Performing art subsidies and future generations.

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Article
THEATER audiences
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Examines the theater-goer population through the use of specially designed audience surveys in the United States. Variables that account for culture development from early ages; Variables that account for hitherto neglected institutions that encourage expanding taste for arts among all ages and income groups; Findings of the specially designed audience survey of theaters in Atlanta, Georgia in 1986-1987.

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PERFORMING ARTS SUBSIDIES AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the equity question related to public support for the performing arts has long been recognized by economists. Throsby and Withers,[13] for instance, observe that "it is clear from audience data discussed ... that the distribution of consumers of the subsidized performing arts is markedly skewed towards high income groups." The same authors believe that the problem of such "perverse redistribution" can begin to be resolved via methods of redesigning subsidies to the arts so that their regressive effects are diminished. Addressing the same problem, Baumol and Bowen,[3] urge that the focus should be upon the needs of future generations. Their argument is that "a program to preserve the arts for the nation's posterity is a case of indiscriminate benefit par excellence." Others however may find such reasoning rather strained if it implies (as it seems to) that some members of the present poor are to be obliged to be taxed with others in order to contribute to the welfare of the future rich. And this point is more general than it first appears. If rising productivity per head together with technical progress is expected over the next few decades, then average members of future generations will be richer than average individuals today. Programs of arts subsidies for posterity may thus flirt with a positive probability of intergenerational inequity.

The argument that arts subsidies are merely a result of the operations of rent-seeking special interest groups, the effects of which are to reduce the welfare of the poor and of the nonusers of the arts generally, is common among economists. Yet it is far too hasty. Empirical research by Morrison and West[4] reveals that numerous members of all income groups report themselves in favor of being taxed to support the performing arts even though they do not themselves attend the theater. Their attempted rationale, moreover, can typically be described in terms of external benefits: feelings of national pride, welfare of future generations, educational importance, the probability of stimulus to local business, and so on.

The diagnoses of regressive transfer versus external benefit therefore is obviously still an open question. In the meantime it may be appropriate to steer a middle course. It is pertinent too, that the question whether government should support arts at all is separate from the problem of the most efficient allocation of the subsidy once intervention has been decided on (for whatever reason). The present essay is written largely in this latter context. And in any case our search for optimal allocation is just as relevant to private as to public donors.

Peacock[11] maintains that cultural transfer to future generations could be better justified if it was more carefully designed. He concedes that the expectation of per capita income growth over time appropriately calls for a "high" social discount rate so that there
is no general encouragement to investment to benefit future generations. Such argument
does not rule out, however, selective support for one item to be made available to future
consumption. But if this kind of support is to be forthcoming, Peacock argues, there is
still the question of its precise form.

If resources are diverted from other uses, including helping today's poor, in order to
preserve our cultural heritage, the future generations argument will surely have more
appeal if the benefits we hope they will derive from this diversion are much more widely
distributed than they are at present. [(11)]

Nobody however has yet proposed a really practical method of insuring that the arts
benefits for future generations will be "more widely distributed." By addressing a similar
but not identical question to that of Peacock, our investigation explores appropriate
avenues for implementing his general recommendation. Our main approach is to examine
exclusively the theater-goer population through the use of specially designed audience
surveys that focus on variables that account for (a) culture development from early ages
(i.e., childhood environment) and (b) hitherto neglected institutions that encourage
expanding taste for the arts among all ages and income groups. The variables in which we
are interested are obviously those that can be operated on by governments and private
donors. Consider for example the discovered influences on audience growth variables
that include ethnicity, religion, sex, age, education, and child exposure to the arts. Only
the last two are operational. The main novelty of our study is the placing of the last
variable, "child exposure," into much sharper focus than has been done hitherto. The
variable is broken down into the (1) degree of exposure, (2) level of participation, (3)
type of participation, and (4) extent of play reading in the high school.

