



Cirque Hors Piste: **Re-Approaching Community Development through the Arts**

Synthesis of research* conducted by
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Cirque Hors Piste: Re-Approaching Community Development through the Arts

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It is now well established that cultural development assists communities to learn from one another and communicate in multiple directions. The social inclusion promoted through community-engaged arts, rather than merely focusing on integrating marginalized peoples into mainstream society, allows individuals and communities to creatively participate on their own terms.

Contributing to the understanding of the impacts of this creative process of social transformation, Dr. Jennifer Beth Spiegel, Research Fellow at Concordia University and the International Centre of Art for Social Change at Simon Fraser University, spent the last 5 years studying social circus in circus in Quebec and Ecuador. This report is based largely on two articles published recently in prestigious peer-reviewed academic journals by Dr. Spiegel from her analysis of social circus in Quebec (1), and in particular Montreal's largest social circus organization, Cirque Hors Piste (2).

Dr. Spiegel's in-depth study of Cirque Hors Piste included carefully following the entire collective creative process of three "Creative Intensives" offered by Cirque Hors Piste in 2013-2015, from recruitment and the identification of goals by the participants, to the creative process itself, through to performance, and finally to the collective debriefing that comes one week after the production (2). Dr. Spiegel drew heavily on participants' own reflections, as well as analyzed the theatrical interactions that took place and the kinds of cultural expression to which they gave rise. To contextualize these interactions and reflect on their potential socio-cultural impacts, she took into consideration the social realities of participants including their working and living conditions, the struggles they face, and the artistic and social goals identified by both the participants and the social circus staff guiding them.

Dr. Spiegel also worked with others from the Art for Social Change Partnership, to conduct a mixed methods study across Quebec, including Cirque Hors Piste using a questionnaire survey to study the personal growth, social inclusion and social engagement of youth involved after compared to before participating (1).

How Cirque Hors Piste Promotes Social Inclusivity

Dr. Spiegel's research explains how both recruitment as well as the collective creative process promotes social inclusivity. With respect to the recruitment process, Cirque Hors Piste partners with *Cactus*, an organization that provides harm-reduction services to drug users in the downtown area, with *En Marge*, which provides services to youth under 18 needing a safe space, and with *Plein Milieu*, which provides outreach to drug users aged 18 - 30 in Montreal's Plateau, a neighborhood adjacent to the southern part of downtown. Cirque Hors Piste also works with a center that provides free meals to youth and with organizations that offer support and safe-spaces to sex workers. In 2014 Cirque Hors Piste worked with over 600 individuals. The research

¹ There is a growing body of literature on the impacts of community-engaged art, and some other studies have been done in Canada and worldwide examining social circus in particular. This report focuses only on the research conducted by Dr. Jennifer Spiegel as part of her work with the Arts for Social Change (ASC!) Partnership led by Judith Marcuse at Simon Fraser University and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This report was prepared in June 2017 by the Evaluation Pod of ASC! led by Dr. Annalee Yassi, Professor at the University of British Columbia's School of Population and Public Health.

describes how community workers distribute flyers, and how the word of mouth recruitment takes place resulting in a target population that is mixed, but loosely comprises individuals who dropped out - or had been pushed out - of 'mainstream' society, with a high percentage of individuals who dropped out of high school or college, as well as many who have been in trouble with the law, or have been in and out of mental health wards.

The quantitative results, combined with the in-depth qualitative study, showed that Cirque Hors Piste had considerable success in equipping participants with "life skills" such as teamwork and risk-management, fostering personal growth, social inclusion and social engagement.

From the in-depth study of Cirque Hors Piste, Spiegel cites the words of one of the participants she interviewed:

We were a very mixed group, everyone was very different. We saw everyone together as our group. Because, you know even if we are so very different we are a group. And it works, there is glue [...] a type of glue made for this type of mix, of cohesion.

