

Festivals as instruments of cultural welfare: a theoretical reflection

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Titolo: I festival come strumenti di welfare culturale: una riflessione teorica

Abstract: Il welfare culturale è uno strumento di coesione sociale che, a partire dalla cultura e dalle arti, combatte le disuguaglianze e punta sulla promozione della salute. È un modello di sviluppo del benessere degli individui e delle comunità, che valorizza pratiche bottom up. I festival generano impatti socio-culturali sul territorio e sui cittadini, ponendosi come momenti di inclusione e partecipazione, e offrendo spazi di innovazione. I festival possono dunque essere strumenti di creazione di welfare culturale, innescando processi di innovazione sociale nelle comunità, abbattendo alcune delle barriere sociali, migliorando il benessere delle persone, e animando spazi spesso diversi dai luoghi deputati alla cultura. Questo lavoro teorico non vuole essere una revisione sistematica della letteratura esistente, ma un punto di partenza per l'analisi dei festival come strumento di creazione di welfare culturale.

Parole chiave: festival; eventi; welfare culturale; welfare di comunità

Abstract: Cultural welfare is an instrument of social cohesion which, using cultural forms, fights inequalities and focuses on health promotion. It is a model for developing individual and community well-being and enhancing bottom-up practices. Festivals generate socio-cultural impacts on the territory and on citizens, acting as moments of inclusion and participation, and offering spaces for innovation. Festivals can therefore be tools for creating cultural welfare, triggering processes of social innovation in communities, breaking down some social barriers, improving people's well-being, and enlivening spaces not usually used for cultural activities. This theoretical work does not want to be a systematic review of the existing literature, but a starting point for the analysis of festivals as instruments of cultural welfare.

Key words: festivals; events; cultural welfare; community welfare

1. Introduction

The term *festival* derives from the word *festa* (Falassi, 1987) and indicates a recurring celebration and moment of social sharing (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; Wilks & Quinn, 2016). With their rituals and the creation of a collective identity, even if temporary, festivals generate socio-cultural impacts on the territory and on citizens (Cudny, 2014; Rossetti, 2022), both in urban areas and in areas at risk of depopulation (Alonzo, 2022). Nevertheless, to date there are only very few studies that analyse festivals as instruments of cultural welfare generation (Andersson *et al.*, 2012; Bush, 2019; Kalele & Rondonuwu, 2020; Long & Harris, 1993). This paper aims to fill this gap and contribute to the literature by analysing the links between the notion of cultural welfare and the impacts of festivals, seen as moments of social inclusion and participation. After defining the concept of cultural welfare, the objective of this paper is to understand if and how festivals can be tools for promoting cultural welfare. The role of this paper is therefore not to provide a systematic literature review, but contribute with some reflections to the current debate on how festivals can be transformative and arenas for cultural welfare creation. Particularly, the paper deals with the issue of welfare in relation to cultural/arts festivals that for example focus on literature, music, cinema, and where the dissemination of messages, ideas, and reflections through dialogue is crucial (Guerzoni, 2008).

2. Cultural welfare

In recent years, cultural welfare has appeared on agendas and entered the political-cultural debate at European level, as a model to promote people's well-being and health through arts and cultural heritage (Cicerchia *et al.*, 2020). Cultural welfare seems to change its meaning depending on the country in which it is being applied, emphasising the culture creation processes which, once included in a welfare context, play a vital role in the psychological and physical well-being of all the individuals belonging to a community (Bodo & Sacco, 2017; Sacco, 2017).

In Italy, cultural welfare became part of the social jargon thanks to studies carried out by Cicerchia, Rossi Ghiglione and Seia, who, in 2020, founded the *Cultural Welfare Center*. According to them, cultural welfare

fight inequalities, focuses on health promotion, and protect human life in all its dimensions and in all its complexity¹. Therefore, cultural welfare could be defined as a branch of *community welfare*, defined by the sociologist Colozzi (2020) as welfare made of innovative and co-created processes designed to encourage social inclusion and autonomy. Community welfare places innovative practices of social innovation at the centre of the discussion as a practice that considers relationships as a vital element to address the problem of inequalities (Rago & Venturi, 2016). These practices can engage the younger sections of the population and promote local heritage and communities (Lampis, 2017).

