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The Power of Connection: An Exploration of Trauma-Informed Community Music Practice

Catherine Birch

Abstract

Working with *trauma-informed community music practice*, the singing and song-writing part of a UK-based University Prison Partnership Project, aims to give opportunity for self-expression, create a sense of community and a safe space, and build positive connections through mutual trust and negotiation of the creative process. The project works exclusively with women who have experienced trauma, engaging them in developing skills in both vocal technique and song-writing. In order to effectively facilitate in a gender-responsive way, there is an obligation to align the work with the five values of *trauma-informed practice*: safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, choice.

This presentation examines the model of practice used in the singing and songwriting project and will unpack facilitation methods sensitive to the women's many complex emotional and mental health needs. Specific workshop elements are demonstrated that enable positive connections to form between participants, as well as a deeper connection to self. In a space where profound social barriers exist, the approaches to practice that enable both inclusion and diversity are examined with opportunity for wider reflection and discussion.

Keywords Trauma-informed practice, safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment, choice

Introduction

Established in 2013¹, the York St. John University (YSJU) Prison Partnership Project (PPP) was originally set up as a theatre-based practice, working collaboratively with women at two local prisons. It was designed with the intention of facilitating a workshop space in which creative and educational exchange can flourish. Staff and students from YSJU work alongside prison staff and women in a way that encourages social and artistic equality, aims to build confidence and self-esteem and provides an open space for dialogue around the complexities of life for the women within the criminal justice system.

Emerging Voices, the singing and song-writing project within the PPP, was piloted during the Autumn of 2018 and is now a weekly provision. As a community music practitioner and vocal leader, I facilitate these sessions supported by undergraduate community music students from YJSU. The underpinning philosophy of equality in the creative partnership necessitates an openness in the weekly encounters, and challenges preconceptions around the stigma of incarceration. With the emphasis on equality, showing mutual respect in this sense is critical, as “Some of the most neglected and misunderstood individuals in our society are the women in the criminal justice system” (Covington, 2016, p.13).

In seeking to understand the immense challenges women in prison face on a daily basis, practitioners on the Prison Partnership Project acknowledge that both prior life experiences of the women and their current circumstances are impactful. The importance of the role creative engagement can play within this context is therefore a juxtaposition against the backdrop of incarceration. Produced by the Prison Reform Trust², the following statistics give a selective

¹ By Rachel Conlon, Theatre Practitioner, Drama Therapist and Senior Lecturer in Applied Theatre at YSJU.

² Founded in 1981, the London-based charity, Prison Reform Trust, seeks to “build a just, humane and effective penal system [by reducing] the use of prison, [improving] conditions for prisoners [and promoting] equality and human rights in the criminal justice system” (<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>). With a specific Women’s Programme, “The Prison Reform Trust has long called for a reduction in women’s imprisonment in

overview of some of the unique circumstances and challenges faced by incarcerated women in the UK:

- Women represent less than 5% of the prison population in England and Wales.
- Nearly 60% of women in prison who have had an assessment have experienced domestic abuse. The total figure is likely to be much higher.
- There was a 20% increase in the number of self-harm incidents in women's prisons in England and Wales, between 2017 and 2018.
- The rate of self-harm incidents for women in prison is nearly five times higher than for men
- An estimated 17,240 children are affected by maternal imprisonment each year

(<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>)

To understand the implications of these statistics is to understand that women in the criminal justice system need to be treated differently than the men for whom the system has been established. It is for this reason that the ethical obligation of adapting to women's needs is gradually being recognised as crucial, to their ongoing health and wellbeing, their rehabilitation, and reduction in recidivism. The implementation of gender-responsive and trauma-informed practice provides a framework within which both prison staff and external practitioners can operate effectively and with appropriate sensitivity to the women's needs. The following sections unpack the notion of trauma-informed practice in relation to the singing and song-writing workshop sessions we run.

Trauma-informed Practice – Key Concepts

the UK and a step change in how the criminal justice system responds to the needs of women" (<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>).

The terms violence, trauma, abuse and PTSD are often used interchangeably. One way to clarify these terms is to think of trauma as a response to violence or another overwhelmingly negative experience. Trauma is both an event and a particular response to an event. (Covington, 2016, p. 14)

Women within the criminal justice system are likely to have experienced trauma. According to the statistics cited above, at least 60 per cent of women in prison have experienced domestic abuse, as one example of prior trauma. The impact of trauma on the emotional, physical and mental health and wellbeing of the women is long-lasting and is, in part, responsible for their high levels of anxiety, depression and rates of self-harm (Lempert, 2016). Sessions facilitated by the Prison Partnership team are delivered using a trauma-informed approach based on the Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care. These have been identified and developed based on the knowledge of what is known about common responses to physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Harris and Fallot, 2001, cited in Covington, 2016, p. 2). The Five Values are: Safety, Trustworthiness, Choice, Collaboration, Empowerment

Approaches to Practice

The following sections explore each of the values in turn, unpacking facilitation methods that enable positive connections to be built.

Safety What needs to happen in order for the workshop space to be safe?

