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Wellbeing and Integration through Community Music: The Role of Improvisation in a Music Group of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Local Community Members

Sofia Vougioukalou , Rosie Dow, Laura Bradshaw and Tracy Pallant

This paper discusses the link between community music improvisation and the integration of refugees, asylum seekers and local residents, and proposes a new way of thinking about priority-setting in refugee integration and rehabilitation support schemes. Drawing on observations and interviews with an integrated music group in Wales, we explore the effect of participating in structured musical activities and improvisation in weekly meetings, as well as at public performances in community arts events. We observed that embedding improvisation led to four outcomes. It (i) encouraged individual unscripted performances, instilling confidence in solo performance, (ii) gave individuals who had experienced displacement and marginalisation a chance to lead in a safe, performative space, (iii) gave other participants a chance to follow and accompany this piece instrumentally or vocally, drawing on their own cultural traditions and thus creating innovative cross-cultural pieces; and (iv) provided participants and audience members with a unique and unrepeated, uplifting experience that triggered their imaginations, and prompted questions and further discussion between participants. These findings suggest that the combination of structured musical activity and improvisation may help to foster a sense of wellbeing and social inclusion, shift power dynamics, and create a space for cross-cultural dialogue. These unique outcomes highlight how music can create a community of people from seemingly completely different locations or situations. Furthermore, the well-established Welsh choral traditions and local community arts provided a receptive environment for this diverse group of performers. Therefore, it was not just the musical activities but their connection to the wider local community arts scene that delivered these individual, collective and wider societal benefits.

Keywords: Community music; Improvisation; Integration; Wellbeing; Refugee

Introduction

The Refugee Crisis

There are currently 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 16.2 million of whom were displaced during 2017 alone (UNHCR 2018). In 2012, the number of applications for asylum in the European Union peaked at 1.2 million, a six-fold increase, which dropped to 650,000 in 2017 (Eurostat 2017). The process of asylum applications can be long and uncertain, and asylum seekers are often placed in temporary accommodation or redistribution centres in towns where they may not have any familial or community connections. Musical activities have been used as a tool for supporting integration in many countries hosting refugees, including Vietnam (Reyes 1999), Australia (Marsh 2015), USA (Wood 2010), Germany (Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017) and Sweden (de Quadros and Vu 2017). In this paper, we explore how community music-making and improvisation in Wales, UK has contributed to participants' experience of their wellbeing, sense of belonging, cross-cultural communication and integration.

Empowerment and Participation in Community Music-Making

Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have hypothesised that group music-making encourages small and large scale social bonding (Pearce et al. 2016; Weinstein et al. 2016) and is linked to diverse functions such as courtship, warning, triumph, prowess and even to 'generate a sense of power' (Monti, Aiello, and Carroll 2016). Many note the importance of the 'group effect', where the benefits of music-making are amplified and shared by working with others. This is both an acoustic effect and a social one. Acoustic, because the harmonics produced by multiple peoples' unique voice create 'extra' sounds in a group singing environment. Social, because group singing requires reciprocity and empathy; in other words, we have to receive and give to others both socially and sonically (rather than just giving, as in a solo performance) (Richman 1993; Welch 2015). Psychosocial studies of group music-making have suggested that this has many benefits, including increasing individuals' confidence (Matarasso 1997), improving participants' health and wellbeing (Clift 2013; Fancourt et al. 2016; Reagon et al. 2016), and fostering social cohesion (Richman 1993). These studies support the position of community arts writers who consider the movement to be a powerful vehicle for expressing and appreciating difference, which leads to enhancement of individual people's and groups' social status (Clements 2016). Arts participation has also been considered to mobilise oppressed groups to have more influence in their localities and more control over their lives (Crehan 2011).

'Community' in Community Music-Making

The process of music-making can create new communities of practice. The term 'community' is complex (Alleyne 2002); 'a community' may mean a group of people who live in a certain locale, however, the term also applies to groups, like refugees, who share certain histories, concerns, or 'evanescent qualities, as in a *community of like minds* or a *community of spirit*' (Brown 2002, 1).