Community and cultural welfare also help to promote social networks between the inhabitants of a particular area and to favour participation through new ways of governance achieving a balance between problem and solution (Cicerchia *et al.*, 2020). Thus, cultural welfare promotes social inclusion, contrasts social inequalities and breaks down social classes barriers. When community welfare is translated into cultural welfare the focus is on the social value of culture and its impact as an aesthetic, symbolic, and institutional value. Thus, cultural organisations can activate several relationships with various stakeholders and foster the growth of the local community (Manzoli & Paltrinieri, 2021). Cultural welfare is a social system, which refers to both the idea of *state aid* and the idea of *rights* enjoyed by citizens in a given state. For instance, according to Manzoli and Paltrinieri (2021), designing cultural welfare projects means understanding the multiple levels of impacts in society and daily life. In order to do so, cultural welfare strategies aim to create locally-based communities, encouraging physical and online participation, favouring co-production processes in order to re-interpret cultural heritage and re-design social services. This encourages listening to bottom-up practices that overcome the prejudice of considering culture the exclusive domain of the elites (Fulco, 2022). This means that cultural welfare promotes social inclusion and creation of communities.

The notion of cultural welfare is also linked to the concept of well-being. However, looking at other countries, the literature is scarce: there are only some studies in few countries that have historical traditions in welfare development processes and in which the relationship between culture and well-being is well consolidated. They include, for instance, France and Finland. In France, already in the 19th century, thanks to the Marquis de Sade various therapeutic plays were staged at the Charenton asylum. Later, in 2010, the Ministry of Health and Sport and the Ministry of Culture signed a new *Health and Culture* convention to promote culture and bring it closer to local citizens and the healthcare communities. In 2007, the Finnish government also adopted a political programme to promote health, via the *Art and culture for well-being Taiku* action programme (2010–2014), which was intended to promote well-being and health through art and culture, and to improve individual, community, and social inclusion (Erkkila-Hill, 2017; Laitinen *et al.*, 2022).

Similarly, after the Second World War, the British Department of Health launched the *Council for Music in Hospitals*, a series of art processes to involve people in hospitals (Fisher, 2017). This was a first step towards more structured interdisciplinary projects bringing together culture, health, and economics, like the 1994 initiative *Arts on Prescription Stockport*, which was designed to help people living with depression through a series of creative activities (Arts Council England, 2006; Bungay & Clift, 2010)². This was based on the idea that the engagement in creative activity can promote health and well-being (Secker *et al.*, 2008; Kelaher *et al.*, 2014; Cicerchia *et al.*, 2020), and encourage the enhancement of individual capabilities. This theory was developed by Matarasso in his report *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (1997), where he analysed the social impacts of the arts on various levels and their contribution to local politics and social cohesion and to the empowerment of people involved in delivering and experiencing culture. Individuals who participate in artistic practices could develop their individual cultural capital as well as increase community social capital (Leroux & Bernadska, 2014), through practices of engagement and subjective empowerment (Tavano Blessi *et al.*, 2014).

All the above means that cultural welfare can be interpreted in several ways (Figure 1): 1) psychological and physical well-being generation through the arts; 2) contrast social inequalities and breaking down barriers of social classes; 3) social inclusion and creation of communities and local networks; and 4) individual and social empowerment with generation of social and cultural capital.

¹ For more information see: <https://culturalwelfare.center/>

² For more information see: <https://www.artshealthresources.org.uk/links/>

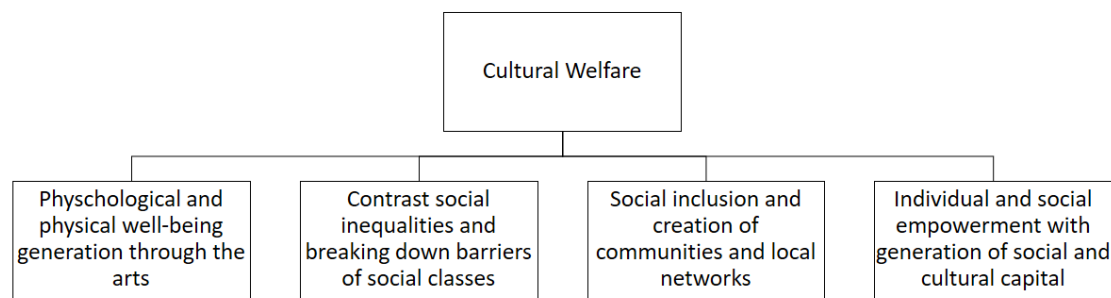


Figure 1: The various meanings of cultural welfare (Source: Authors)

3. Festivals as tools of cultural welfare

Scholars are starting to explore how festivals can take on different functions and act as tools for the implementation of cultural welfare. This section discusses some literature around the topic and links the concept of cultural welfare with festival studies.