Section II of our paper briefly describes and reports the main findings of our own
specially designed audience survey of theaters in Atlanta in 1986-1987. Section III
reports the full statistical analysis of the effect of 19 independent variables upon our
dependent variable: present theater attendance. Section IV discusses the need for new
research that is suggested by present findings together with possible policy implications.
Our conclusions appear in Section V.

II. THE SURVEY

This section is primarily descriptive; it is essentially a report on who attends theater
performances in Atlanta, and as such it follows in the typical tracks of previous
investigations. Theater audiences of nonprofit equity and non-equity theaters in Atlanta
were surveyed by us between April 1986 and April 1987. An attender sample of 406
returned questionnaires was obtained, and the full results are reproduced in an appendix
(available from the authors). The sample reflects a predetermined diversity of time of
year (the fall-spring theater season versus summer theater), type of play (musicals,
tramas, classics, originals, and comedies), time of performance (matinees, weekday
nights, and weekend nights), and size of theater (theaters with over 450 seats versus
theaters with less than 450 seats). Approximately one half of the audience per performance received a copy of the questionnaire handed to them (as opposed to placing the questionnaires in the show program). Special care was taken in avoiding a pattern of distribution and insuring a completely random, sample. On the average the response rate was 40 percent, a relatively high rate for surveys of this kind.

Our findings indicate that Atlanta theater attenders are strikingly similar to national and international arts attenders. Like national arts attenders, they are generally wealthier, better educated, and older than the general population. Females also tend to outnumber men in the Atlanta audiences, as was found in the National Endowment for the Arts,[5, 6] Morrison and West,[4] and ACUCAA[2] studies. In terms of overall childhood experience, most of the participants either were taken to the theater as children and/or participated in theater. Less Atlanta theater attenders participated in theater (84%) than were taken to the theater (93%).

Considering the striking resemblance between Atlanta theater audiences and national arts audiences, it is strongly arguable that the predictive variables for Atlanta theater demand are applicable to general arts demand. In fact, based on the similar demographics of the audiences, there is no logical reason why the predictors of theater attendance would differ for general arts attenders. Therefore we proceed with some confidence to Section III, which examines the predictive power of the variables on theater attendance.

III. PREDICTIVE POWER OF THE VARIABLES

To test the predictive power of the variables in our study a multiple regression was used. The dependent variable was present theater attendance. All of the 19 independent variables in the study were analyzed, including: (1) level of income, (2) child participation, (3) school related versus nonschool related child participation, (4) age of the participants, (5) time of year of show attended, (6) type of community, (7) performance night, (8) type of play, (9) size of theater, (10) child exposure, (11) play reading in class during high school, (12) type of school attended up to the age of 18, (13) level of education attained, (14) gender, (15) ethnic background, (16) dance performances attended, (17) music performances attended, (18) opera performances attended, and (19) rock concerts attended.[1] Of the 19 variables entered into the regression, seven are revealed to be significant predictors of theater attendance and account for 32.8% of the variance in current theater attendance. Table 1 presents the significant variables found in the regression.

Of the significant variables at the 5% level in the two-tailed test (the variables with an absolute t-statistic of 1.96 of more), the values in Table 1 show that age and child participation have the expected relationship: as the level of each of these variables increases, the frequency of annual theater attendance significantly increases. The other five variables found to be significant require further discussion.
Consider first family income. The finding here offers no surprises. In coding the data, levels of family income were assigned values ranging from one to five, where one equaled family income of $50,000 or above and five equaled an income under $20,000. Therefore, the negative correlation shown in Table 1 simply means as family income increased (and data values decreased), the frequency of theater attendance increased.

The significant variable school versus nonschool participation is a new finding. (This variable is labeled nonschool participation in Table 1.) Non school participation was coded from one to two, where one designated child participation in school related performances and two designated child participation in nonschool related performances, i.e., youth club, church, community, or amateur performances.[2] Nonschool participation loaded positively into the regression (as shown in Table 1). The novel indication is that child participation in nonschool related performances is a stronger predictor of adult theater attendance than child participation in school related performances.