For the purposes of exploring community music activity in a refugee centre, Owen Kelly's definition of community arts is perhaps the most helpful, as it considers 'a community' to be constructed through a 'set of shared social meanings which are constantly created and mutated through the actions and interactions of its members' (Kelly 1984, 49–50). Lee Higgins asserts that the defining aspect of community music groups specifically is an 'act of hospitality', in which important, non-musical, conditions about membership eligibility combine with an open approach: if you are eligible then you are welcome, regardless of musical ability (Higgins 2012). This act of hospitality, Higgins considers, is central to the practice and empowerment process in community music. Matarasso also adopts what here may be a useful definition of empowerment through arts participation that centres on participants having 'developed more equitable relationships, taken further self-determined action or gained control over their own affairs' (Matarasso 1997). The notions of hospitality and acceptance are key in creating a receptive and welcoming environment where self-driven musical expression can take place. It is these social meanings along with musical sounds that are transmitted and contribute to the creation of community.

Music and Refugee Integration

The contribution of music to integration has often been described in terms of the environment it creates, which is conducive to improving participants' wellbeing and creating new social connections through interactions between 'musical' and 'paramusical' dimensions (DeNora and Ansdell 2017). For example, music education was found to have a positive impact on pupils' mental health in Australian schools with a high percentage of pupils from refugee backgrounds, fostering a sense of wellbeing, belonging, and enhanced engagement with learning (Crawford 2017). Research into the settlement of Burundian refugees in Pennsylvania, USA further proposed that music helped mitigate the challenges of transitioning from one place to another by soothing loss, instilling hope and strengthening a healthier sense of self. Furthermore, music-making in groups aided adjustment to the new country and assisted in creating a renewed sense of identity and home (Wood 2010). Further supporting the notion of music as an externalising therapeutic space, Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch argued that creative art therapies in general, serve as a 'safe and enactive transitional space' where participants can overcome home-sickness, particularly if they play or listen to music from their homeland. This helped transition more smoothly from their old home to their new home (Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017). These findings highlight the

processes by which music supports refugees, but they also raise questions on the types of music used, and the wider context in which they are performed. For example, when choral directors in Sweden sought to include refugees from Africa, Syria and Iraq into their choirs and music groups, the medium of the Western European choir was often experienced as culturally remote, even though the initiatives were perceived to be welcoming by refugees (de Quadros and Vu 2017).

Methodology

This article is based on the experiences and observations of two group leaders and a local community participant in the music group between 2017 and 2019 and its effects on participants. Fifteen participants also completed a questionnaire and took part in informal open-ended interviews. The analysis consists of a duo-ethnography, encompassing nested auto-ethnographic accounts (Sawyer and Norris 2012). We selected salient examples that we all recognised and then reflected jointly as a group. We consider this to be an appropriate way to describe and systematically analyse our own experiences in order to combine researcher, group leader and participants' experiences, also challenging canonical ways of doing research. Our aim was to treat this process of knowledge production as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). We paid close attention to the unintended outcomes of rehearsing and performing in diverse community settings and public spaces, which in turn prompted us to recognise the shifting power dynamics between 'permanent' communities of local, settled residents and transient communities of refugees and asylum-seekers. We also paid attention to the spaces in which we performed and their wider symbolic context; the messages the spaces conveyed to the group and vice versa.

The exact locations of rehearsals and performances and the names of participants have been omitted to preserve anonymity. Since this is a duo-ethnography involving more than one perspective we have written in the third person, except when using direct quotes. Refugee and asylum-seeker participants are referred to as RAS participants and local community participants as LC participants in order to identify how these different types of participants contributed to the group.

Case Study: An Integrated Music Group in a Refugee Support Centre in Wales

The Scope of the World Choir and Band and Participants

During 2017–2019, the music group, the 'Oasis World Choir and Band', consisted of a weekly morning women's group, usually attended by 5–10 female RAS participants and 5 LC participants and an afternoon mixed group, usually attended by 20–30 RAS participants, predominantly men, and around 10 LC participants. Most RAS participants identified as Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian, Kurdish, Sudanese or Congolese. Young children often attended both groups. Both groups operated as 'drop-ins' without obligatory attendance.