3.1 Well-being generation through festivals

Scholars have analysed how festivals can promote subjective well-being, focusing especially on the social or psychological outcomes (Rossetti, 2021). Several studies have explored how festival participation can promote individual well-being and happiness (Heldt, 2014; Saragih & Amelia, 2020), and how festivals are moments where communities get together and expand their social well-being (Wilks & Quinn, 2016; Brownnett, 2018). For example, Qu and Cheer (2022) while examining a Japanese rural festival that exhibits landscaping artworks, they noticed that the festival stimulates inward migration and the development of social capital among the inhabitants. As such, local people were not only involved in the festival activities, such as promoting and performing through folk music and tea ceremony performances, but they were also part of the festival organisation, by for example conducting workshops. Additionally, family's quality of life has been a topic of research. For instance, Liu & Draper (2022), while analysing family quality of life at festivals, discovered that «Participants attending with children have a higher level of cognitive engagement and experience novelty in festivals compared to those without children» (p. 25). Recently, after the Covid pandemic, Glover (2021) suggested that people's physical proximity during events and festivals can generate happiness, social connectedness, and belonging.

Moreover, other outcomes of festival participation can be knowledge and skills development, which is linked to psychological and mental well-being (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2014; Rossetti & Quinn, 2019, 2021). Only few studies have explored how spiritual well-being can be shared and improved at festivals, which can be perceived as divine, devotional, and sacred experiences (Mellor *et al.*, 2012; Mackay, 2014; Soulodre, 2019). Overall, different elements can play a role in the well-being generation. At literary festivals, for example, place, social environment, festival programme, weather, and attendees' background can promote well-being (Rossetti, 2021). All this recalls the meaning of cultural welfare as a tool to generate psychological, mental and physical well-being.

3.2 Social inequalities eliminated/limited

In the 1960s, the growing upsurge of cultural festivals coincided with the increase in the spending power of the working class (Cudny, 2014; Frey, 2020). The idea of the democracy of culture was rediscovered in France by Malraux when he founded the Ministry of Culture, helping to promote broad access to the arts, also by the categories usually excluded and trying to overcome territorial discrepancies (Bodo & Sacco, 2017). This same approach was adopted by Pompidou in the 1970s when he helped to found the Festival d'Automne in Paris, with the aim of diffusing culture throughout the city, including the more suburban areas: all segments of the population could take part in this new widespread event, even in areas where culture had not yet arrived (Alonzo & Ponte di Pino, 2022a). With these practices, various cultural activities enliven urban areas not usually accustomed to cultural use, breaking down barriers and social prejudices (Duvignaud, 1973). Citroni (2020), studying events in Milan, argued that festivals, by «distributing flyers in the neighbourhood or writing articles in the local newspaper» (p. 10), are occasions to involve local communities in self-organisation

processes to meet social needs, such as re-semanticization of public spaces and create temporary communities between neighbours.

Thus, festivals can assume a central role in the redefinition of culture, trying to break down social distinction between high culture and low culture (Friedman, 2014). This process also occurs with the re-semanticisation of places not usually used for cultural practices (Duvignaud, 1973). Festivals, as a moment of social sharing (Falassi, 1987), occupy spaces and can redefine the boundaries of artistic and cultural expression (Giorgi *et al.*, 2011; Citroni & Karrholm, 2019). This means that festivals can also address the issue of marginalisation. For example, Hassanli *et al.* (2020) underline the role of festivals in assisting «marginalised groups in mitigating the adverse effects of marginalisation» (p. 165). This is all linked to the concept of cultural welfare, as an instrument to contrast social inequalities and breaking down barriers of social classes.

3.3 Community creation

Festivals can promote social inclusion and foster social networks (Citroni, 2020), with celebration and rituals (Turner, 1982). This perspective led some theorists to reflect on festivals as moments for building a sense of community. According to Falassi (1987), festivals are sharing experiences in public places, when attendees participate in rituals out of the ordinary and socialise while sharing experiences and emotions.

