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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

The influence of music on black, Asian and minority ethnic women working in the field of domestic violence and abuse: critical reflection on music as method

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Abstract

Background: Arts-based research practices draw upon music, visual art, poetry and other media as methodological tools throughout the research process. There is also growing recognition of the contribution of arts-based practices, including music as method, to interdisciplinary fields of health, social sciences, humanities and education. Research into: i) the role of music as a therapeutic intervention; and ii) the use of creative approaches to practice development are clearly evident in the literature. What is less evident is the role of music as method. This article is a critical reflection on the novel use of music recordings during qualitative interviews in a small-scale study exploring the role of music in the work and lives of black, Asian and minority ethnic women working in a UK domestic violence and abuse charity.

Aim: To describe a critical reflection on music as method in a small-scale qualitative research study.

Implications for practice:

- Music has potential as a model and method in qualitative health and social care research practice, particularly with sensitive topics such as drug misuse or homelessness
- Music is a means of developing compassion and critically reflective practice development in the field of domestic violence and abuse and other areas of practice

Keywords: Critical reflection, reflexivity, music as method, arts-based research practice, 7 Cs of caring conversations, domestic violence and abuse

Introduction

We are narrators of a shared story (Sanders et al., 2020) about the innovative use of music recordings during qualitative interviews exploring the role of music in the work and life of black, Asian and minority ethnic women working in a UK domestic violence and abuse charity. The focus of the article is critical reflection on music as method in a small-scale arts-based study in health and social care. Kathryn is a practice-based academic psychologist and was project supervisor for her co-author Maria's psychology MSc dissertation. Maria has worked in the field of domestic violence and abuse, and undertook the MSc as a basis for a future career in mental health research and practice. Roddy and Dewar's (2016) 7 Cs of caring conversations were used as a framework and narrative device for critical reflection and reflexive research dialogue (Table 1).

Table 1: The 7 Cs of reflexive research conversations

The 7 Cs	Guiding questions for reflexive dialogue
Connecting emotionally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I feel about being reflexive? • What emotions were present during the research process?
Considering other perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the characteristics of reflexivity in arts-based research? • How does music impact/influence reflexivity in research practice?
Being curious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sparked my curiosity in music as method and why? • Where will this take me next?
Collaborating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did it feel to be an equal thinking partner? • What is the title/genre of our shared story?
Being courageous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What risks did I take? • Why did I take them?
Compromising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What stories no longer serve a purpose? • How to balance academic expectations with flexibility and openness?
Celebrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the most memorable aspect of the research and why? • What music is on my celebration playlist?

How the framework was used

The 7 Cs framework was adapted from Roddy and Dewar's original model in that the guiding questions set out in Table 1 were tailored to enable critical reflection on i) the research process and ii) our shared experience as co-authors. This was done through journaling, using writing to explore and clarify experience (Gardner, 2019), followed by reflective conversations around each of the seven Cs. The first three – connecting emotionally, considering other perspectives and being curious – were particularly pertinent to Maria's experience as a student researcher, while collaborating, being courageous, compromising and celebrating reflect our shared perspectives and experience. This resulted in the stories from reflective practice (pages 3-6), relating to Maria's experience as she carried out the research, and a shared story of critical reflection on music as method in a small-scale qualitative research study.

Our reflexive position/s

Here we reflect on how we addressed power dynamic – a crucial aspect of critical reflection (Gardner, 2019) – between Maria as a postgraduate student and Kathryn as dissertation research supervisor, and on how this has changed now that we are co-authors of this article. Kathryn is a white woman, an experienced academic and coach who is looking forward to the next chapter of her career post-retirement. Maria describes herself as a British African who has lived in the UK since she was seven and whose African heritage is really important. She is also looking forward to a new chapter in her career.

In our 'formal' roles of student and supervisor we established clear boundaries and expectations, a supervision contract and regular meetings, conducted online due to Covid-19 restrictions. This was based on the student psychological contract, which is about 'individual ... understandings of the reciprocal exchanges between students, their teachers and their learning institution' (Koskina, 2013, p 1034). We co-authored this article in less formal, institutionally defined roles, as 'equal thinking partners' (Kline, 2015, p 46). That is, we treated each other as equals in an atmosphere of ease and mutual encouragement and challenge, with expression of difference and diversity of feelings encouraged. Leavy's (2020, p 280, emphasis in original) approach to reflexivity in arts-based practice is relevant here:

'Another way that we engage in reflexive practice is to be attentive to issues of voice ... we do not speak for others, nor do we give voice to others, as they already have their own voices, but we can use our platform as researchers to amplify the voices of others.'

The above quote resonates with Maria's curiosity to hear the voices and stories of women who work in the complex practice context of domestic violence and abuse. Importantly, the role and motivation of individuals working in charities in this field is under-researched, and the crisis environment in which they work is poorly understood (Das and Waddington, 2020).