The next significant variable found in the regression was time of year. The time of year variable was data coded in values ranging from one to two, where one represented theater attenders of fall, winter, and spring performances (the theater season) and two represented theater attenders of summer performances (summer theater). This categorization of the time of year variable reflected an important distinction between theater seasons and summer theater: a season ticket is available for the theater season, whereas summer performances are sold strictly on a single ticket or limited series basis. From the value column in Table 1 we see that the time of year variable entered negatively into the regression, which indicated that audience members who were possible season ticket subscribers attended theater more frequently than the single ticket buyers of summer theater performances.

Type of community was revealed to be another significant variable. It refers to the geographical location of the participant up to the age of 18 and reflects the availability of the arts during the audience member's school age (again relating to childhood experience in the arts). The coding from one to three was such that one represented an urban, two represented a suburban, and three represented a rural community. Since Table 1 shows that type of community loaded negatively into the regression, we can conclude that audience members who lived in rural communities as children attend theater less frequently than those audience members who lived in urban communities.

The results of the type of community variable could be reflecting aspects of both child exposure and child participation. It is logical to assume that fewer plays are performed in rural communities, and travel costs deter many rural theater-goers from attending performances in urban or suburban communities. In that case, the type of community results may be reflecting the lack of opportunity to be taken to live theater. On the other hand, if fewer plays were produced in the rural community during the audience member's childhood, the findings may be reflecting the lack of opportunity to take part in a
performance. Thus the interpretation of the type of community variable is somewhat ambiguous.

The last significant variable was number of dance performances attended. Since it entered positively into the regression, this variable indicates that the more frequently a theater-goer attends dance performances, the more frequently he attends theater performances. This is another new finding. While the casual relationship between present theater attendance and number of dance performances attended seems obscure at first sight, we can offer one theoretical explanation: unlike symphony orchestra and opera companies, dance companies usually use theater (drama) space to hold their performances. Physical familiarity with the theater location (including a knowledge of car parking opportunities) may therefore partially explain the readiness of individuals who go primarily to see dance to visit also on some occasions when drama is being offered (and vice versa). It is obvious also that, being present in the theater for one class of entertainment, individuals will be direct recipients of advertising of "next week's attractions" within the premises.

Three overall observations on the regression results need to be mentioned or reemphasized because of their policy implications (to be discussed in more detail later). First, the level of education attained was not found to be a significant predictor of Atlanta theater attendance. This was surprising in view of the fact that other audience studies have suggested that education is very important. The NEA[5, 6] research found in fact that level of education was the most powerful predictor of adult theater attendance. Second, the finding that participation in nonschool related performances, as opposed to school related performances, more strongly influenced Atlanta theater attendance challenges the existing research findings.[3] Yet the stronger predictive power of nonschool participation can be explained to some extent by the greater commitment required of a child and his parents when he or she takes part in a play. It is logical to conclude that a child who makes the greater time commitment and endures the overall inconvenience of a nonschool performance, continues this commitment and interest in the arts later in life.

Third, child participation (activity in the theater) was found to be a significant predictor of present theater attendance. In contrast, child exposure (being taken to the theater) was not significant.

IV. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Considering that the Atlanta theater attenders surveyed in this study revealed strikingly similar characteristics to those audience members surveyed on a national and international basis by Baumol and Bowen[3], the NEA[5, 6] and Morrison and West,[4] if there are any policy implications from this study they are presumably widely relevant. In other words, since there was only a minimal difference in Atlanta audience characteristics (namely, minority representation in theater audiences), national
application of the policy implications of this study would appear to be legitimate.

