



# Arts & Kindness

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*'Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together.'*

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

## Introduction

For the last six years People United has been exploring how the arts can create the conditions for kindness, and from that a sense of community and social change. Our approach is motivated by a belief in the power of the arts and is rooted in a strong theoretical framework and academic research.

This paper is a starting point for a conversation with all those who are interested in the role of the arts in bringing about social change. We want to share some of what we know, and more of what we don't know but suspect might be true, about the potential of the arts to help create kinder, more caring communities.

Much is claimed for the transformative power of the arts. We want to explore those claims and examine them more closely. We are driven by a curiosity to discover how our work can be more effective through understanding and learning from academic research across a range of disciplines. In this paper we use research on prosocial behaviours and altruism to propose a model for how the arts might inspire kindness. We examine the evidence and suggest what further research is needed to improve the model, and explore the implications for those of us interested in the arts and social change.

This paper is for practitioners, arts professionals, policy makers, researchers, funders, and all those who have a passion for building kinder, more caring communities, whether that is in a school, a high street, an estate or a neighbourhood, a town, a city, online and off.



## 1 Why kindness?

We are living in turbulent times and confronting profound challenges. Climate change, global poverty, and resource scarcity are amongst the most critical issues we are facing in the 21st century. Youth unemployment remains high in the UK and across the world. The economic crisis that began in 2008 continues to play out in Europe and beyond, and our own austerity programme means difficult questions are being asked about fairness, entitlement, and who is most deserving. Underlying all these questions is a consideration of values; our deepest motivations and guiding principles, and how they influence our everyday attitudes and behaviours.

At the same time, new research in areas such as evolutionary biology, neuroscience and genetics has drawn our attention to the importance of character and its role in the development of personal resilience and well-being. Connections are being made between individual happiness, how people treat each other, and participation in civil society. Around the world initiatives are being developed exploring notions of creativity, self-reliance, sustainability and personal responsibility, encouraging us to make the links between the individual and community, between the local, the national and the global, and to recognise the sometimes far-reaching effect of our actions on others.

People United's contribution to these initiatives is to promote kindness through the arts. At first the term kindness can seem rather lightweight, particularly if it is understood as only referring to individual acts of generosity and thoughtfulness. However, a deeper examination reveals it as a more muscular concept with a rich heritage. The word 'kind' comes from the old English noun 'cynd': 'The word meant "nature", "family", "lineage", "kin". It indicated what we are, who we are, and that we are linked together in the present and across time'<sup>1</sup>.

This concept of kindness arises from a sense of people being connected by force of our common humanity. It encompasses notions of compassion, social justice, neighbourliness and respect for others. It asserts that: 'others are worthy of attention and affirmation for no utilitarian reasons but for their own sake'<sup>2</sup>.

People United believes that in order for us to live well together in our increasingly interconnected and complex world we need to strengthen our capacity for empathy, compassion, friendship, social connection and concern for others, including future generations. Our definition of kindness is rooted in theories of 'altruism' and 'prosocial behaviour'; where altruism\* is 'a motivational state with the ultimate goal

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\* The nature of altruism itself is contested, with different academic disciplines defining the term in different ways. In fact some scholars argue that there is no such thing as altruism and that all prosocial behaviour is driven by self-interest. For the purposes of this paper we are relying on social psychologist Daniel Batson's definition of altruism, which proposes that in particular circumstances people can act for the primary intention of assisting another.

## 1. Why kindness?

of increasing another's welfare'<sup>3</sup>, and prosocial behaviour, is 'an action that helps or benefits another person'<sup>4</sup>.

Straightforward kindness is something that most people can understand and appreciate, and as such it can be a stepping-stone towards other attitudes and behaviours that may help us tackle some of the challenges that lie ahead. With its essential orientation towards 'other' thinking, we think kindness is an idea whose time has come, and that the arts may have a vital role in creating the conditions for kindness to grow.



## 2

## What do we know about kindness?

Have you ever gone out of your way to help a stranger? Comforted someone who needed a kind word? Helped someone struggling with a pushchair or a heavy case? Taken time to direct a tourist? Given money or time to charity? Volunteered? Got involved with a local community group? Joined a campaign to protest about injustice? Then you have engaged in an act of kindness.

Since ancient times human beings have been studying and debating what motivates and drives concern for their fellow human beings. Different fields of research have advanced various theories to explain the factors that affect our capacity for kindness. We have looked at a number of them and what follows is an introduction to some of the most interesting and important concepts. By understanding the main influences on kindness we hope to see where there is potential for the arts to play a role.

**Philosophers** from as far back as Aristotle have argued about why people should help each other, and three main strands of ethics<sup>5</sup> have developed. Virtue ethicists propose that we should do good to be good (Plato and Aristotle), deontologists think we should do good because it is our duty to do so (Kant), and consequentialists argue that we should do good because it has good outcomes (Bentham and J.S. Mill). Today, concepts such as postmodernism, relativism and scepticism mean that morality is no longer seen as a set of universally accepted rules. However some contemporary philosophers argue that the consequences of having no shared moral values are uncertainty and social isolation, and that we need to return to the teachings of Aristotle, celebrating the idea of community, of virtues and of citizenship<sup>6</sup>.