Story from reflective practice 1: Maria

Working in the field of domestic violence and abuse, I learned that everyone has a story to tell. I was curious to know why service users struggled to leave or returned to their perpetrators. I also noticed workers and volunteers were not given an opportunity to provide a narrative of their experience in the sector. I was often asked, why do you work in this area? How do you cope with the trauma of services users? What are your coping mechanisms? These questions were often tough to respond to – where do you start? This formed a lot of my early thinking, why do people choose to work and volunteer in this field? And how can you illicit this information as data in an empowering environment controlled by the participant, not the researcher?

Research and music

Research into the role of music as a therapeutic intervention – for example in the hospital experience of older people (Al-Jawad et al., 2020) and in dementia care (Pithie, 2016) – can be found in the practice development literature. Coming from another direction is a consideration of how arts-based practice, including 'music as method' (Leavy, 2020, p 128), contributes *into research*. Figure 1 represents a reflection between 'research-into-music' and 'music-into-research'; in other words, the two are not mutually exclusive, and should be seen as complementary reflections of each other.

Figure 1: Research-into-music and music-into-research



While there are differences between therapeutic and research practices, there is no doubt that knowledge derived from practices of arts-based therapies has informed arts-based research practices (Leavy, 2020). There is also no doubt that practice development includes and embraces arts-based creative practices and methodologies (Horsfall and Titchen, 2009; Lindsay and Schwind, 2015). What is noteworthy is that music as method is used less frequently in studies of music and practice development, which rely instead on qualitative and narrative approaches such as interviews and reflexive journal writing (Barry and O’Callaghan, 2008; Pithie, 2016).

Music as method

Thinking about music as method and theorising about music can offer new insights into interdisciplinary research in healthcare, social sciences, humanities and education (Bresler, 2008). Music is a valuable research tool that can elicit data from areas, topics and feelings that typically remain unspoken or that are difficult to uncover in a conventional qualitative interview (Allett, 2010). *Desert Island Discs* is a BBC Radio 4 programme, which has been on air in the UK since 1942. The archive has been used as a secondary data source by qualitative and quantitative researchers (Cohen and Duberley, 2013; Lamont and Loveday, 2020; Loveday et al., 2020). A well-known ‘castaway’ – for example, a politician, actor or writer – is invited to choose eight pieces of music, a book and a luxury item to take with them to an imaginary desert island. The music is used as a vehicle for castaways to reflect on their lives and careers: choices made, people who influenced them or impacted on their lives, and their thoughts and feelings about their unfolding narratives.

Story from reflective practice 2: Maria

I became interested in the idea of using a *Desert Island Discs*-style approach in interviews after a lecture by Professor Catherine Loveday, and learning that a popular reason for choice of music was its link to memories of a person, period or place. We have all experienced a song that takes us back to a specific moment in our lives. I was fascinated to find out where a method could lead if it empowered interviewees with the freedom to choose their own music and provide their own narrative. As an introvert, I was very aware that having structured questions with small talk in between just wouldn’t work for me.

Using music as method

Participants were asked in advance to choose their own eight pieces of music, and email the titles before interviews took place. Short excerpts (30-60 seconds) were then played during the interviews. Data collection took place shortly before and during the UK’s first Covid-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020. A convenience sample of six female participants was recruited from the charity BeSafe (not the charity’s real name) where Maria had previously worked. Despite repeated efforts it was only possible to interview four participants (two in person, two online). This was unavoidable for two reasons: a worldwide increase in demand for domestic abuse victim services and support during the coronavirus pandemic (United Nations, 2020); and the increased care burden for women and families caused by the pandemic (Power, 2020). Table 2 shows the characteristics of the four participants.

Table 2: Participant characteristics

Participants (all female)	Age	Ethnicity	Length of time at BeSafe*	Role in the charity
P1	50s	African-Caribbean	Three years	Unpaid volunteer
P2	50s	Asian	10+ years	Paid community/outreach worker
P3	30s	African-Caribbean	Five years	Paid independent sexual violence advocate
P4	40s	African-Caribbean	10+ years	Paid independent sexual violence advocate

* BeSafe is a pseudonym

The interviews lasted 75-90 minutes and those that took place in person were conducted in line with Covid-19 guidance. Participants were asked about why they had chosen each track, and its significance to them. For example:

*Track 1. Tell me about your first track: what are we going to hear and why is it your first choice?
Q1. You've provided a range of tracks here, tell me about your musical influences. What role does music play in your life and work?
Track 4. We are halfway through now; tell me the significance of your fourth track
Q4. You are supporting other women who have experienced domestic violence. How would your colleagues or clients describe you?*

In keeping with the *Desert Island Discs* format, participants were also asked what book and luxury item they would choose and why.

