being (on the basis of the linear correlation index between intensity of attendance and PGWBI score) and the ranking as to the sociability orientation provided by experts. The two rankings have been weighted and then compared for concordance, i.e. matching of ranks from subjective well-being and social orientation viewpoints, respectively (Table 5).

Table 5. PGWBI and social orientation of culture related activities

Cultural activities	Relational goods ranking	Subjective well-being ranking	Cumulative ranking
Practicing a sport	2	1	1
Engaging in social activities	1	5	2
Attending museums	4	2	3
Reading novels	3	5	4
Attending rock concerts	6	2	5
Attending painting exhibition	5	4	6
Going to a disco dance	7	5	7
Going to a cinema	9	3	8
Attending a sport event as a spectator	11	2	9
Reading poetry	8	7	10
Attending classic music concerts	10	5	11
Attending drama theatre/musicals	13	6	12
Attending opera/ ballet	14	5	13
Attending jazz music concerts	12	8	14

The association between the sociability and the PGWBI dimensions shows that at the top 6 activities in terms of sociability orientation are also the ones that get the highest cumulative ranking on the basis of both scales, although single positions are not necessarily preserved (e.g. sports practice gets a higher global rank than pro-social activity, and the same happens to museum attendance w.r.t. novels reading). Likewise, the bottom three activities in terms of social orientation are also those with the lower global ranking. In the case of other activities that do not belong to extreme sides of the ranking, evidence is less clear cut, but it can be noted that in no case the rank difference between the social orientation rank and the global rank exceeds 2 – which allows us to conclude that indeed the production of relational goods seems to have an important (though not an exclusive) role in determining the well-being impact of cultural activities.

5. Discussions

The results presented in the previous section allow us to draw some interesting assumptions as to the relationship between production of relational goods and subjective well-being implications of cultural activities. The ranking in terms of well-being implications on a representative sample of the Italian population seems to display a structure: it goes from sports practice, museums attendance, and novels reading (namely, typical components of a weekday pattern of access), down to sports attendance, cinema, and painting exhibitions attendance (more weekend-oriented leisure activities), and further down to opera, ballet, and classical music concerts (i.e. the activities with a more significant highbrow character). It is interesting to notice that this ranking is quite different from the one observed by Cuypers et al. (2012) in a recent, large Norwegian survey, where sports events attendance and church/chapel (not surveyed in our study) are the first two activities in order of importance, followed by associations and club meetings, dance, parish work, and outdoor/sports

activity. In that study, attendance of museums, art exhibitions, cinema, and theatre show up a very modest well-being impact. These striking differences between the two studies, which are practically simultaneous, merit attention and call for further reflection, which is beyond the scope of the present article. Clearly, they reflect deep differences in the social and cultural models and habits of Italians and Norwegians.

But what about the expert ranking in terms of social orientation and relational goods production? Also in this case, the picture that emerges seems to be readable enough. The basic criteria to identify social orientation and production of relational goods are clear-cut, although they lead to some surprise. Pro-social activity and sport practice are clearly and unsurprisingly top ranking, whereas reading novels gets a relatively unexpected third place. Interestingly, however, reading poetry gets a much worse social orientation rank – implicitly suggesting that, unlike novels, poetry seems to be more likely to be associated to a solitary, inward-looking attitude that does not facilitate interaction: a judgment that is further reinforced by the high media visibility of novelists and by the large sales figures for novels, as opposed to the almost total invisibility of the vast majority of poets and to the mostly meager sales of poetry books. Overall, there is a concordance between the two rankings: more socially oriented activities tend to generate higher levels of well-being, and vice versa. Moreover, they tend to be associated, *ceteris paribus*, to a relatively lowbrow character, to the underlying level of intrinsic motivation, and to the fact that they take place in physical environments that favor direct encounters.

On the basis of the above results, if we can conclude, as it seems, that a relatively lower social orientation causes a reduction of well-being, the key question becomes why people do not consume higher levels of relational goods, provided that their production is associated to well-being-improving opportunities for more social interaction.

One possible explanation comes from studies such as Antoci, Sacco and Vanin (2005) and Bartolini and Bilancini (2010). The common idea in these works is the focus on relational goods as public goods: the level of relationality may be too low because of a coordination failure in contributing to the public good. In this approach, changes of relative prices over time tend to increase the costs of contributing to the production of relationality. Scitovsky (1976[1992]) goes in a similar direction in distinguishing between ‘comfort’ and ‘stimulation’ goods. Comfort goods provide immediate rewards, with strongly decreasing marginal utility and tend to lead quickly to boredom. Stimulation goods, such as many cultural goods, have opposite characteristics, as their marginal utility is generally increasing with consumption – generally, the more so the higher their cognitive requirements, which explains why highbrow cultural activities tend to have a relatively modest impact on the well-being of a general population, which is repelled by their highly demanding cognitive effort. Relational goods can be interpreted in turn as typical instances of stimulation goods but, as pointed out by Hirschman (1996), relational goods in fact confer at the same time both comfort and stimulation. People tend to consume too much comfort goods also because they often appear as stimulation goods in disguise, offered at a much lower ‘cognitive’ price than actual stimulation goods. In our view, television provides inexpensive and effortless artificial relationality, which is often used as a substitute for actual interpersonal relationships (not incidentally, heavy consumers of tv often tend to develop fictitious and even obsessive one-sided emotional relationships with their preferred tv characters and personalities; Jenkins, 1992). Television viewing can therefore be seen as a comfort good that crowds out consumption of relational goods (Bruni and Stanca, 2008).