The importance of kindness and compassion is a central strand of all the major world **religions**. The notion of caring for others can be found in the holy books of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Confucianism. Concern for others is a key part of religious thinking across cultures and time, and many religions formalise a duty to act prosocially; for example, almsgiving in Islam and tithing payments in Christianity. Being a member of a religion may help embed some shared values that emphasise concern for others, but it is also important to acknowledge that religion has been a part of some of the most violent conflicts in history.

**Social anthropologists** have been debating whether a propensity for kindness has helped us evolve as a species. Proponents of the 'selfish gene' perspective argue that we are predisposed towards competition and aggression. However, they also acknowledge the part that reciprocity based on human kinship has played in our

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evolution as a species – it is in our interest to care for others who carry the same genes as us. Trivers<sup>7</sup> thinks our cognitive abilities and language skills evolved so that we are more able to manage larger networks of reciprocity. Sussman and Chapman<sup>8</sup> go further, arguing that human beings, and perhaps other animals, have a biological foundation for social interaction which is not motivated by selfishness.

**Economists** are also intrigued by kindness; they propose a number of models to explain it, often predicated on an assumption that people act rationally. Some economists propose that people behave altruistically because they want to signal their generosity to others, or because they believe others intend to behave altruistically towards them. Researchers into game theory have found that although behaving selfishly can bring some benefits initially, in the long term, strategies of generosity and cooperation yield greater returns<sup>9</sup>. Other economists argue that relative income, envy and jealousy, and conspicuous consumption all impact on a person's well-being<sup>10</sup>. More recently Layard<sup>11</sup> has evidenced the link between relative inequality and levels of happiness, and the influential and extensive research of Wilkinson and Pickett<sup>12</sup> has demonstrated that the quality of social relations is worse in less equal societies, noting the resultant impact on levels of engagement, interaction and trust.

The disciplines of social psychology, developmental psychology, sociology and neuroscience have contributed significantly to our understanding of the factors that influence kindness, and we explore some of the key theories in more detail below.

Many theories in social psychology stress the importance of **emotion** in motivating prosocial behaviour, and most researchers agree that **empathy** is fundamental to many different kinds of helping. However there is less agreement about the nature of this emotion and how it actually works. Batson<sup>13</sup>, for example, makes a distinction between two feeling states that are aroused when we see another person in need: situational distress and situational empathy. Situational distress is an unpleasant emotion that can be reduced by helping or leaving the situation. With situational empathy, however, we adopt the perspective of the person in need; we imagine ourselves in their situation. People are more likely to be motivated to behave altruistically when they are experiencing a high degree of situational empathy.

Perhaps experiencing a positive emotion like joy, happiness or wonder might lead us to be kinder? The Broaden and Build theory of **positive emotions**<sup>14</sup> argues that they expand cognition and behavioural tendencies. Even though a positive emotion may only be momentary, the benefits last in the form of traits, social bonds and abilities into the future. The implication is that positive emotions have inherent value to human growth and development.

Other relevant emotions that may influence kindness are **moral outrage** and **moral elevation**. Moral outrage can be aroused when people witness a moral transgression – research shows that this feeling can encourage people to help others and is also associated with support for policies that distribute wealth more fairly<sup>15</sup> and participation in anti-poverty action and protest<sup>16</sup>. Witnessing an uncommon act of kindness can mean we experience moral elevation – a warm feeling that motivates people to do good themselves<sup>17</sup>.

**Social identity theory** suggests that our motivation to help others is influenced by the groups we feel we belong to<sup>18</sup>. We are more likely to help those who we perceive as belonging to the same group as ourselves (in-group members), and less likely to share and cooperate with those outside our group (out-group members). However our perceptions of the groups we belong to can change. If we become aware of 'higher level' groups that both we and out-group members belong to, we can redefine out-group members as in-group members. In other words we can start to see others as belonging to the same group as ourselves, opening the door to greater kindness towards them.

The concept of **social capital** also highlights the importance of relations between individuals and groups. Social capital has been defined in different ways but is based on the idea that being part of a social network has value. It is often argued that social capital knits society together, promotes civic participation and affects the quality of public life. Putnam identifies two forms: bonding social capital can happen between members of the same group and strengthens intra-group relations; bridging social capital happens between two or more different social identity groups and strengthens inter-group relations<sup>19</sup>.

A fundamental consideration in sociology is how our values influence our behaviour towards one another. Schwartz identified more than 50 **individual values** which he found to recur across more than 70 different cultures. He proposed that these fell into ten broad groupings. Values which occur in the groupings *benevolence*, *universalism* and *power* are most relevant to prosocial behaviour. People who support universalism (concern for all people and nature) and benevolence (the enhancing of others' welfare), and give low importance to power (social status and control over people or resources), tend to be more cooperative in their behaviour than others<sup>20</sup>.

Further research<sup>21</sup> shows a correlation between **cultural values** and the extent to which nations care about the well-being of current and future generations of children. A study of 20 wealthy nations found that in those nations that prized egalitarian and harmony values over those such as hierarchy and mastery, children's

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well-being was higher, the law regarding maternal leave was more generous, less advertising was directed at children, and less CO<sup>2</sup> was emitted.

Psychologists have found that encouraging people directly to be generous; for example, by being offered money, being pressured to reciprocate, and being told that altruism is what is expected, can have the opposite effect, meaning they are less likely to behave kindly in the future<sup>22</sup>. They have also highlighted the importance of **communication**<sup>23</sup>, which allows for the development of shared plans, reveals and helps develop **group norms** and group identity, promotes trust and eliminates fear.