Reflexive insights

Reflexivity moves beyond reflection as a process, and involves critical exploration of what we know and, importantly, what we don't know, in an attempt to understand our position in relation to others (Gardner, 2019). We used the 7 Cs framework (Table 1) to guide reflexive dialogue about 'how practitioners working in domestic violence and abuse use music to curate and make sense of their lives', which Maria reflected upon in her journal:

Getting to the heart of the matter

Participants provided a reflection of how they were impacted by this study. Before the interviews, participants reflected on how choosing their tracks took them through a journey of past memories. The tracks had also helped them to find closure on emotions and memories they had 'suppressed'. Curating the order of tracks participants to envisage their journey and how far they had progressed.

The inclusion of music yielded rich data, enhancing the interview transcripts and Maria's reflexive insights about complexities and relationships between the Cs of connecting emotionally, being collaborative and considering other perspectives, as illustrated in the story below.

Story from reflective practice 3: Maria

I began to view reflexivity as three varying interactions, the first focusing on myself as researcher and how my lived experiences, emotions, interests, general observations of my workplace and investment in writing the study would impact on the research. The second focused on all those involved in the research, such as the participants and Kathryn; here the relationship involved various forms of communications (written, face to face, online) and my emotions ranged from excitement to anxiety. Finally, the third interaction is between myself and other audiences within academic and practitioner communities, where my work will be reviewed and read – I hope!

Listening to participants' choice of music with them during the interviews brought a shared understanding of the emotional nature of their work, illustrated in this journal extract:

A rich tapestry

I came to realise that my recognition of the importance of the tracks being played was paramount, because it positively influenced participants' engagement in the interview process. Music created a bond between us and I realised there was a rich tapestry of shared experiences. I steered the research conversations from facts to explore their imagery and sensory language, which gave me greater insight into how their worldviews were forming.

Music as method amplified participants' voices, as black, Asian and minority ethnic women, and enabled a strong connection between Maria as a researcher and her participants, in a more informal (but rigorous) research 'space'. Participants fully engaged with their choice of music recordings, for

example by singing and dancing, which provided additional arts-based data to be further explored during the interviews.

This final story is a shared one, based on Maria's curiosity and courage to engage in novel use of music as method and *Desert Island Discs*, which also contributed to our capacity to be reflective/reflexive together when writing this article. Our relationship evolved from that of student-supervisor, to equal thinking partners and peers.

Story from reflective practice 4: Maria and Kathryn

We shared *Desert Island Discs* choices with each other to facilitate working and reflecting together as equal thinking partners when writing this article. Disc eight is the one we reflect on here using the 'C' of celebrating.

Maria: I'm listening to a lot of classical music at the moment, and while Christmas has been and gone my eighth disc is *Carol of the Bells* by the Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych because it just makes me feel really happy!

Kathryn: Mine is Simon and Garfunkel's *59th Street Bridge Song* with its reminder to 'slow down' and enjoy the moment, and also as a reminder (in pandemic times) of a memorable holiday in New York (Figure 2).

We also reflected on the genre of our shared story as: 'A Women's Adventure', and the book we would both take to our desert islands would be *Tough Women Adventure Stories* (Tough, 2020).

Figure 2: Slow down!



Figure 2 serves as a reminder that critical reflection takes time, and that arts-based research practice promotes reflexive self-awareness, and shows how images can be evocative, experiential, moving, and/or disquieting (Tracy, 2020).

Concluding reflections

Healthcare professionals working in emergency services, acute care and mental health settings will care for victims of violence and abuse. This article raises awareness of the need for research and practice development in this field. The 7 Cs framework was a useful narrative device to create a shared reflective research story. We extended the 'C' of compromising and the question 'what ideas has it been helpful to let go of?' (Roddy and Dewar, 2016, p 8) to consider what research stories no longer serve a purpose. Tracy (2020, p 43, emphasis added) notes that '*many theoretical discussions in qualitative research today are related to ... post-qualitative methodologies*', which are now challenging many qualitative practices. The use of music as a model and method in qualitative health and social research expands the creative methodologies and spaces identified by Horsfall and Titchen (2009). The study also shows how music as method could be used in research with vulnerable groups and sensitive topics, for example people taking illicit substances, the homeless or individuals considered to be stigmatised or marginalised (Alexander et al., 2018).

Implications for practice development

Finally, we consider how others might use our learning from this study in practice development. The way that music created a '*bond between us*' can be applied in critically reflective practice development in the field of domestic violence and abuse. This relates to maintaining a sense of openness and creativity, and the importance of 'compassion and connection' (Das and Waddington, 2020, p 4). Thinking about compassion and connection also extends to other areas of practice development and person-centred care, as illustrated in Matriano and Middleton's (2020) reflections on compassion and nursing. *Desert Island Discs* can also be used as a professional development tool for researchers to promote reflexivity through reflection on choice of music and asking 'what does this mean to/for me as a researcher?'

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