The present study has been confined to survey data of people who attend the theater. Our findings suggest, at the very least, that attendance of this subset of the population would increase if the allocation of the given subsidy was partially switched to encourage more childhood arts participation. To claim more at this stage would be premature. We cannot yet assume that increasing the level of childhood exposure (participation) to the theater among the nontheater going population will have the same impact as on the sample examined above. Yet our findings point the way to further empirical study. Recall that most researchers in this field have been looking for the identification of influences on theater attendance among the population as a whole. And the list usually includes broad items such as income, age, and education. Our work suggests the importance of a more precise variable: childhood participation in the arts. What is next required, therefore, is systematic evidence showing the difference between the average childhood participation in the arts among the present nonattenders of theaters compared with that of attenders such as those in the sample mentioned.

From offered statements of objectives we assume that future audience expansion is a major goal. The national endowment for the Arts, in its 1986 Annual Report, outlined its purposes as: "to foster artistic excellence by helping to develop the nation's finest creative talent, to preserve our cultural heritage in all its diversity, to make the arts available to wider, more informed audiences, and to promote the overall financial stability of American arts organizations."[ 4] This being so it follows that the present inquiry whether a key operative variable is that of child participation in the arts in and out of school is a relevant endeavor. If the further research suggested strengthens the observation about the influence of childhood participation, it will most probably follow that the current allocation of less than 5%, or $5 million, to "arts education" is too small. One will then be able to be more critical of the fact that existing programs neither emphasize any kinds of child activity in the arts, nor distinguish which types of childhood experience are more promising in promoting future theater attendance than other types. Even on the most conservative level, our findings, coupled with those of Morrison and West,[( 4)] strongly suggest that, at the very least, minimal transfers of government funds should be made to promote an active role for children in the arts, instead of the passive role that they now play in arts education programs.

Our research has gone beyond the range of Morrison and West's 1986 analysis in that it has tested for a linear relationship between the variables of child participation frequency and theater attendance. The regression results revealed in fact that such a relationship exists. This means that, as the level of child participation increases, the frequency of theater attendance among theater-goers increases. Additionally, in the ANOVA test that studied the predictive power between the frequency categories of the child participation variable and present theater attendance, a strong predictive influence existed between no child participation and the minimal level of one to two times of child participation. This suggests that, at least with the theater-going subset, policy need not be concentrated
merely on high intensity of child participation (e.g., a greater number of times of participation) to produce positive effects on theater attendance. Instead, a policy which concentrates on minimal participation by a greater number of children would positively affect audience expansion.

The second area of our findings relates to nonschool institutions. Hitherto current government monies have been prohibited to nonprofessional institutions, such as amateur groups, community groups, or youth clubs. Our findings of a particularly strong relationship between nonschool related child participation in the arts and present theater attendance, if replicated in a study of present nonattenders, will suggest the need to review the policy restriction on subsidies to nonprofessional groups. This conclusion remains despite the fact that the majority of previous research programs seem to have taken it for granted that any level of child experience in the arts is the most effective in schools. Our findings, to repeat, indicate that nonschool related participation is a stronger predictor of the frequency of theater attendance among present day theater attenders than school related participation.

The policy implications will be relevant to both government and private support. While the majority of the corporations and foundations which fund the arts probably do so to receive advertisement or good public relations, the argument certainly can be made that there are some corporations, foundations, or individuals who genuinely wish to promote audience expansion for the arts for its own sake. The indications of this study are certainly pertinent to such contributors. Corporations and foundations, for example, might find it more effective to show more interest in nonprofessional group funding to initiate specially designed arts education programs focusing on child participation.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The demand for the arts and the influences which affect it are two areas that appear to require much more investigation. Indeed, it seems as if the more research conducted, the more needs to be done. Since the findings from our study are no exception to that hypothesis, some discussion of suggestions for future research seems appropriate.

It has been emphasized that the most important limitation of our study is the population-base sampled. It has tested only theater attenders, or the existing audience for the arts.[5] The next logical step for research therefore is a survey of the total Atlanta population, followed by a comparative analysis of the two studies. This approach would help test further the validity of the predictive variables reported in Table 1.