Our experiences as children and what we learn from adults play a part in whether or not we show kindness. The work of many developmental psychologists is underpinned by **attachment theory**<sup>24</sup>, which proposes that children who have experienced supportive and emotionally responsive care develop secure attachments, thus positively affecting their belief and trust in other people and their ability to form relationships. People with secure attachment are much more likely to behave kindly.

As children develop they are thought to pass through different stages of **moral reasoning**, moving from a primarily moral focus on fairness to a more adaptable ability to draw on different types of reasoning and justification for both prosocial and excluding or discriminatory behaviour<sup>25</sup>. Pressure from peers and adults could therefore potentially deflect or reinforce children's motivation to be kind.

**Social learning theory**<sup>26</sup> focuses on the importance of observing and **modelling** the behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others, and is underpinned by a belief that most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling. From watching others we form an idea of how a new behaviour can be performed, and we use this information when we try out the behaviour for ourselves.

Given the psychological and sociological forces at work it is perhaps no surprise that the human brain may even be 'wired' for kindness. Neuroscientists have discovered that watching other people in pain activates the parts of the brain that are normally activated when you are in pain<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, when we see others being treated unfairly, the part of the brain related to our own personal outcomes is activated, regardless of whether or not we have a stake in the situation. Various studies support the 'warm glow' hypothesis; that it feels good to do good. Both giving and receiving stimulate the same mesolimbic reward system in the brain; research has shown that when we donate to charity, an area of the brain is activated which is intimately related to social attachment in other species.

## 2. What do we know about kindness?

Drawing on this broad range of research we can see that a study of kindness opens the door to a body of literature and knowledge which is fundamental to human existence. There are a large number of factors that influence kindness, from genes to childhood attachment and development, from emotions and mood, social values and norms, to the degree of inequality in our society, from the kinds of connections we have with others to what we learn and from whom. At the same time there are some clear underlying themes emerging, such as empathy, expression, collaboration, communication and cooperation. These lie at the heart of many kinds of arts practice and suggest new ways of understanding the impact of the arts for both individuals and the wider society.

### 3 The potential of the arts

The arts can entertain and delight us. They make us think and feel. They can challenge, surprise, disrupt, provoke and cause offence. The arts have been used to reflect back to us who we are and how we live, tell stories of our own and other people's lives, and help us imagine other worlds and other ways of being. Throughout history they have been used as a propaganda tool and to promote particular cultural, social and political ideals\*. Over the centuries many people have believed that the arts can have profound effects, both positive and negative. But do the arts have the potential to create the conditions for greater kindness?

The initial challenge in exploring this potential is to understand what is meant by the term 'the arts'. Perceptions of what 'art' and 'the arts' are have changed throughout history. The ancient Greeks had no word for art – the closest was 'techne', which included anything from poetry to carpentry, from sculpture to shipbuilding; in short, any activity which produced beautiful things requiring a high level of skill and talent<sup>28</sup>. Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art were introduced<sup>\*\*29</sup> and are still present in our notions of the arts today, reflecting social and educational divisions.

There are deep inequalities in participation in many established artforms, such as theatre and classical music, with the least privileged in society least likely to engage<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, people may be participating in creative and expressive activities within their communities but without regarding it as 'art'<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, one could argue that most of us are engaged in the arts on a day to day level, whether we call it 'art' or not. We watch soaps, listen to music, download films, take photos, shoot home movies, write, draw, read, play music and make things, often sharing them with others.

The etymology of the word 'art' roughly means 'to put things together' and 'to make stuff you care about'<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, and this is the basis of People United's understanding of 'the arts'. When we use the term in this paper it covers a broad, inclusive range of activities where creativity and self-expression are key, and the focus is on doing and making as much as seeing.

Identifying activities that can be considered within the term 'the arts' is a useful starting point. But understanding what the arts are, also means examining the

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\* For example, the Nazi regime saw art as the perfect medium for creating and directing the Aryan dream. At the same time, the 'committed novel' promoted the idea that literature can change history, fight slavery and oppression, and play a role in political struggles.

\*\* John Carey cites the educational reforms of the late 19th Century and the subsequent increase in literacy as the reason for this separation, as those who considered themselves intellectuals distanced themselves through modernist literature from the newly literate working classes.

\*\*\* With thanks to Eric Lidell for pointing this out in his presentation at the *Art will change the world* summit at Southbank Centre, London, 2012.

essential characteristics of arts practice and experience. What is it about what an artist does, what an audience witnesses or what a group of people create together that makes it 'artistic'? There is a longstanding discourse about the nature of arts practice, including a rich literature on relational art and aesthetics, which is beyond the scope of this paper to review in depth\*. However, many accounts focus on the core idea of art as a communicative experience. As McCarthy et al point out in *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*: 'A work of art is... a bridge, however tenuous, between one mind and another'<sup>32</sup>.

The arts offer a myriad of channels for expressing and sharing viewpoints, feelings, ideas and visions. In doing so they can link the artist to an audience, and individual beholders and participants to one another. Furthermore, the arts are one of the primary ways in which people create and exchange meaning. An artwork can be seen as a container for meaning, a shared point of reference and dialogue; when people participate in the arts they are creating meaning for themselves; a collaborative arts process is one in which people make sense of the world together. As Sharpe argues in his collection of essays *Economies of Life: Patterns of Health and Wealth*: 'To become art, something must move from being private to circulating amongst us as a means of sharing the experience of being human'<sup>33</sup>.