Particularities of Cirque Hors Piste Social Circus Pedagogy and Creation Process:

While Cirque Hors Piste provides open drop-in circus sessions and outdoors circus workshops - providing a low-pressure creative play space where participants can come and go as they choose, much in the manner conducted by Cirque du Monde sites throughout Quebec, what is unique about Cirque Hors Piste is its offering creative intensives - in which participants are admitted by interview for 7-10 sessions over a 3-week period to produce a theatrical circus show using juggling, ground acrobatics, aerial acrobatics, and clowning as well as some acting and improvisation skills. In this way Cirque Hors Piste is able to target the often transient community of street involved youth in Montreal, who may be interested in production but without the time commitment of a full year involvement, and who may also benefit from a "pre-professional" model of rehearsal that offers an honorarium in exchange for commitment.

Dr. Spiegel observes that the entrance interviews, where those who are most able, willing, and/or desiring of an "individual, social and collective" learning process are identified, is also a way for instructors and community workers to gain insight into the social and artistic goals of the participants, facilitating a "participant-centered" process - so important in the Cirque du Monde pedagogical approach. Dr. Spiegel confirms that from the beginning, instructors and community workers attempt to instill in participants an understanding that *social* goals are primary in social circus. Moreover, Spiegel explains now the interview also initiates self-reflection and a verbalizing of goals and desires; in this way the entrance interview for the creative intensives is the gateway to a collective process.

While Cirque Hors Piste shares much in common with other art for social change practices, there are some particular aspects of its approach that Dr. Spiegel highlights as especially noteworthy. Harkening to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Dr. Spiegel explains that the goal of Cirque Hors Piste's intensives is to create an ensemble, using theatre games chosen or modified to explore a particular social lesson for the group, such as trust, teamwork and creative confidence, for example. Spiegel explains that while themes and messages are sometimes explicitly social, the system of valuation is embedded more concretely in the creation process itself. Unlike the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, she notes, community issues are rarely the initial

point of departure - rather social circus dramaturgy begins with the personal and moves toward a collective expression, although participants do sometimes link their own desires or trajectories to the stories told in the shows. Spiegel writes: *“The creation process offers a mechanism not only for conceptualizing problems and their causes, but also for expressing, if not sublimating, frustrations.”*

Moreover, Spiegel notes, the short product-oriented collective creation process, which delineates this Cirque Hors Piste’s activity from the functioning of the broader Cirque du Monde community, means a more frequent exploration of production-generating themes and an intensification of the group dynamic with its associated tensions to navigate.

In discussing Cirque Hors Piste’s creation for the Youth for Human Rights show in 2014, which explores the prejudices experienced by those living in the streets, Spiegel notes: *“Throughout the production, the language of circus became a vehicle for a humorous critique of dominant social structures and policies that affected the participants individually and collectively”*. Spiegel cites participants’ desire to awaken audiences to the prejudices against their communities.

“.. We live prejudices everyday, all the time- in the metro, on the street, anywhere. It’s weird, because they want you to take part in the system, but at the same time, they exclude you [...] I think that sometimes, you must put things into perspective so that people see it as if it were them and ask, for example, would I like to feel judged, be looked at, because I am different? They [the audience] understand a bit more how we receive prejudices. Through the circus show, people are more open to understand this kind of thing. So we could get the message across.”

Spiegel’s analysis notes that the desire for inclusion in society does not merely mean integration into the system such as it is, but an ability to impact transformation, exemplifying the coming together to express collective goals and collective social commentary.

In the next Cirque Hors Piste creation intensive studied by Dr. Spiegel, Alice in Wonderland, she notes how *“the creation process tapped into corporeal fantasies, desires, and the transformation of identities”* explaining that the material was generated by a collective stream of consciousness exercise on the theme of childhood dreams. She describes how *“the Alice wig was passed from one performer to the next regardless of gender, allowing for the impression of a growing and shrinking Alice, a gender morphing Alice, and a fluid sense of identity”* sharing *“stories based on the Alice trope, unhinged from any authoritative version”*.

Dr. Spiegel notes that while the Youth for Human Rights show was based on social critique, and the Alice show drew more heavily on the fantastical, the May 2015 creation intensive combined elements of both with messages ranging from “unity in diversity” to simply *“lâcher notre fou”* or ‘letting ourselves go crazy.’ Citing other scholars, Spiegel explains that: *“the implicit expectation that those living in precarious and marginalized social conditions should put on shows about precarity is something that has been heavily critiqued, highlighting the problematic assumption that “at risk” people should perform their vulnerability as spectacle.”* By beginning with embodied desires of the individual, rather than ‘issues’, Spiegel explains how social circus aims to make the social kinesthetic at work one of collectivity and emergence rather than one of assuming and exploring a preformed identity or problematic.