In a context where participants have past experience of trauma and abuse, I would argue that the issue of safety is of paramount importance. The women we work with have “deficits in feeling safe” (Porges, 2017, p. xvi) and are wrestling with ongoing issues with their mental, emotional and physical health as a result. A safe space might mean one in which they can

voice their fears and anxieties. The women may not always want or be able to articulate their emotions, so as practitioners we learn how to ‘read the room’. This involves sensing the emotional undertones, reading body language, looking at facial expressions and observing group interactions, with the understanding that unspoken emotions can still be visible, therefore reflexivity and responsiveness are crucial.

In addressing issues of physical safety, we sit or stand in a circle, also reinforcing the sense of equality within the group (Higgins, 2012, pp. 152-154). Giving space and time for reflection and understanding potential triggers are vital in creating a positive environment within which the women can feel safe enough to take risks and be vulnerable in the creative process.

Trustworthiness How can a relationship of mutual trust be developed?

“As an expectation of hospitality, trust and respect are significant ideas. In synergy with an ethics of care [...] I observed community music facilitators consciously cultivating environments of trust and respect through an overarching desire to ‘hear’ the others’ ‘voices’” (Higgins, 2012, p. 159). A space that offers the opportunity for hospitable encounters is one in which mutual trust can begin to be developed. The women can be hostile in new environments and with practitioners they have not worked with before. We work hard to alleviate potential fears and misgivings by offering respect, openness, warmth and the opportunity for the women to be ‘heard’, without judgement, pressure or exposure.

Choice How do we enable creative exchange in a situation where the social barriers are immense and the participants are, at this point in time, no longer free citizens?

Working with participants who have had many of their rights taken away, the gift of choice is one which a workshop facilitator can generously give. Life for the women outside of the

workshop space is hugely complex, and external factors can potentially make it impossible for fully engaged participation. This calls for the facilitator to develop responsiveness and a heightened sensitivity to both the intricacies of the group dynamics and the individual needs of participants.

We use images, words and inspirational quotes as a starting point for creative stimuli. The women may choose to respond in writing, reflection or conversation and as we capture their ideas, we work together as a group to shape and refine the individual offerings until we have a text that is representative of the whole. Choices around the songs we sing are vital for the women. They can share their musical tastes and preferences and we do our best to be responsive to these.

Collaboration What will enable effective collaboration to take place?

The collaborative process of songwriting is a key component of this project. It is an opportunity for the authenticity of individual voices to be expressed. Women who have had their voices silenced (Belenky et al. 1997) are given the platform for both individual and group-expression. We use images, words and inspirational quotes as a starting point for creative stimuli. The women may choose to respond in writing, reflection or conversation and as we capture their ideas, we work together as a group to shape and refine the individual offerings until we have a text that is representative of the whole. Working together in this way can be immensely challenging for some of the women but is one of the ways in which we are committed to enabling opportunity for self-development, building of confidence and a platform for negotiation and connection.

Empowerment How can participants experience personal empowerment and growth?

Concurrently there is a further realization, as identified by Martha Nussbaum (2000) that care-related factors such as love, empathy, collaboration, reflexivity, power, empowerment, and voice, are central human capabilities that practices of and for social justice need to promote. (Burnard et al., 2018)

Working alongside the women on a weekly basis, we strive to create an environment where each individual can experience that sense of care, support, value and opportunity for self-expression. The use of our physical voices in song also seems to be a factor in greater discovery of enabling the women's individual voices. We certainly endeavor to create an environment where the women have the "courage [to] fill [the] space" (Barnwell, 2000, p. 55) that we work in.

Concluding Thoughts

Within the complexities of working with women in the criminal justice system in the UK, the use of trauma-informed community music practice is key. The five values act as a solid foundation on which to build an inclusive and equitable workshop space. These values weave together and inform our planning, decisions, reflexivity, and creative delivery.

Reflecting on the project, Conlon states that, "Facilitating a weekly arts practice enables us to develop a deep, respectful and relational approach, travelling alongside the women from week to week as they navigate the topography of imprisonment" (2020, p. 175). In developing a relationship of mutual trust, it is important also to acknowledge that as human beings, the need to be in relationship, to belong, to have a sense of purpose, and, importantly, to be heard and valued are all vital to our wellbeing and survival. Stephen Porges states that:

The need to connect with others is a primary biological imperative for humans. Through connectedness, physiology is co-regulated to optimize mental and physical health. The theory focuses on the role that the social engagement system plays in initiating and maintaining connectedness and co-regulation. (2017, pp. 7-8).

Creating opportunity for the women to build positive relationships within the group, both with us and with each other, is one way in which we endeavour to reinforce these ideas of belonging, connectedness and positive social engagement. Working with the voice in singing and songwriting can be powerful for the participants who engage in the practice. They develop in skill and confidence, learning to connect to themselves and others in a more positive and constructive way.

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<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>

Hyperlink to Presentation:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ412bPC_xQ&feature=youtu.be

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Reader's Provocation

1. What particular considerations do you need to engage with in your specific context of practice? For example, what needs to happen in order for your workshop space to be safe?
2. Reflect on each of the five values of trauma-informed care (safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment and choice). How do you implement these within your practice?
3. How important would you consider the trauma-informed framework to be as applied more widely into practice?