We also suspect that the arts may have the potential to act as a magnifier. The arts can operate on many different levels; they can affect us emotionally, intellectually, psychologically and even physically, and often these effects occur simultaneously. As such, the arts can involve us in particularly intense and absorbing experiences.

At their essence, then, the arts have the potential to be meaningful encounters that magnify our experience of life and connect us to the world and to each other. This suggests that they could have a vital role to play in building a kinder society. But what evidence is there that the arts can impact how people think, feel and behave towards each other?

Introducing the question of evidence to a debate about the arts is fraught with difficulty, and typically leads to charges of 'instrumentalism' – that the arts are being valued not for their inherent qualities but because they can be used to achieve wider social or economic purposes. As Bennett and Belfiore point out, the desire to understand and articulate the impact of the arts and their cultural, social, economic and political value can be traced back to the ancient Greeks<sup>34</sup>. However, the debate has become more heated in recent years as the publicly funded arts sector has come under increasing pressure, both to account for what it achieves with its share of the public purse, and to better advocate its value to funders, particularly government.

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\* For contrasting views see the work of Grant Kester and Claire Bishop.

### 3. The potential of the arts

As the arts sector has sought to articulate its value to a wider audience, the evidence base for the social impact of the arts has developed with both strengths and weaknesses<sup>\*35</sup>. Ruiz (2004)<sup>36</sup> and Galloway (2008)<sup>37</sup> offer a detailed critique of this evidence base and note that there is some robust and substantial evidence for the benefits to individuals in specific contexts such as health and criminal justice. However, the empirical evidence for the impact of the arts at a group, community and neighbourhood level is still limited. Research and evaluation methods for appraising the impact of arts participation on individuals, and how those effects translate at group or community level, are relatively under-developed and scarce, and there is a wide variation in methodology, rigour, conceptual definitions, and underpinning theory of change models.

From People United's perspective, the pressure to generate evidence, and the accompanying debate about instrumentality, are not helping us to think creatively about how to understand and explain the effects and benefits of what we do. Perhaps a more helpful (but controversial) starting point is to recognise that all art is inherently instrumental in some sense. When people make, see or do art, 'things happen': the vision of an individual artist is fulfilled; an artform advances in technique or excellence; an audience is captivated; a community is sparked into fighting injustice; bonds are strengthened or divisions deepened; power and money change hands.

In their 2011 RSA pamphlet *Arts Funding, Austerity, and the Big Society* Knell and Taylor<sup>38</sup> propose that the value of the arts is best understood as a spectrum of instrumentalism that ranges from promoting artistic excellence and innovation, through to work which, though still valuing artistic excellence, prioritises contributing to the public good. If we accept this argument, then the challenge for artists and arts organisations, particularly those which are publicly funded, is to understand where on that spectrum their work sits and to focus their evaluation efforts accordingly. We are not arguing that every arts encounter can or should contribute to the conditions for kindness to grow. However, for organisations like People United, which are setting out purposefully to promote social change, it makes sense to try to understand what can happen when people experience the arts in terms of why, how and in what circumstances kindness might be inspired.

Building this kind of understanding of the impacts of the arts means embedding action research and evaluation in artistic practice. In the next chapter we draw on existing research to propose a model for how the arts might inspire kindness. As

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\* See Francois Matarasso's *Use or Ornament: The social impact of participation in the arts* for an early attempt to evaluate the impact of the arts in terms of concepts such as personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and imagination and vision.



### 3. The potential of the arts

People United explores and improves the model over time, it will form a solid foundation for all of our work. The model will allow us to take an informed approach to developing projects, evaluating the results and increasing their impact, whilst leaving space for the unpredictable outcomes that are inevitably part of arts practice and experience.

## How might the arts inspire kindness?

From the research summarised in chapter two we have identified four main themes that connect the arts and kindness. For the purposes of our model, and using a technical term from psychological statistics, we will call them 'mediators'. Our central proposition is that the arts can create the conditions for kindness to grow through activating one or more of these mediators. The mediators help to explain the kinds of changes that might be taking place when people engage in the arts, which may lead to kinder attitudes and behaviours. They are:

**Emotions** – the arts can engage people's emotions directly and powerfully and in doing so can spark feelings, such as empathy, that are key for influencing kindness.

**Connections** – arts experiences can bring people together and have the potential to create immediate strong connections between individuals and groups.