LC participants included people living locally, people singing in choirs in the city, music therapy professionals, and refugee support centre volunteers who regularly dropped-in and joined in with the singing. This helped to establish a grounding of music and an evolving repertoire of songs, rhythms and dance which helped to welcome new people. The decision to invite LC participants was taken in order to promote dialogue and participation in shared musical activity. The group manager mentioned:

When participants go home from the sessions they will be able to talk to their friends and families about the people they have met, the songs and food they've shared and the fun they've had. Music is a language we all understand.

Group Management and Organisation

The Oasis World Choir and Band was managed by a regional community arts charity with a track-record in using arts-based approaches to reduce poverty, address stigma and cultural practices that might be harmful. The group leader is a trained community musician with over 25 years' experience in leading community choirs and incorporating improvisation within a structure to improve wellbeing and confidence. Her practice has been influenced by the Natural Voice and Community Music philosophies of empowerment for group participants through music-making, promoting the idea that everyone can sing, drawing upon the historical role of singing in community building.

The Natural Voice Movement incorporates a philosophy of non-judgement and of allowing and encouraging sounds of peoples' voices to express themselves freely. Any sounds that are not expected are viewed as interesting, showing and confirming that difference is welcomed and can enhance the expected norm. This can also be seen as a form of improvisation (Bithell 2014).

The Role of Improvisation

Improvisation was an engrained and important feature of all workshop sessions and performances. Within this context, we define improvisation as creating or performing something spontaneously, without specific or scripted preparation. Improvisation was not usually delivered or started in a purposeful way but rather tended to occur at the beginning or at the end of the session when participants would engage in drumming more or less spontaneously. The creative activity of this immediate ('in the moment') musical composition allowed and encouraged the combining of *performance* with *communication of emotions* through expressed music, as well as welcoming spontaneous interactions within the group—to sometimes include audience members. This was regularly achieved during hand drumming sessions where non-metric music was performed by a wider range of percussion instruments and accompanied by singing and hand clapping. In these polyrhythmic performances, each of several rhythmic lines consisted of metric

units of equal length but began their cycle at different points. Of special importance was also the juxtaposition of units of two and three beats, making possible a variety of hemiola effects. The use of more than one pitch by drums and of a variety of ways of shaking and rattles indicated the secondary melodic role of percussion which is typical of West African musical traditions (Randel 1996).

Alongside these 'purer' improvisational activities, weekly musical activities involved learning new drumming and singing pieces of mainly European and African repertoire. For the drumming section, simple heartbeat rhythms offered a bass—with the hand loosely bouncing off the centre of the skin—to outline a pulse of the music and connect participants as one group. Drum improvisation was often initiated and sustained by experienced African RAS participants. A simple theme was repeated and varied by improvisation many times, eventually becoming very complex, then receding and finally giving way to a restatement of the original theme. The improviser usually went through a series of sections, each with specific characteristics which can be described as 'preparation, beginning, basic pattern, development, variations, successful completion, basic pattern, ending and tail' (Randel 1996, 18). This structure within improvised pieces encouraged improvisers to lead and others to follow and then take turns in improvising. We also based rhythms on popular songs such as Babatunde Olatunje's drumming 'call' on the Nigerian Yoruba song *Odun De*.¹ The instruments used were a wide array of African hand drums—djembes, bougarabous of West Africa—tabla of India, darbukas of Turkey, bodhráns of Ireland as well as shakers, tambourines and bells (see glossary of world percussion² for further information on instrument description). Polyrhythms often occurred naturally, with some outlining a 'heartbeat' core rhythm and others free-flowing over the top. We aimed to establish a supportive feel, with people listening to each other and taking it in turns to express their individual patterns of improvisation (soloing) over the top of gentle regular patterns.

For singing activities, we used African songs in which the chorus repeats the soloist's line, sings a contrasting line, and then individuals suggest variations on a theme which the chorus repeats without change. The repetition of these lines was often the only way harmony could be generated with participants who did not speak the same language since many of the RAS participants spoke very little English. Despite this, participants were, with the help of interpreters, able to follow this more structured musical activity and repeat the chorus, whilst the more confident participants improvised. The responsorial form was also used as a tool in improvisation where certain songs lent themselves to this, either in the opportunity simply to change words to suit an idea, or create fun. For example, the group often sang an improvised song based on the phrase 'Feel Like Dancing' where people can simply change the word 'dancing' to another verb and act out the word. Often unwittingly, the melody was also changed adding a great deal of energy as participants responded positively to the new creativity at work. One of the group tutors noted:

At this positive response to changing the melody more people realised they have the 'permission' to also change the given melody and much fun and spontaneous interaction ensued. They contributed all kinds of different verbs and accompanying gestures increasing the liveliness of the activity.