The emotional exchange that a festival can trigger a dialogue with the locality (Van Winkle & Woosnam, 2013). With festivals, public spaces can become places of community creation (Wood & Thomas, 2006; Giorgi *et al.*, 2011) that redefine urban models (Citroni & Karrholm, 2019). Some scholars have analysed how festivals can perform a significant social function by being occasions for new identities creation and community socialisation (Small *et al.*, 2005; Wood, 2005; Stankova & Vassenska, 2015; Richards, 2017; Getz *et al.*, 2018). As Dragan Klaic (2002) observed, «Building a relationship means in turn sharing responsibility and making the members of local civic groups participants and not just consumers» (p. 34). For example, at the Suq Festival in Genoa, foreign communities self-represent themselves on the festival stage, at the end of a participatory planning process with groups and associations. In this way they become ambassadors of a process of transformation and inclusion (Alonzo & Ponte di Pino, 2022b).

Recently, after the Covid pandemic, the desire to return to rural areas has increased (Salvatore & Chiodo, 2020), where festivals can promote community participation. The goal is to use culture as a development tool, and at the same time maintain the unique territorial capital that distinguishes rural areas. In this context communities can act as agents of change, reacting to adverse circumstances to protect levels of well-being (Mahon & Hyryläinen, 2019). For instance, in Italy several festivals were set up to engage audiences in rural areas (Alonzo & Ponte di Pino, 2022a). They are mainly intimate and small scale events, often organised far from urban centres, in order to bring the audience closer to an authentic experience, in contact with the environment in which the event takes place and with the artists (Alonzo, 2022). Thus, festivals seem to be instruments of cultural welfare by promoting social inclusion and fostering social networks.

3.4 Empowerment: social and cultural capital development

As introduced in 3.3, festivals have the potential to develop social networks. For example, Arcodia and Whitford (2006) claimed that festivals can build community resources, social cohesiveness, and enhance social capital. This happens when festivals involve and consult local communities about their programmes. This interaction, which concerns both local businesses and citizens, increases awareness of community skills, showing new ways of development, and it produces new social ties and intensifies existing ones (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006). Scholars analysed how different types of festivals can generate social networks, interactions, and relations, including music festivals (Wilks, 2011), folk festivals (Wilks & Quinn, 2016), community arts festivals (Qu & Cheer, 2022) and cultural festivals more generally (Hassanli *et al.*, 2020). At festivals, people can improve existing relationships and/or create new social contacts. This is linked to what discussed in 3.1 and how festivals can promote social well-being. It has also been noticed that the location of where festivals are held can shape the development of social capital. For instance, in rural areas festivals can enhance social connectedness of communities through celebration (Mair & Duffy, 2018). Similarly, in urban areas, festivals have the potential to generate both bonding and bridging social capital (Devine & Quinn, 2019).

Moreover, festivals can be builders of cultural capital (Snowball & Willis, 2006). Festival attendees can acquire cultural resources, learn and embody culture (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021, 2022). The process of how this occurs may differ from festival to festival. For example, at literary festivals cultural capital can be acquired, stimulated, and reinforced through several elements. These elements can be internal (demographics,

behaviours, enjoyment, involvement...) and external (socio-cultural context, time, space, and festival features) (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). Some scholars also explored how learning occurs at various types of festivals, such as music (Karlsen, 2009), literary (Rossetti & Quinn, 2019), arts (Mahon & Hyyryläinen, 2019) and film festivals (Roy, 2016). Comunian (2015) studied how artists perform experiential learning as communities of practice at festivals. More recently, Canovan (2020) explained how different cohorts of people can learn and acquire knowledge and skills at science festivals through school trips, including teachers, pupils and organisers. All this shows that festivals can generate cultural welfare, in terms of social and cultural capital development.

To conclude, even if scholars have rarely used the concept of cultural welfare while studying festivals, it can be argued that festivals can be instruments of cultural welfare, in various ways, through different processes, and by involving several social actors. Figure 2 is a visual representation of what has been discussed previously: festivals can generate psychological and physical well-being; contrast social inequalities; promote social inclusion; and be arenas for cultural and social capital development.