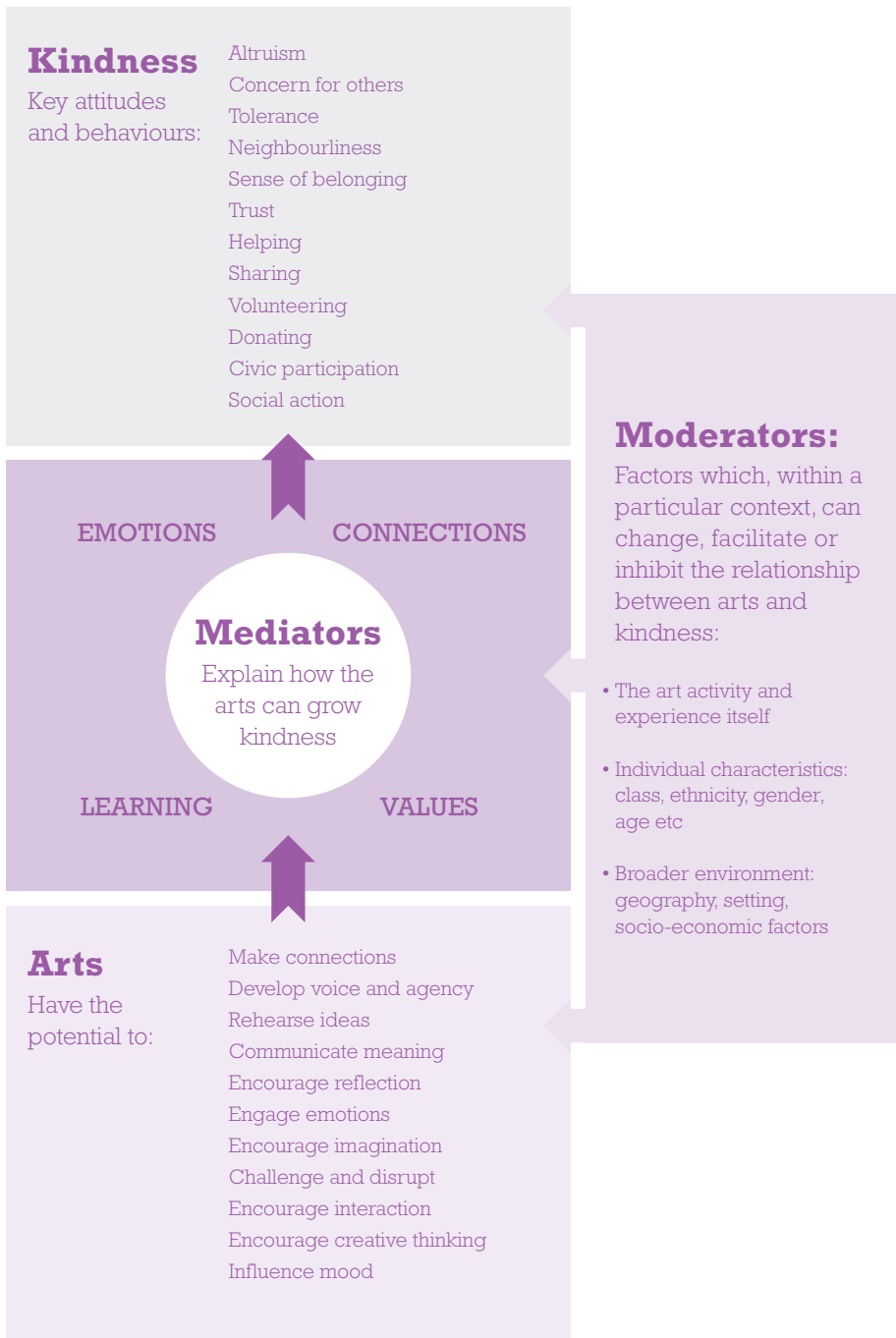
**Learning** – the arts can create opportunities for people to learn from and about each other and the world.

**Values** – many arts experiences involve a deep exploration of human values which are key to determining how people live together and behave towards each other.

There are a range of factors that will mitigate against the potential of the arts to inspire kindness. These range from individual characteristics through to wider socio-economic and environmental circumstances. Again using a term borrowed from psychology, we refer to these as 'moderators'. We explore them further in a later section.

Below we consider each mediator in more detail. Where available, we explore the peer-reviewed research that demonstrates the operation of a particular mediator between the arts and kindness. We draw out what each mediator might mean for arts practice.

#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?



#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

### EMOTIONS

How the arts can link with our emotions, increase empathy and affect our mood.

**KEY THEORIES: empathy; mood; moral outrage; moral elevation**

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The arts are particularly powerful in eliciting emotional responses. One of the most powerful aspects of the arts is their ability to create **empathy** – witnessing the misfortunes of others in a film, play or book can spark emotions such as concern, sympathy and compassion which we know from social psychology research can motivate prosocial behaviour. There are many art forms that encourage us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes – a specific mechanism for the development of empathy. Plays, films, songs, told stories all encourage us to experience the world as someone else does.

A recent piece of research<sup>39</sup> examined the effects of reading novels. It found that reading fiction could develop empathy in regular readers, and make them more adept at reading and anticipating the emotional reactions of others. A further study found that for people who normally avoided difficult emotions, reading fiction had a greater effect on their development of empathy than those who were more emotionally expressive. From this the researchers interpreted that, 'fiction can be an occasion for transforming the self', and 'a way of reaching those whose tendency is to avoid their emotions'.

People can gain a huge amount of pleasure from the arts. They can be a source of fun, beauty, colour and relaxation, and alter our **mood** and state of mind. Concentrating on an artistic work or activity can challenge us and absorb us completely in the present moment, creating a satisfying state of 'flow'<sup>\*40</sup>. The arts are an opportunity for people to experience joy and wonder, and to be uplifted, and we have seen the importance of positive emotion in encouraging people to help others.

Experiments conducted into the effect of feeling positive emotions have shown that those experiencing them demonstrate an increased capacity for broad-based thinking. Research participants who were encouraged to feel positive emotions through watching emotionally evocative films had improved cognitive abilities. Further research concluded that by momentarily broadening attention and thinking, positive emotions can lead to the discovery of novel ideas, actions and social bonds<sup>41</sup>.