This mix of structure and improvisation reflects Gordon's discussion of improvisation practice, where he states that 'aesthetic values are usually secondary to outcomes of connection and communion for whoever has assembled for each session' (Gordon 2018, 1). The need to provide comfort and familiarity for the group must be balanced with pure improvisation, which, for Gordon, necessitates 'an alteration between very free and "authoritarian" approaches' (Gordon 2018, 2).

Almost all musical activities had a sense of 'allowing' things to happen spontaneously, and the effects of this on the participants were remarkable. In a simple call and response activity using the rock chant *We Will Rock You* and asking others to take the lead, participants often personalised it or slightly misinterpreted. This resulted in interesting changes that were then passed around the group, usually leading to laughter and all present echoing the new chant enthusiastically back in a humorous way. This in turn, led to more changes and spontaneity, which added extra energy—and even helped the improvisation to turn into an actual composed song to be repeated. One of the group leaders noted:

I observed that participants expressed joy in the doing what one is not supposed to. This could possibly be the case for this type of group who have had to leave their countries due to political persecution and war? This simple exercise – or by product of an exercise allowed the creativity to flow giving all participants a sense of freedom.

One RAS participant, a young woman who had recently arrived in the UK, became quite emotional during a women's dance improvisation session. She later mentioned to one LC participant that she cried because she realised how long it had been since she last felt happy. She described remembering how freedom feels, albeit for a short amount of time. As group leaders, we observed that this feeling, on a weekly basis, can help participants in their search for a sense of freedom in their lives outside the workshops too. One RAS participant mentioned: 'The music takes away the heavy burden you are carrying'. Similarly, one LC participant added: 'These sessions have a therapeutic effect on all who come here, music is a release, it helps you to forget problems and difficulties'. Experiences of improved wellbeing were reported by both RAS and LC participants. These experiences often took participants by surprise, as they had attended the music sessions for other reasons.

Community Events

The Oasis World Choir and Band were often invited to local community events that were organised by other choirs, museums, libraries and art centres, creating yet more opportunities for integration and raising awareness of refugee issues, through

bringing different groups together. Participants were invited to participate in these events during the group sessions in the refugee support centre, and by email through the group's mailing list. Participation was entirely voluntary and numbers varied between 10 and 50 people per performance.

One of these events was a range of local choirs meeting for a picnic in the park. One of the choirs invited was the Coming Home Choir, a choir of veterans. All participating choirs led different songs and World Choir and Band participants joined in too. This event introduced the RAS participants to a different part of town and to local people. They were also able to see the local people listening attentively and participating in their songs. There was a shared choral repertoire learned, so everyone was able to sing together. RAS participants mentioned that they wanted to feel they were doing something useful for their local community and that through these events they feel that they have something to contribute that the local community appreciates.

The group leader was also asked to lead a performance workshop in the local library. This involved many newcomers to the group, as well as choir members from other local choirs and the general public. There were around 35 people in total, all sitting equally within a circle in the library. Pensioners frequenting the library during the day were attracted by the sounds of the music and the accessibility of the environment and joined in. Shakers and tambourines were distributed around. The result was library visitors and music group members singing many songs together, refugee participants singing songs from their home countries, an improvised drum circle and local choir members singing songs from their repertoire. The mainly older audience was able to join in and, during the breaks, talk to the people in the circle.

Later, a university dementia research group asked the music group to deliver a similar workshop for their annual public engagement event for Dementia Awareness week in the local arts centre. With a core repertoire of songs now developed, it was possible to deliver inclusive community workshops to a wide range of community settings. People with dementia and their carers were able easily to join certain sections, either vocally or using simple percussion. Improvisational drumming sections were led by an experienced musician from the Congo who recently gained his refugee status. A Kurdish Iranian member performed solo on his Persian flute while accompanied by African drums, and RAS and LC participants spontaneously got up to dance. Then he led a traditional Kurdish song—which the group had never heard him do before—and then he got up and led a traditional Kurdish circle dance where RAS, LC participants and community members joined hands and danced together. These spontaneous moments of cultural expression—both traditional and innovative—were far-reaching and affirmative of the commonalities between different cultures that might appear very different. Some attendees mentioned that this event reinforced 'their belief in humans and the world'. For refugee participants it provided an equalising space, where they were able to contribute to the wellbeing of vulnerable members of their host community.