The issue of child participation in itself offers several possibilities for future research. First, given that the results from our study demonstrate that child participation is a powerful predictor of adult theater attendance, the next requirement is to delineate fully the meaning of the term. What types of child participation are most conducive to adult theater attendance? Is it acting, playing a musical instrument, helping on the technical
crew or assisting with management that best promotes future theater attendance?

Given the uncertainty of the predictive power of "child exposure" and the consensus on the predictive power of "child participation," further research also needs to be conducted as to how much more effective is child participation than child exposure on theater attendance. This implies two controlled studies of allocation of donor support. The first should examine the effects on adult theater attendance of arts participation programs in nonschool related avenues. The second should take a controlled sample from the current allocation policies of funding professionals to expose children to the arts in schools and test for the effect of that policy on future theater attendance. By comparing the results from two such studies, a conclusion could be reached as to how much more effective is child participation than child exposure in expanding theater audiences.

Consider, finally, our findings that nonschool related participation (i.e., participation in youth club, amateur, church, and community groups) is a stronger influence on the frequency of present theater attendance than school-related performances. If this conclusion is accepted, more research needs to be conducted on which types of nonschool performances are most conducive to audience expansion. Specifically, are amateur, youth club, or community performances stronger predictors of future theater attendance?

We began our discussion with reference to the concern expressed by several economists over the fact that the distribution of consumer of the subsidized performing arts is markedly skewed towards an apparently self-perpetuating subset of society. Peacock \([11]\) has maintained that the problem of intergenerational inequity could be reduced if the benefits of arts subsidies were more widely distributed among future generations. But no practical guidance has been forthcoming as to how this is to be done. Hopefully the type of investigation that we have attempted can do something towards breaking the usual vicious circle that still stands in the way of Peacock's proposed reform.

NOTES

1. Since other performances received analysis by Baumol and Bowen\([13]\) and the NEA\([5,6]\) studies, our research includes other performances as an independent variable for comparative purposes. However our study differs from the Baumol and Bowen\([3]\) research and the NEA\([5,6]\) research in that the other performances variable is differentiated between number of rock concerts, dance, music, and opera performances attended.

2. Originally this variable was tested to determine the optimal time in school to initiate participation, based on the conclusions of other studies that school-related arts experience is conducive to future theater attendance. After analyzing that data, however, it became apparent that this approach was incorrect in terms of Atlanta theater-goers. The variable was then recoded to test for the predictive power of school-related
participation versus nonschool related participation (youth clubs, amateur groups, etc.).

3. See the Ontario Arts Council’s 1974 audience survey (The Audience for the Arts) which found a correlation between arts attendance and exposure to arts at an early age, usually in schools.

4. National Endowment for the Arts.[(9)]

5. This is not to imply that such technique is invalid. The 1966 Baumol and Bowen study and the 1978 NEA based their conclusions exclusively on the attender population.

Table 1: Nineteen Variable Multiple Regression Results
Dependent Variable: Present Theater Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>T-Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of income</td>
<td>-.117</td>
<td>(-3.357)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child participation</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>(4.248)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonschool participation</td>
<td>.514</td>
<td>(2.569)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>(3.649)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of year</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>(-2.656)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of community</td>
<td>-.199</td>
<td>(-2.71)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance night</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>(.218)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of play</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>(.548)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of theater</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>(1.297)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child exposure</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>(1.171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play reading</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(.242)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of school</td>
<td>-.129</td>
<td>(.881)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>(.945)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(.093)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic background</td>
<td>-.144</td>
<td>(1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance performances</td>
<td>.263</td>
<td>(4.629)[*]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music performances</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>(1.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera performances</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>(1.345)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock concerts</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td>(1.749)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Designates significance at the 5% level in the two-tailed test.

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