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\* Flow is described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as 'a state of heightened focus and immersion in activities such as art, play and work'.

#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

The arts can also provoke difficult, uncomfortable emotions and have long been used as a way of bringing important social issues to public attention. Art can open our eyes to injustice which may provoke a sense of **moral outrage**, and a desire to take action on another's behalf. Similarly, the arts can reveal the potential of the human race to act nobly and selflessly, which may lead to a feeling of **moral elevation** that inspires people to behave differently towards each other.

Research has examined the relationship between moral elevation, social dominance and donations to charity through videos and stories depicting acts of moral excellence. After watching the videos and reading the stories, white participants who were high in social dominance orientation were more willing to donate to a black-orientated charity, in comparison to a control group who did not watch or read the elevating stimuli<sup>42</sup>.

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#### To summarise:

- Empathy in particular has been demonstrated to be a powerful influence on kindness. Developing opportunities for audiences and participants to relate strongly to characters and situations has the potential to increase their capacity to empathise and act in a prosocial way.
  - Arts experiences which affect our mood, particularly by absorbing and captivating us, may positively influence our desire to act with kindness.
  - If we feel positive emotions then it can help us learn new skills, broaden our thinking and strengthen social bonds.
  - Witnessing transgressive acts or uncommon acts of kindness through the arts may inspire us to take action to help others.
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#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

### CONNECTIONS

How the arts can connect people, reveal similarities, cross barriers and aid cooperation.

**KEY THEORIES:** social identity; interpersonal relations; attachment theory; social capital; social inclusion and exclusion; exchange; oneness

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The arts have huge potential to build connections between people, including people from different backgrounds, quickly and powerfully. But can they help us create a shared sense of identity with people we would have previously viewed as different; or make us feel included, accepted and supported by others; or increase our sense of interdependence and commonality?

We know from **social identity theory**<sup>43</sup> that we like people most and are most likely to help them if they belong to our social groups. The arts may provide opportunities for our notion of the groups we belong to be reframed so that we broaden our definitions. This may be particularly true of activities that encourage people to come together from across different identities to share in a common arts interest or pursuit; for example, a community choir in a diverse urban area might highlight a sense of people belonging together as singers, and decrease differences based on ethnicity and background. In addition, arts activities that involve people in doing, making, participating or witnessing experiences together may develop bridging **social capital**, strengthening individual and group relations.

The imaginative aspect of the arts may be particularly significant in breaking down barriers between people. Many arts experiences invite audience members or participants to imagine what the past was like or how the future might be different, or how people live in other places and contexts. The act of imagining may help people to feel more comfortable with ideas or ways of living that are strange to them.

One recent research study<sup>44</sup> investigated whether simply imagining contact with people from other groups can improve intergroup attitudes. In three different experiments using control groups in each case, participants were asked to imagine talking to someone from a different identity group, with the difference based on age in two of the experiments, and sexual orientation in the third. They found that intergroup bias and anxiety was reduced in all three experiments, which led them to conclude that just imagining contact with someone different can help reduce prejudice<sup>45</sup>.

The arts may provide opportunities to strengthen people's feelings of support

#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

and develop their emotional literacy and voice. This could be particularly beneficial when working with children; we know from **attachment theory**<sup>46</sup> how important it is for children to experience supportive and emotionally responsive care in order to develop secure attachments. Creating a safe and emotionally supportive environment for children to explore emotions, to play and to develop self-expression through arts activities such as storytelling or music making may encourage prosocial behaviours in the long term.

Two studies<sup>47</sup> investigated the influence of group singing and joint music making on children and found that both activities increased spontaneous cooperative and helpful behaviour, and developed trust. Researchers proposed that music making encourages participants to keep a constant focus on collective intention and a shared goal, 'thereby satisfying the intrinsic human desire to share emotions, experiences and activities with others'<sup>48</sup>.

Theories of **social exclusion**<sup>49</sup> and **inclusion, exchange**<sup>50</sup>, and **oneness**<sup>51</sup> all focus on the connections between people. Arts experiences that are inclusive, demonstrate the worth of individuals involved and highlight interdependence and relatedness could all influence participants to think and act more prosocially.

A regeneration programme<sup>52</sup> on a notorious central Sydney housing estate nicknamed 'Suicide Towers' used storytelling as a catalyst in the regeneration of the neighbourhood. Results from the programme included improved social cohesion, improved environments and a decrease in violent crime. Tenants reported feeling more valued, much safer and more comfortable.

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#### To summarise:

- Art which develops relationships between people, and across social, ethnic and faith divides may develop kindness.
  - Art which disrupts our accepted versions of identity and the groups we belong to may provide powerful opportunities for us to reframe who we are and help us create connections with people who are different from us.
  - Creating safe and emotionally supportive environments where people feel accepted and valued is important, particularly so for children.
  - Involving people in imagining contact with those who are from different identity groups might help reduce prejudice and anxiety about other groups.
  - Feeling excluded has a negative effect on one's kindness towards others so inclusive practice is important.
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#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

### LEARNING

How the arts can help build skills and provide good role models to emulate.