The music group was also invited by a local women's choir to participate in an event marking Holocaust Memorial Day 2018 in the national museum. This event raised

awareness of past and present genocides. Around 30 RAS group members entered this free museum for the first time, and after the performance spent time looking at the exhibits. The group performed after the local women's choir sang the Ballad of Mauthausen, a set of four arias based on the first-hand experiences of a concentration camp survivor. The music group performed some of the regular songs, one led by a RAS participant from Sudan, and an improvised drum circle. Museum visitors joined in with shakers and tambourines, and the children of the music group participants and those of the audience played together in the middle of the performance space. The performance was scheduled to last 15 minutes but it lasted 45 minutes because the museum audience was so receptive. In the end, museum staff asked for the group's details so that they could be invited again. After the performance, LC and RAS participants expressed enthusiasm about this event because the space was conducive to performing without being stressful. The presence of people who have experienced and fled genocide, in an event raising awareness of past and present genocide, resonated with the audience and raised awareness of the current political climate and its consequences among a wider audience. Nevertheless, the city museum was a space that is not a regular home for folk music and improvisation; neither is it a space where RAS participants are regularly invited to attend events relating to wars of which they have direct experience. Bourdieu argued that museums represent spaces of political dominance and high cultural capital where only 'legitimised art' is displayed (Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper 1991). For 'refugee music' to have a presence in these exclusive spaces, was symbolically very important as it conveyed a public acknowledgement of the experience of displacement. It also gave a platform to new forms of musical expression and previously unheard or underrepresented voices like those of refugees and non-Western cultural representations.

The World Choir and Band has also attended a variety of festivals, performing songs written by the group through improvisation, a solo by one of the group members, some interactive audience participation pieces and some well-known songs. One LC participant mentioned that working with this type of 'looseness' made her 'feel the fear and do it anyway', particularly during more formal performances.

These processes and outcomes informed the group leader's practice to incorporate non-prescriptive and non-judgemental methods of music-making when working with refugees and asylum seekers in private practice sessions as well as during public performances in informal and formal settings.

Conclusions

This paper highlights the close link between improvisation, structure and community music benefits. It places a high degree of importance on the way the sessions were run and emphasises the way that the leader's approach was crucial in establishing the parameters for positive change, expression and emancipation. It is also an important contribution to the discussions on what 'community' means, and how music can create a community of people from seemingly completely different

locations or situations. The Oasis World Choir & Band makes a community *out of* diversity, and despite its transient membership and irregular participation, offers a resilient environment that fosters integration and wellbeing. The delivery of integrated musical activities could help other host organisations to better support the psychosocial needs of asylum-seekers and refugees, while at the same time creating a space where dialogues and meaningful cultural exchanges with local residents can take place.

Improvisation and Structure

Using improvisation allowed for spontaneous personal and cultural expression to happen, and suited the transient nature of music group composition which didn't have a fixed/obligatory membership. We observed that embedding improvisation within a closed music group session, as well as in public performances, achieved four outcomes: (i) it encouraged individual, unscripted cultural performances; (ii) it gave individuals who have experienced displacement and marginalisation a chance to be a leader in a safe space; (iii) it gave other participants a chance to follow and accompany a piece instrumentally or vocally, drawing on their own cultural traditions and thus creating innovative, cross-cultural pieces; and (iv) it provided all participants and audience members with a unique experience. Essentially, it provided a non-verbal dialogue between participants that required both attention and response.