The research demonstrated how “*group solidarity was evidenced in the actual dramaturgy of the production. The show was replete with pyramids ...carefully negotiated to make sure no one would get hurt in assembling or disassembling them. Unlike Alice that was primarily solos, duos, and trios, in Psych [the May 2015 production] all ten participants were on stage the entire time.*”

As with many art for social change practices, Spiegel explains how each of the Cirque Hors Piste creation intensives ends with a post-mortem that includes thinking about what was achieved, what one liked and did not like about the process, as well as the extent to which goals identified had been reached or approached.

Impacts on Personal Growth:

The analysis that emerged from Dr. Spiegel’s two-year ethnographic study (2) was supported by the survey results from across the social circus programs in Quebec (particularly from Drummondville, Sherbrooke, Quebec City and Montreal’s Cirque Hors Piste). The results (1) indicated that social circus indeed had an impact on physical fitness and reducing drug use. Additionally, there was a marked and statistically significant increase in all the personal growth indicators (See Figure 1) albeit to varying degrees.

Dr. Spiegel cited the words of several participants who experienced traumatic childhoods and/or were involved with drugs, crime, and other social difficulties. For example, one participant cited stated:

I really have trust issues [...]. A lot of it has to do with my parents. ... the people that I loved the most in the world were causing me the most pain through physical violence or emotional violence or through just complete indifference [...].I was raped you know. [...]. I finally caught myself in that negative pattern [...]. So the circus in a way is healing that.”

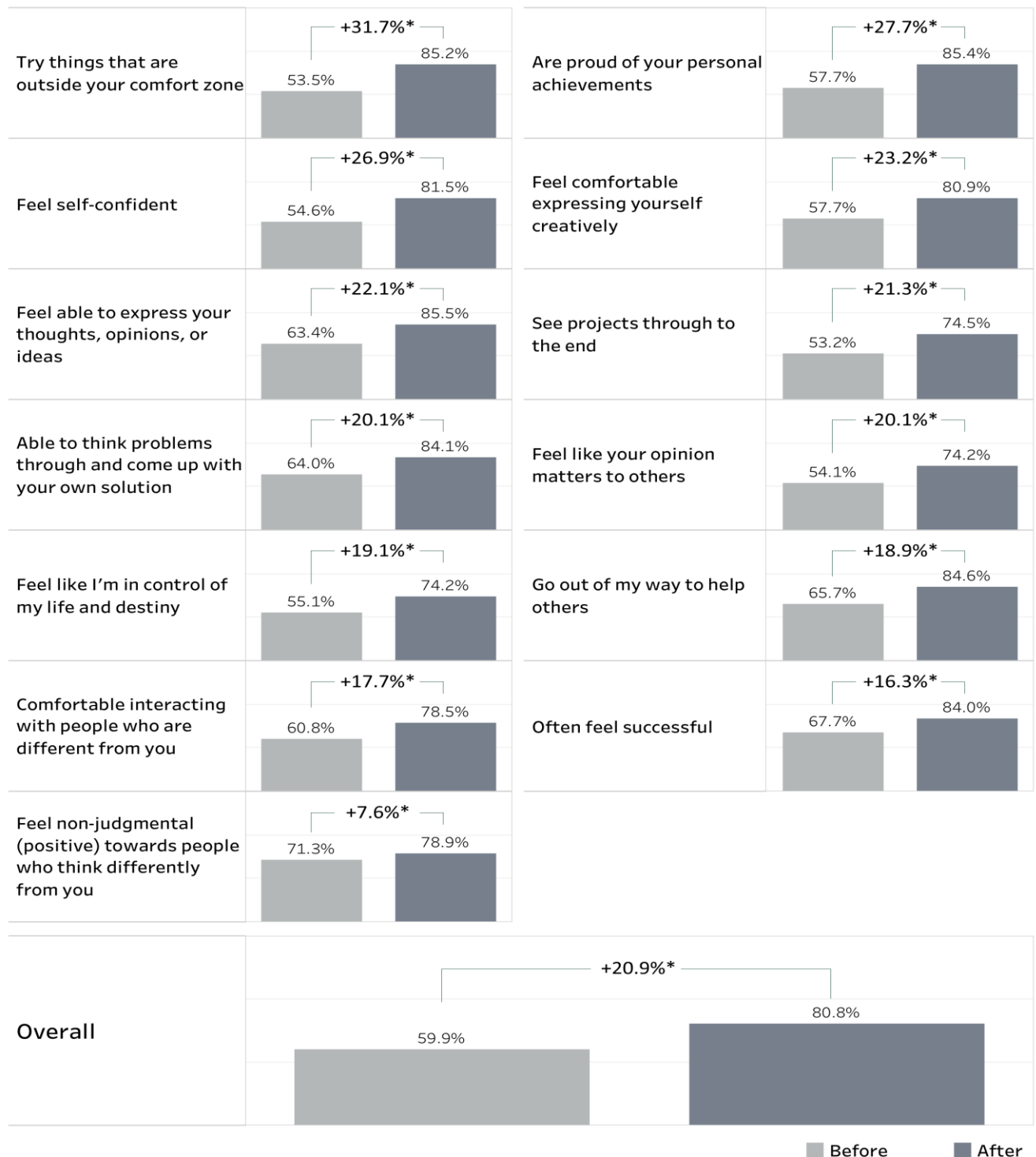
And Spiegel showed, through quoting another participant the importance of collective creation:

What attracts me to circus is the creative side. It was a side of me I had never touched, blossoming in a group through art; when you can learn at your own rhythm, without being judged.

Spiegel explained “*this primacy of collective play and non-sexual, non-aggressive touch through the creative act of play, are consistent features throughout all the social circus activities*”.

These personal transformations and changes in personal habits often translated into and/or complemented self-reported increase in self-discipline and taking responsibility – lessons that could, at least potentially, be leveraged as transferrable job skills, Spiegel argues. The survey results showed, for example, that there was a 21.2% increase in *seeing projects through to the end*. Importantly, notes Spiegel: “*Self-discipline and personal growth tended to accompany development of particular modes of sociality, translating into formation of social networks or ‘social capital’ that could be leveraged for community building beyond the social circus sessions.*”

Figure 1: Personal growth, Québec (N=98)



* t-test with Holm-Bonferroni correction shows change is significant with 95% confidence. Note, only 10 of the 98 respondents were from Cirque Hors Piste, their results are not presented separately. However, they were not significantly different from the overall results.

Impacts on Social Inclusion:

The results of the survey were impressive: 85.1% of participants reported higher scores on the social inclusion scale after participation in social circus (See Figure 2). Interestingly, change in reported openness to difference (*Feel judgmental [negative] towards people who think differently from you?*), while having improved by 7.6% (Figure 2), was relatively less marked than changes associated with other indicators. This appears to be due to the fact that participants generally perceived themselves to be open to different kinds of people from the outset, as they themselves often felt ostracized.

Spiegel and Parent (1) also noted that: “*In giving participants a goal, they were effectively being encouraged to develop skills and aptitudes to become ‘productive’ members of society.*” The survey indeed provided some evidence in this regard, for example, with 14.3% of respondents having previously dropped out of school with *no desire to go back* at the time they started social circus, decreasing to only 6.1% after social circus participation. Similarly, the survey showed that 21.4% of participants indicated *neither having nor wanting a job* before social circus, decreasing to only 7.1% afterwards. (Table 1).

Dr. Spiegel goes on to explain how social circus is a source of creative inspiration intimately linked to the precarious living conditions of urban youth, with work both hard to come by and alienating. Spiegel notes that:

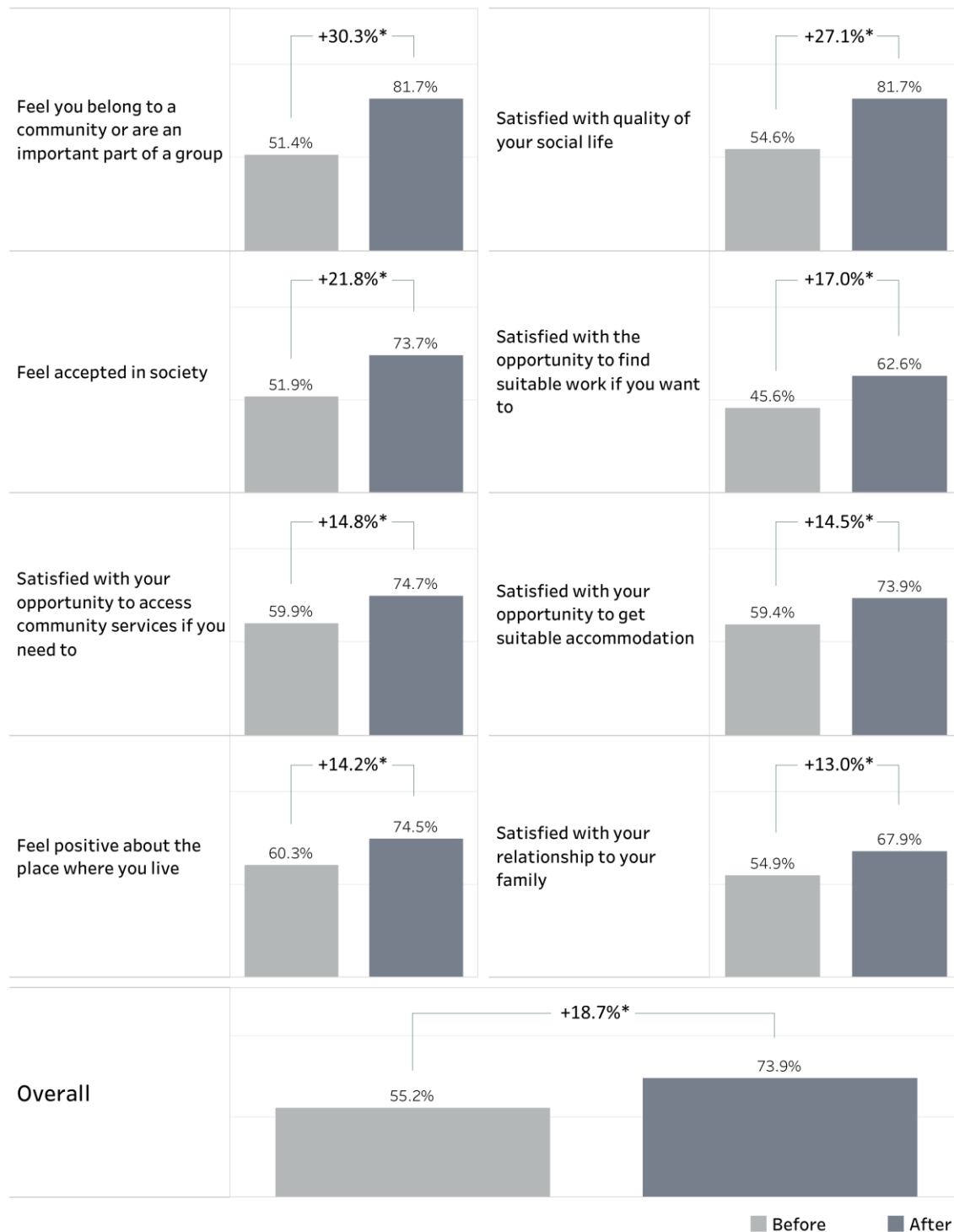
“While some participants treat the program as a work model, citing CV-building in the face of prolonged underemployment, many participants as well as instructors expressed disdain for the imperative to ‘go to school’ and ‘get a job’ as a measure of the program’s worth, particularly at a time where going to school is increasingly no guarantor of getting a job. What is stressed is personal and collective learning and a pursuit of one’s goals.”

Spiegel cites a participant of Cirque Hors Piste:

I just kept affirming myself and saying like, “I can do this.” [...] We were all encouraging ourselves as a group and bringing up the energy... [...] I really felt like I was part of the team and my teammates really appreciated my presence and were really happy that I was there and that really made me feel important

Some concerns common in community-engaged art were indeed identified, such as what Dr. Spiegel referred to as “infantilizing”, noting, for example, that some young adults prefer not to be referred to as “youth”, and certainly not “youth at risk”. Spiegel notes that stressing the “damaged” nature of participants is sometimes adopted by community arts organizations to comply with mandates of funders, and she observes that many instructors and community workers see the problematic nature of this orientation. While instructors and community workers tend to be responsive to the perspectives and concerns of participants, funding categories and funder mandates often exert pressure on how activities are framed and what kind of feedback the program requires. Funding bodies tend to be slower to respond to the realities on the ground, and thus a current site of struggle is the need for diverse participant needs and desires to orient not only the programs themselves but also the broader structures that facilitate the sustainability of the programs.