**KEY THEORIES: social learning theory; interpersonal skills; responsibility norms; fairness / equity norms**

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Experiencing other people's stories, observing their problems and dilemmas, and understanding how they make difficult decisions and overcome obstacles is a key component of many art forms; for example, participative theatre practices give an audience characters they identify with, and test out different courses of action and their consequences with input from the audience. According to **social learning theory** this type of experience could provide rich opportunities to learn about kindness. Graphic novels, films, plays, stories and songs can present us with people we can relate to, and may want to emulate.

Momentum Arts project 'Untold Stories' aimed to preserve the heritage of BME communities in Cambridge through a 3-year project. Residents nominated local Black / Asian role models, a magazine was published recording stories of local BME business owners, the stories of people from BME communities were recorded, and storytellers used the stories to record a CD and create murals in school workshops<sup>53</sup>.

Many forms of arts practice and experience involve deep observation of human interaction and relations. This creates the opportunity for artists, spectators and participants to understand, explore and challenge social **norms**, particularly in relation to **responsibility**, **fairness** and **equity**. The experiential nature of the arts enables people to learn through active participation, engaging them cognitively and emotionally, which may have a more powerful impact than more straightforward, one-way instruction about attitudes and behaviour.

Lifestories for Kids is a US programme to increase life skills and character education among school children through storytelling. Research found that students participating in the intervention experienced statistically significant improvements in social behaviour compared to a control group. The researchers noted that storytelling is particularly useful in character education because it 'teaches by illustration, making abstract concepts concrete and accessible' and that 'stories invite participation by guiding children in the creation of mental imagery and allowing them to experience the scene and its consequences through imagination'<sup>54</sup>.



#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

Engaging in arts activities and experiences can help develop social and **interpersonal skills** (such as listening) which also play a role in how we care for one another, and as we have already highlighted, arts activities which help us to experience positive emotions may in turn develop our cognitive abilities<sup>55</sup>.

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**To summarise:**

- Art can provide us with prosocial role models that we can identify with and relate to.
  - Art can provide us with opportunities to explore and practise thinking and behaving kindly – through, for example, participative theatre, or creative storytelling.
  - Art can help us explore and reflect on social responsibility and fairness.
  - Art can encourage people to take individual responsibility for developing kinder attitudes and actions towards others.
  - Art which helps us to feel positive emotions may aid the development of cognitive abilities.
-

#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

### VALUES

How the arts can challenge and explore our values and encourage us to be more benevolent and other-focused.

**KEY THEORIES: values; moral development; moral reasoning**

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The arts are rich in possibility for an exploration of our **values**, and the extent to which they guide our attitudes and behaviours. Arts experiences can challenge what we think and believe, introduce us to new ideas and philosophies, and bring us into contact with questions and dilemmas about how we live our lives. We recognise the need to exercise caution – the arts have been adopted over the centuries as a vehicle for promoting particular political ideologies. However, messages about values are all around us, including in the arts. One could argue that all arts communicate a set of values whether intentionally or not.

Research on the effects of listening to music tends to focus on the connection between antisocial music and aggressive behaviour. However, a recent study showed that listening to songs with prosocial lyrics reduced aggression and increased helping behaviour. The researcher concluded that positive, prosocial lyrics can foster interpersonal empathy which in turn promotes prosocial behaviour<sup>56</sup>.

In *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values* Crompton considers the importance of values in tackling global social and environmental challenges. He argues for more explicit and transparent conversations about values: 'It is important to ask what values we want to endorse, and what the implications will be for the issues that we care about'<sup>57</sup>.

This research has shown that appealing to 'self-enhancement' values such as wealth, status and power, in order to achieve a short term gain, risks strengthening the values that are the root of many of the complex global and environmental issues we are currently facing. With their power to engage, surprise and disrupt, the arts offer the opportunity to challenge 'self-enhancement' values and to foster 'intrinsic' values such as self-acceptance and concern for others.

There is also a strong association between self-direction values (enhancing creativity, exploration and independent thought and action) and universalism values. Arts participation often develops self-direction and so it may be that simply engaging in creative processes may increase social and environmental concern<sup>58</sup>. Hawkes argues that the democratisation of the arts – increased engagement in

#### 4. How might the arts inspire kindness?

doing, making and seeing – can develop creativity and innovation, essential attributes for bringing about the cultural transformation necessary to tackle the urgent challenges of sustainability and resource scarcity<sup>59</sup>.

People United's 'We All Do Good Things'<sup>60</sup> project carried out a piece of action research across five schools in partnership with the University of Kent. Two schools acted as the control group. In the other three schools, pupils were encouraged to reflect on kindness and what it had meant to them personally, and then whole classes developed arts based activities to demonstrate kindness to others. The evaluation demonstrated a significant increase in prosocial motivations and behaviours for the children who took part.

Arts activities for children which reinforce prosocial and moral norms might lead them to act more kindly towards one another, and more generally. Research into **moral development** has shown that these norms become highly internalised from a very young age. Research also shows that particular values are strengthened by repeated engagement with them over time and long-term arts programmes offer the opportunity for that kind of sustained engagement<sup>61</sup>.

Artbeat 2011<sup>62</sup> initiated by the legal firm Allen and Overy carried out a series of workshops on art, people and justice in an ethnically diverse inner London school. Evaluations of the project demonstrated that it had changed attitudes and given a voice to students regarding racism, justice and what freedom means. One participant reflected, 'The arts can give you a voice, to stand up for what is just and right'.