The range of examples reflects the combined use of both rehearsed and improvised pieces. This was an important combination, since in practice, despite the unstructured ambitions of improvisation work, we accepted that leadership and structure were required in order to establish and contain the group as a group with a common trend throughout different community music initiatives (Higgins 2012). This may also be about balancing risk with individual expression:

Complex entanglements of individual and group subjectivity will always be a factor in community music improvisation, and we perhaps need to accept that 'authentic' individual expression must necessarily be sacrificed to some degree in this context. (Gordon 2018, 2)

Gordon's position recollects the writings of group work theorists, who consider that in a group situation people are more willing to take risks than they are as individuals (Kothari and Cooke 2001). This links back to Higgins' 'safe climate for risk taking', the provision of which he considers to be central to the 'act of hospitality' in community music practice (Higgins 2012). Improvisation certainly entails a process of risk-taking, however, that risk was minimised by a supporting structure of pre-planned activity. The incorporation of improvisation within a loosely-structured repertoire also enabled cultural expression in a unique way, and allowed marginalised, transient populations to express themselves musically in ways that rehearsed pieces would not have allowed them to do. The public sharing of these pieces in

local community arts events helped deliver integration in a culturally-informed and culturally-sensitive way.

The Role of Improvisation in Healing and Integration

Live drumming resulted in the dynamic generation of complex, polyrhythmic drum music. Ham and colleagues have argued that through improvisation, the identity, the personality and the style of the drummer is revealed (Ham, Kieferle, and Woessner 2017). The fluidity and flow of the musician's engagement in the instrument is a phenomenon that provides the basis for personal expression, communication of difficult feelings as well as entertainment; effectively a non-verbal dialogue with other participants. The key to polyrhythmic, improvised drumming is the purposeful generation of complexity through bodily engagement in the instrument. The composition of the drum circles was always different. Through practice, repetition, and copying and evolving the drumming of others, highly complex combinations of patterns and phrases were enabled wherein polyrhythm occurs at the macro and micro scales. This level of co-ordination enabled a non-verbal, bodily type of communication between participants that required mutual attentiveness and responsiveness.

The incorporation of improvisation, and the willingness to seek out opportunities for ad-libbing in performance appear to have led to increased participant enjoyment, and to positive memories for the RAS participants, building up confidence in their new-found country of residence as they perform and are well received by audiences. However, this always bares a risk, since the outcome of an improvised performance is by definition unpredictable. Nevertheless, this risk added not only to the enjoyment of the performance but also to its originality. Indeed, risk can serve as a crucial catalyst for a beneficial experience of arts participation. Matarasso argues that 'one of [the arts'] best lessons is in teaching us how to live with risk and to turn it to our advantage' (Matarasso 1997). Gordon likens this risk-taking in community music improvisation to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theory of 'deep play' (Geertz 2005). He considers that when we engage in deep play—and deep listening—through group improvisation, we take risks and adopt responsibility for the group's success, which in itself is an empowering process (Gordon 2018).

Empowerment in this sense is therefore closely linked to pedagogy, since using improvisational elements in community music may be seen as an anti-oppressive practice that enables both control and creativity for participants (Freire 1972). Indeed, in more recent applications of Freire to studies of music improvisation researchers have concluded that 'socio-cognitive functions and social positioning traits inherent in improvisation suggests that it could play an important role in education for freedom' (Lewis 2013, 255). Much has also been written about the role of group improvisation as a tool for opening up dialogues between people within communities (Borgo 2007; Fischlin and Heble 2004), which may be particularly effective if conversation is limited by language barriers, as in the case of refugees. Of course, dialogue is at

the heart of a Freirean approach, and improvisation in particular, encourages participants to think ‘for themselves’, which is highly analogous to empowerment (Shevock 2015). This is incredibly important in a refugee setting, since:

when working with individuals characterised by trauma and whose identities have been dictated by political power, it is essential that music therapy practices oppose these forces and provide opportunities for empowerment. (Comte 2016, n.p.)

Even though, the group did not offer these sessions as ‘music therapy’, there are many areas of synergy in the practice of music therapy and music improvisation with refugee groups since both involve a process of asking participants to express emotion and tell their story through the creation of music. Experiences of trauma and empowerment are pertinent and address the desired outcome of wellbeing and integration. Specifically, in relation to the role of improvisation Comte also noted that:

improvisation was cited as a method used by music therapists with refugee individuals for the purpose of transcending traditional language barriers to find a common musical language through which the therapeutic dialogue could occur. (Comte 2016, n.p.)