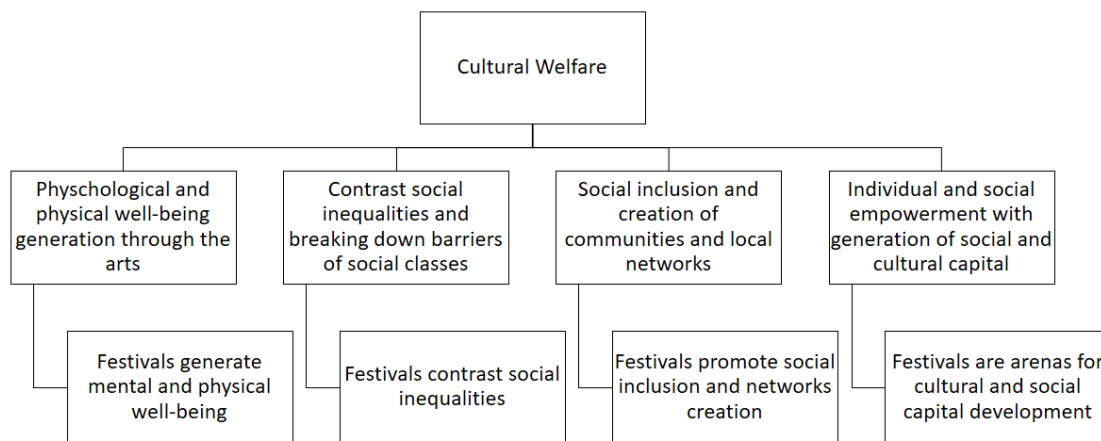


Figure 2: Festivals as instruments of cultural welfare (Source: Authors)

4. Conclusions

The concept of cultural welfare is very complex and is dependent on the culture and the welfare system of the country in which it is being applied (Bodo & Sacco, 2017; Cicerchia *et al.*, 2020). Some researchers (Long & Harris, 1993; Andersson *et al.*, 2012; Bush, 2019; Kalele & Rondonuwu, 2020) have started to understand if and how festivals are instruments of cultural welfare, but much research still needs to be done. This paper aimed to contribute to the current debate on how festivals can be transformative and arenas for cultural welfare creation.

First, it analysed the notion of cultural welfare identifying four meanings: 1) generation of psychological and physical well-being through the arts (Matarasso, 1997; Arts Council England, 2006; Sacco, 2017; Cicerchia *et al.*, 2020); 2) contrast of social inequalities and break down barriers of social classes (Rago & Venturi, 2016; Fisher, 2017; Lampis, 2017); 3) promotion of social inclusion and creation of communities and local networks (Manzoli & Paltrinieri, 2021; Fulco, 2022); 4) individual and social empowerment, generating cultural and social capital (Leroux & Bernadska, 2014; Erkkila-Hill, 2017; Laitinen *et al.*, 2022).

Second, the paper discussed the relationships between cultural welfare and the potential impacts of festivals. It took into consideration previous studies, that explored how festivals can generate psychological and physical well-being (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2014; Glover, 2021; Qu & Cheer, 2022); contrast social inequalities (Bodo & Sacco, 2017; Cirtroni & Karrholm, 2019; Alonzo & Ponte di Pino, 2022a); promote social inclusion (Falassi, 1987; Richards, 2017; Citroni, 2020); and generate cultural and social capital (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006; Wilks & Quinn, 2016; Rossetti & Quinn, 2019, 2021, 2022; Qu & Cheer, 2022).

Although, as previously seen, festivals can be tools for cultural welfare, there may be limits in the processes of building welfare. The focus of cultural welfare is that inclusiveness and democratisation of cultural processes are achieved, but unfortunately often only those communities that are already involved or predisposed to involvement are reached (Cirtroni & Karrholm, 2019; Alonzo & Ponte di Pino, 2022a). Furthermore, since cultural welfare is based on bottom-up practices (Manzoli & Paltrinieri, 2021; Fulco, 2022), the extent of the external involvement of the communities proposing the practices can be a critical factor for the success of festivals in the long run (Qu Cheer, 2022).

The paper suggests therefore a conceptual framework that links the different meanings of the term cultural welfare to festival impacts. This framework can be used in future studies to better understand if and how festivals are instruments of cultural welfare, and try to unravel the limits that may arise in this relationship. Thus, this study's theoretical contribution is twofold. First, even though cultural welfare might be dependent on the country's cultural context, it is possible to see that there are strong similarities between countries and can be clustered in the meanings represented in Figure 1. Second, the conceptual framework of Figure 2 shows that festivals can be instruments of cultural welfare. There are however several limitations to this study, as this is only exploratory research on the topic. Further studies should include a systematic review as well as further explore cultural welfare practices more globally.

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