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#### To summarise:

- Egalitarian and harmony values, and benevolence and universalism values, may promote prosocial behaviours and increase cooperation and helpfulness.
  - It is important to examine the values implicit in arts practices and experiences. Do they promote self-enhancement values such as wealth, status and power, or self-transcending values such as universalism and benevolence?
  - It may be that just by being engaged in arts practices and experiences we are increasing our capacity for social and environmental concern.
  - Arts activities with children that focus on developing prosocial values and norms can be particularly effective in the long term.
  - Repeated engagement with the same set of values embeds them over time.
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## 5 Moderators for arts and kindness

We have proposed a model in which the arts can create the conditions for kindness through four key mechanisms: by engaging people's emotions; by connecting people to each other; by creating opportunities for people to learn about the world and each other; and by exploring, revealing and challenging values.

We suspect that the more of our mediators are involved or highlighted by an arts activity or experience, the greater the potential for kindness to flourish; for example, reading a novel may stimulate empathy (*Emotions*) for the characters in the story, and if we identify strongly and relate to a character who is behaving prosocially then it may mean that we emulate their behaviour (*Learning*). If it also helps us to imagine someone's life from a group that is different from our own (*Connections*), we may then be more likely to relate to someone from that group positively when we come across them in our real lives. We still have much to learn about how our mediators operate when more than one of them are activated at the same time.

At the same time we are not suggesting that all kinds of arts practice and experience will always have a positive effect on kindness through all four mediators. In fact there are many things that may **moderate** the potential of the arts to inspire kindness. Not all arts experiences will activate all of our mediators, and some art forms will favour some mediators more than others; for example, research has demonstrated that acting has a more powerful effect on empathy than visual arts or music<sup>63</sup>. Some arts experiences will have a more powerful effect on kindness than others. For example, it is likely that an arts experience that takes place over a period of time and involves repeated engagement of values will have a greater effect than a one-off experience. It may even be the case that some arts experiences may activate one or more of the mediators but have a negative effect on kindness; for example, research suggests that some art forms may help to deepen social and economic divides in communities, helping privileged people to connect with each other while others feel unwelcome or excluded<sup>\*64</sup>.

Indeed wider socio-economic factors such as deprivation, poor educational outcomes and housing, unemployment, inequality and poor social mobility cannot be underestimated in their impact on individual and community resilience and cohesion<sup>65</sup>. In addition, much has been written about how people from low socio-economic groups or experiencing particular disadvantage are the least likely to participate in the arts. The current economic climate is particularly testing of our capacity and resources to be 'other' focused.

Overall, and using Belfiore and Bennett's classification in *Determinants of Impact*:

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\* See the wider work of Wing Chan and Goldthorpe for a detailed consideration of the role of status in influencing arts engagement.

*Towards a Better Understanding of Encounters with the Arts*<sup>66</sup>, we identify three types of factor that may moderate the relationship between the arts and kindness:

- Factors that are inherent to the arts experience: whether and how an arts experience activates the four mediators to promote kindness may depend on the art form involved, whether the experience involves spectating, participating or coproducing with an artist, the subject matter and qualities of the art work, and the characteristics of the artistic process.
- Factors that are inherent to the people participating: an arts experience may have different effects depending on the age, gender, education, socio-economic status and psychological state of the participants.
- Environmental factors – the relationship between the arts and kindness may change depending on the physical environment, the setting and the cultural, social, economic and political context in which the arts experience takes place.

Understanding these moderators in more depth will be key to developing the model further. People United thinks there is much more to be done in examining what some of the moderators might be for the potential of the arts to inspire kindness, and that further research in this area may yield some rich learning which could deeply influence thinking on the arts, from policy through to practice.



## Conclusion

This paper offers the foundation stones for how the arts might inspire kindness and social change. We think it has never been more urgent to look at fundamental questions of values, relationship and interconnectedness and how we live our lives together. Crompton<sup>67</sup> talks about the need for us all to develop our capacity for 'bigger than self' thinking in order to tackle some of the complex global challenges we are currently facing. We hope that we have provided the beginnings of an evidence base for the role the arts might play in helping us do this. We have used existing research to propose that the arts can develop the conditions for kindness to grow through the activation of one or more of four mediators: *Emotions*, *Connections*, *Learning* and *Values*. What is clear is that there is still much more to do to understand how the arts connect with our deeper feelings and experiences, both as individuals and in our social relationships.

For People United, the research and findings described here will inform our future direction and work. Through our practical projects, artists commissions and continuing research we will be developing this evidence base further, particularly through focusing on the specific mechanisms by which art involves or engages one or more of the four mediators. We will also be examining in greater detail what mitigates against the arts creating the conditions for kindness to grow, and we want to know more about whether the arts might impact negatively on kindness.

Capturing and evaluating the impact of the arts is an ongoing challenge. We hope that our model offers a solid underlying theoretical basis for those who want to understand what it is about particular arts practices and experiences that might inspire kindness and social change. We think that this model may have a range of applications and benefits: for artists, for researchers and evaluators, and for funders and policy makers. We will continue to explore and develop the implications for practice through future work.

People United thinks the arts have an important and unique role to play in exploring questions of kindness and inspiring change. This paper is just the beginning of our exploration. We are keen to look at our work critically and are open to new ideas and arguments. Most of all we are excited about the possibilities of our model and are curious to learn more. We look forward to hearing your thoughts and creative ideas on how we might develop it further.





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