In a similar fashion, our group also used improvisation with the purpose to transcend linguistic barriers, and even though many participants found the experience therapeutic, we did not engage in an explicit, clinical therapeutic dialogue.

Improvisation may also be a useful tool for refugees’ storytelling, which may have therapeutic applications when working with traumatised participants (Ahonen and Desideri 2014). Even though the purpose of this group, was not therapeutic as such, participants reported experiencing an improvement in well-being, increase in confidence and finding enjoyment in performing. These benefits were not limited to the RAS participants but also applied to the LC participants. The community events were key storytelling opportunities, and introduced participants to new spaces and groups of people. They also provided a taster for the reception of their music by wider audiences, and connected with other potentially vulnerable groups (people living with dementia, veterans) within a structured musical environment, which enabled them to feel like they were ‘giving something back’ to their local community. The act of music-making therefore contributed to the RAS participants’ identity-building, and increased their social capital.

Music-Making and Performing as a Tool for Integration and Social Change

All of these diverse elements of the experience of music-making and performing potentially contributed to an improvement in some participants’ wellbeing, as well as to their social integration. However, music-making was not a mere ‘tool’ that delivered benefits in a linear, instrumental fashion. Music-making was a collaborative, inclusive process that allowed refugee and asylum-seeker participants to process

their new reality, and progressively integrate into their new environment. At the same time, it provided local residents with a space where they could get to know refugees and asylum-seekers, learn about their musical traditions and eventually forge friendships that transcended the boundaries of the group. It was a way to create an equalising, healing space where all participants had the power to lead. Matarasso and others caution against taking a narrow view of the arts as merely a 'tool' for social change, arguing that the intrinsic value of arts engagement is important, as well as the instrumental value (Belfiore and Bennett 2008; DeNora and Ansdell 2017; Kelly 1984). Many in this field also advocate for simplicity in analysis, keeping central the idea that music and the arts are inherently about pleasure and human connection (Higgins 2012). This, they say, may prevent a 'slide into advocacy', or a consideration of the arts in merely social or economic terms (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). It is important to keep in mind that describing the experience of arts participation has many pitfalls, with 'intangible factors at work, invisible changes and unquantifiable benefits' (Matarasso 1997, 86). Considering this alongside the theories of post-Foucauldian writers on empowerment who assert that 'resistance or agonism is no longer the only route to freedom' (Haugaard 2012, 34), perhaps we may therefore understand the pleasurable, the invisible, and the intangible to be central to the process of self-actualisation and emancipation in community music improvisation.

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Notes

- [1] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ql6Kt-HJnk0> (accessed October 18 2019).
- [2] See <http://drummagazine.com/the-glossary-of-world-percussion-instruments/> <http://drummagazine.com/the-glossary-of-world-percussion-instruments/> (accessed October 18 2019).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Laura Bradshaw has worked as a community musician since 1991. After studying classical flute and composition at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama she found a passion for using music as a

creative and fun vehicle for community empowerment. She is a member of the Natural Voice Network and uses song with many groups as well as with the Oasis World Choir and Band. She also performs regularly and continues to write music.

Rosie Dow is a researcher, choir leader and community music enthusiast. She has led several large arts in health/community programmes, including the Tenovus Cancer Care ‘Sing with Us’ network of choirs for patients and carers and, later, the Military Wives Choirs Foundation. As a result of this she co-authored several influential papers about the biological and psychosocial effects of group music-making. She completed her MA in Anthropology and Community Arts in 2018 and is now Director of a national arts in health social enterprise, Breathe Arts Health Research.

Sofia Vougioukalou is a medical anthropologist working in applied health care settings. Her research focuses on healthcare delivery and organisation, and the evaluation of participatory quality improvement interventions, particularly to hard-to-reach and vulnerable patient groups. She has been volunteering with the Oasis World Choir and Band since 2016.

Tracy Pallant has worked as a Film for Development worker with Valley and Vale Community Arts since 1990. She is passionate about working with groups and individuals to enable them to share their stories and get their voices heard. Having witnessed the transformative power of music to bring together asylum seekers and the wider community, Tracy together with Laura Bradshaw set up the Oasis World Choir project in 2015.

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