Figure 2 : Social inclusion, Québec (N=98)



* t-test with Holm-Bonferroni correction shows change is significant with 95% confidence. Note, only 10 of the 98 respondents were from Cirque Hors Piste, their results are not presented separately. However, they were not significantly different from the overall results.

Impacts on Social Engagement

The research conducted by Jennifer Spiegel offers the insight that *“how participants are situated within a larger social context...conditions the possibilities for participation, the kind of communities that may as such emerge, and the horizons of futurity opened.”*

Based on her in-depth study, Spiegel notes:

“Desires...have a way of becoming more vivid and transforming through actual engagement with a group process, particularly when one is asked to articulate one’s goals, work closely with others, tap into creative expression, and embody the fruits of this in front of friends, family, and a viewing public....These transformations in desire perhaps explain the impacts of process over product, the final product being the transformation in collective subjectivity itself... What is embodied in social circus is a challenge to habitual modes of relating, one that breaks with habits of thought and interaction, to open up new individual and collective horizons for future social and cultural development.

The theory of change Spiegel’s observed to be at work in social circus in Montreal as well as in Quebec more generally begins with individuals coming together to create something greater. According to the survey (Figure 3), participants as a group were 42.8% more likely to *consider further involvement in social circus* and 36.5% more likely to *participate in organizing or offering social or community circus projects* after attending social circus.

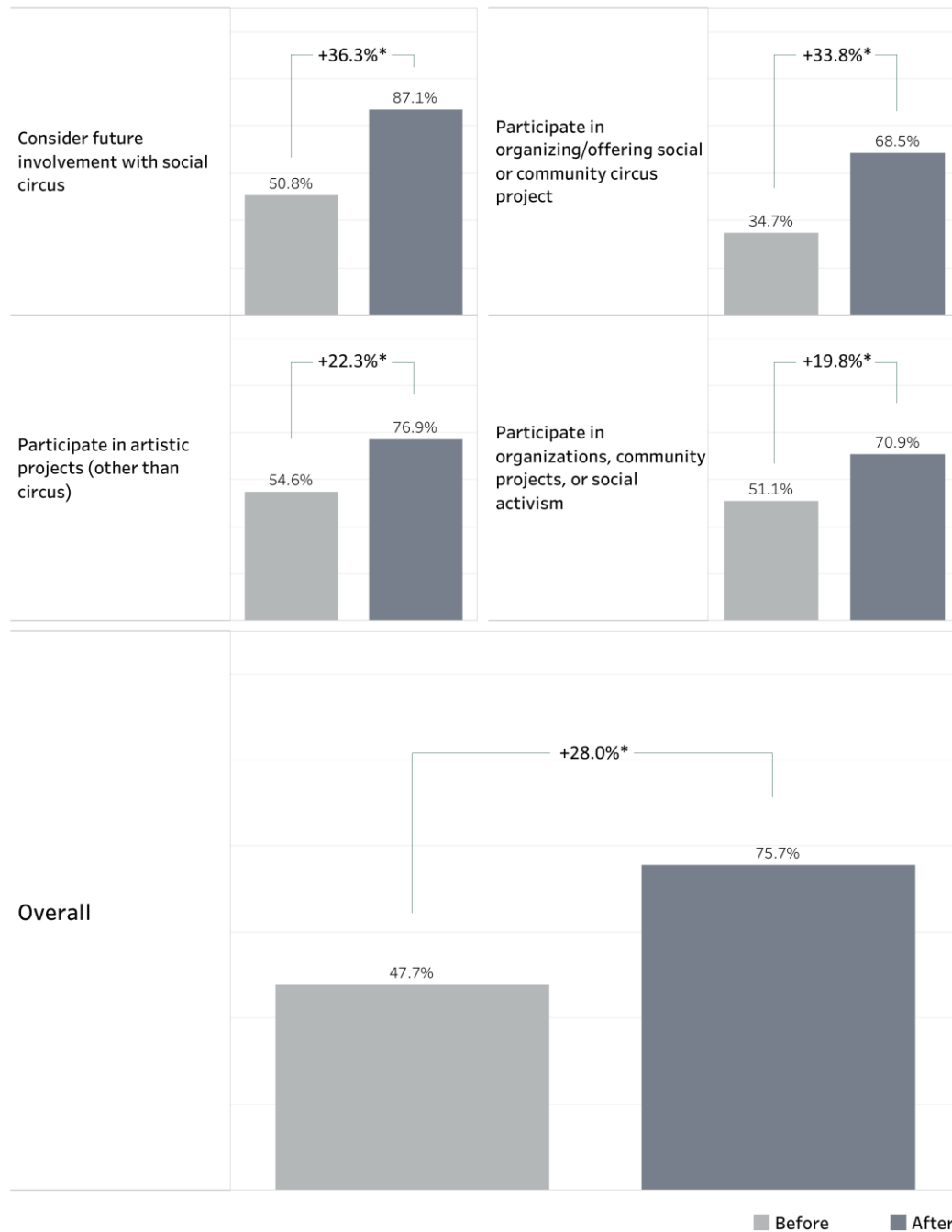
There was also a substantial, albeit smaller, increase in intent towards non-circus related social engagement after social circus participation, with a 24.2% increase for the question *I participate in organizations, community projects, or social activism*, and a 25% increase for *I participate in artistic projects (other than circus)*. A community worker explains:

The majority of participants do not like the dominant system in which they find themselves. Many have the ambition to change it, to improve it. They all have skills, beautiful dreams, but sometimes they don’t know how to realize these dreams, to push their projects to fruition, and also how to manage their personal development.

That many participants leave the program with not only an improved sense of self-worth and a greater sense of social belonging, but also with confidence and skills to engage in broader social projects bodes well for the possibility of creating greater ground-up change, both in the specific social structures directly affecting the targeted youth as well as in broader social processes. Indeed, evidence was found that this engagement is not only desired but taking place.

Spiegel observes that: *“as a site of socially inclusive artistic creation and cultural production, social circus has permitted development of emerging community engaged circus collectives as well as the seeding of practices of trust and play.”*

Figure 3 : Social engagement, Québec (N=98)



* t-test with Holm-Bonferroni correction shows change is significant with 95% confidence. Note, only 10 of the 98 respondents were from Cirque Hors Piste, their results are not presented separately. However, they were not significantly different from the overall results.

Table 1: Change (in proportional %) before and after social circus.
(Excludes respondents from Wemotaci, Victoriaville, and Baie St-Paul.)

		Québec	Montréal (Hors piste)	Sherbrooke	Drummondville	Overall
	N	37	10	20	18	85
Dropped out but wants more education	Before	11%	10%	5%	0%	7%
	After	19%	20%	10%	22%	18%
Has a job and is happy with it	Before	32%	10%	40%	0%	25%
	After	57%	30%	55%	22%	46%*
Doesn't use drugs or alcohol	Before	27%	20%	50%	6%	27%
	After	51%	50%	60%	56%*	54%*

- Chi-squared test shows change in proportion is significant with 95% confidence

Overall, Spiegel's research shows how social circus, as practiced at Cirque Hor Piste, "*models a technique and community structure for breaking with habits of alienation and seeding futures that the joy of collective creation may potentiate,*" explaining how social circus provides tools for redressing the social inequities that dominate in contemporary urban centers.

Spiegel concludes that "*the collective dreams embodied by social circus remind us, if nothing else, that we still have little idea what we are collectively capable of accomplishing together -- and that we have so much work, creative collective work, left to do as a community, or rather, as communities.*"

As such, the results from this ASC-supported research provide powerful evidence worthy of note by decision-makers who support, or contemplate supporting, such initiatives.

References:

- 1 Spiegel JB. Social Circus: The Cultural Politics of Embodying "Social Transformation" TDR: The Drama Review. 2016;60(4):50–67.
- 2 Spiegel JB, Parent S. Re-Approaching Community Development through the Arts: A 'Critical Mixed Methods' Study of Social Circus in Quebec. Community Development Journal. 2017. 1-18.
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