If the developmental role of culture both on the social and the economic sides finds new confirmations at many different levels, what our results suggest is that, however, it may be difficult to spark a social dynamics that leads people to invest in the strengthening of their own cognitive skills: it will be more likely in principle – and in the short term, also more rewarding in terms of

well-being – to stick to their customary habits. This leaves, however, a wide scope for cultural policies aimed at modifying the motivational balance of individuals to induce them to explore new cultural consumption patterns – for instance by nudging them into unfamiliar yet intriguing patterns of cultural experience (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). In this respect, cultural experience, a confluence of factors shape how individuals participate in cultural activities social class, gender, age frequently shown to matter. It going beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the independent or net impact on participation in cultural activities of the previous elements, leaving it to future consideration. Focusing the attention on cultural policy directed to foster the establishment of interaction between individuals, cultural policy may become a powerful policy tool insofar as it motivates people to interact more through cultural activities, to produce more relational goods, and to escape the perverse lock-in effect of affluent loneliness based on exaggerated consumption of material goods, at the expense of experiences and relational goods – thereby providing further motivation to access socially oriented cultural activity, and generating a positive feedback social dynamics that builds more social capital.

But why, then, cultural policy remains so marginal in the policy makers' toolbox? This is the outcome of a long history of neglect, that may to a good extent be traced back to a pre-industrial but hard-to-die conception of the role of culture (that still survives today in many circles) as an activity that is absorbing resources rather than creating them, not only in the economic sphere but also in the human and social dimensions. In fact, given the complex social mechanics of cultural experience, the evaluation of cultural participation cannot be carried out on the basis of the classic principles of consumers' choice (O'Sullivan, 2009). Cultural consumption is subject to positive feedback dynamics of self-reinforcement based on the acquisition of a basic level of experience and capabilities, determined by previous direct and personalized access to cultural activities and opportunities which cannot be properly understood in terms of forward-looking optimizing behavior based on a given preference structure. Cultural consumption may be regarded as an investment activity with uncertain returns linked to the development, and active use, of the capability to be engaged more intensively by cultural experiences. In this perspective, it is possible to regard cultural participation as one key social platform for the production of relational goods.

Another importance source of neglect comes from the difficulty to measure the contribution that relational goods secure to the system's level of activity. Individual well-being depends in principle on satisfaction of both material and relational needs. The former may be satisfied to a great extent through private activities, whereas participating to social activities mostly addresses the latter. The outcome of private activities typically enters the GDP, but much of the outcome of social activities, namely what we call relational goods, does not. Unless a more comprehensive measure of value production is used, the policy relevance of relational goods is likely to remain underrated. Moreover, social participation generates a direct externality, in that it raises the 'productivity' of the time other individuals spend in social activities, and a cumulative externality, in that it contributes to the formation of social capital. And again, such externalities are easily overlooked unless their actual impact is clearly demonstrated. Culture then acts toward the enhancement of well-being by bringing about outcomes, such as an increased level of relational goods, which have a positive impact on individual well-being, as well as on social well-being through the accumulation of social capital, but these effects are often far from being appropriately perceived by the decision makers.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we have addressed the question of the impact of participation in cultural activities on individual perceived well-being, asking in particular whether such participation – and which type of participation specifically – may work as an effective channel to increase subjective

well-being given its sociability orientation and its capacity to produce relational goods. By relying upon two distinct and independent sources of evidence based on different informational backgrounds, we have been able to reason, although in a very tentative and preliminary way, in terms of possible causation schemes. Finding that a specific typology of cultural participation is indeed effective for psychological well-being, and combining this result with the already existing evidence about the impact of culture on life expectancy (Konlaan, Bygren and Johansson, 2000), we thus have a promising empirical platform to construct a model that may potentially redefine the role of cultural policy in terms of an advanced, innovative form of welfare policy.

As to the relationship between cultural participation, production of relational goods and generation of individual psychological well-being, we may see it as a sort of ‘investment’, in analogy with what drives the accumulation of other forms of capital – but a peculiar form of investment such that individuals do not act spontaneously with the optimizing purpose of accumulating well-being, but rather to enjoy the relational goods they get through participation to cultural activities. Such accumulation appears therefore as a mix of two effects: a genuine interest toward culture, and an unintentional byproduct of activities with different aims, whose actual drive is the opportunity for individuals to connect and interact with others (Danna-Lynch, 2010). This is why a fair evaluation of the well-being consequences of cultural participation should take into account in principle its effects on social engagement and on the individual propensity to consume relational goods.

Cultural experiences may then be much more than a pleasant way to spend leisure time. They may be important platforms for the development of individual dispositions and capabilities that may substantially expand the potential of self-determination, the strategies for the pursuit of life satisfaction, the articulation and adoption of lifestyle choices.

While obviously relational goods cannot be directly produced by the state, public action can avoid the growth-unhappiness paradox (Easterlin, 2005) and promote personal interactions in many important ways, for instance by providing meeting places, by regulating shopping hours, by fixing the maximum duration of the work week, by supporting the arts and sports, by careful urban planning aimed at reducing commuting time etc. In this new setting, culture has basically changed its role, from being a marginal aspect of individual and group activity mostly related to entertainment, to become intrinsically linked to main issues of social development, and by addressing an expanding set of policy targets.

Our paper suggests that apparent leisure activities like practicing a sport, reading a novel, attending museums or paintings exhibitions or even rock concerts may have non-negligible positive consequences both at the individual and at the social level. This evidence, once properly tested and corroborated, could have major effects on many current commonsense reasoning that are very popular in the public domain. Understanding it, and even more its implications, may play a decisive role in boosting or thwarting the developmental potential of culture in post-industrial societies.

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