

Exploring the role of music workshops and their use within a prison environment.

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Summary:

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of music therapy intervention within a prison environment and how it can have a significant impact on prisoners even within a limited timescale. It is also to illustrate the logistical problems associated with prison culture, protocol and policy and how this might have a detrimental effect on the growth of music therapy in prisons in the UK. I must stress that being fortunate enough to have contacts within HMP Lewes was paramount to the inception of the workshop.

There is a paradigm within prison culture of brutality and punishment. This archaic view should be reconsidered due to the fact that prisoners are stripped of their identities, humiliated by uniformity and constantly regressed through boredom and lack of stimulation. The appeal of activity can have a profound effect on his/her attitude towards improving their quality of life and in some cases inspire them to desire education and basic training to better themselves.

My studies have shown that there is a gulf between theory and practice due to the unpredictable variables within a prison setting, regardless of the degree of planning and preparation. That said, the increase in this type of therapeutic intervention in prisons makes for rich research of a Primary and Secondary nature.

I chose clinical improvisation as my main approach because of the flexibility of this theory when applying it within the ever-changing environment of a prison. This report identifies recommendations for running future prison workshops, principally focused on more detailed planning, gaining greater insight into

prison culture prior to delivery, securing appropriate supervision for facilitators, and researching and evaluating the benefits of music workshops in greater depth.

Introduction

Overall, the entire prison experience with its symbolic mechanisms of justice that encompass every lock, piece of barbed wire, the thick walls, the never ending supervision and segregation, the harsh solitude, and minimalistic lifestyles, are deliberately designed to not only incapacitate, but psychologically curb any prisoner's personality traits that have been deemed by society as undesirable or dangerous. (Jenny Kreteev, Pathena Prokipidis, & Evan Sycamniias - *The Psychological Effects of Imprisonment.*)

80% of prisoners have writing skills at or below the level of an 11 year old. 65% have numeracy levels at or below the level of an 11 year old. 50% have reading skills at or below the level of an 11 year old. Compared to the UK population, male prisoners are 13 times as likely to have been in care as a child; 13 times as likely to be unemployed; 10 times as likely to have been a regular truant; 2.5 times as likely to have had a family member convicted of a criminal offence; 6 times as likely to have been a young father; and 15 times as likely to be HIV positive.

For this project, I decided to explore the effects of music as a therapeutic intervention with long-term prisoners. The excitement I felt about the project was based on delivering a song-writing workshop embodying the antithesis of prison culture, based around freedom of expression, creativity, individuality and attentive oversight and guidance. My aim was to provide an open forum for the group to express themselves within the context of song writing including lyrics, melody and chord sequences. The group context was designed to access more individuals who may benefit from the intervention and also to enhance their experience through group interaction, learning from each other and the cross fertilisation of ideas. The theory would be to break down social isolation and raise empathy and awareness that others have also encountered difficult life experiences. The prison population focuses on a demographic that commonly suffers with mental health issues, behavioural problems and/or substance misuse.

I anticipated that running and managing a music workshop in a prison would be extremely challenging especially as I have still relatively limited experience teaching song writing. However, writing and singing songs for a five-day period with a group would also be a learning experience for me, expanding my technical development as a singer/songwriter.

The workshop would give the prisoners an opportunity to participate in an activity, to experience a mini project with focus and specific goals, and also offer a break from the rigmarole of prison life. A prison officer who supervised my workshop told me he sees the same faces coming back to Lewes Prison time and time again. In his view music workshops decrease boredom levels which he believes have a knock on effect on the problems relating to substance abuse, regime control and reducing aggression on the wings. This suggests that a short-term benefit of such workshops could be a quieter, less fractious prison, and a more constructive prison environment may in turn support effective longer-term rehabilitation.

Another officer stated: *Men who attend the music therapy workshops in prison are away from the rest of the inmates and can let their hair down a bit and have a laugh and enjoy some camaraderie with other prisoners and the music facilitators. The boredom prisoners face being locked up for up to twenty three hours a day, this is when they will start to seek alternative enjoyment i.e. drug taking and alcohol abuse - they make the hooch [alcohol] from various food products here.*

These comments outline the limits of prison life and how easily the inmates can become focussed on negative activities. By providing music therapy and/ or education, this creates both a distraction from these detrimental activities and could build prisoners' self-confidence and self esteem, possibly making them feel less alienated when the time comes to be re-integrated with society.

A lot of the prison culture promotes education, however this does not include music as it is perceived as 'enrichment', and therefore as frivolous and enjoyable rather than educational or therapeutic. I found out from the Head of Reducing Re-offending at HMP Lewes that the funding for the enrichment programmes is strictly last on the list. This resistance against enrichment is part of the prison service's traditional ethos that a prisoner is there for punishment only. My informant suggested that the majority of staff at Lewes prison are cynical about the benefit that music can have on the prisoners' welfare and rehabilitation, whereas she thinks music making could have a significant impact on the reducing of re-offending by engaging prisoners in a non-threatening way. In response to the attitude that music is not educational, I would argue that music is not only a type of Art but also mentally challenging, similar to the exercise of a mathematical equation. Music is in essence another language and to become competent in reading music requires dedication and application.

Recently a number of music workshops have been delivered with HMP Lewes including the 'Music in Prisons' programme [Black History month]; workshops

delivered by Brenda Rattray, a singing coach who delivers faith based Gospel workshops and self development programmes; and by Billy Bragg from the organisation Jail Guitar Doors.

Prior to running my own workshop I researched a number of methods, techniques and existing approaches to music therapy. I also interviewed two prisoners about their prior experiences of attending music workshops. The prisoners I interviewed appeared to disclose truthful and unbiased information about the previous music workshops they had attended. They illustrated how important it was to them to create music, to be expressive and *simply pick up an instrument*. Both prisoners I interviewed also made new friends, which they said was unlikely to have happened in their daily activity.

Having spoken with the prisoners, this encouraged me even further as I felt I would be offering a rewarding experience. Although access into HMP Lewes was difficult, interviewing as a method of research suited their situation and gave me a useful indication of the types of people I could be engaging with.

One particular issue I had to be aware of was how careful you have to be as there are a high number of inmates with mental health issues, so by evoking emotional expression in an unaware way, difficult situations might be created. Personal safety and the security of others may even be compromised.

Still, after my initial research I remained committed and confident, and ready to carry out a song writing workshop in an environment as demanding as a prison. However, I decided to run the workshop with a colleague (Jamie) rather than go it alone. I have collaborated with him in the past and felt he had the right musical and personal qualities to assist me in the workshop.

From my own experience in song writing workshops, a group of three is a favoured approach to a productive collaboration. The aim of this creative trinity is as follows:

1. A competent guitarist/pianist
2. A competent lyricist
3. A confident vocalist

I felt that with Jamie and me in the room, we would be able to help the participants gain access to all three areas.

I had regular contact with HMP Lewes who kept me up to date with the applicants and initially we were anticipating a group of twelve. However, on the first day due to

the unpredictability of the prison environment, we only had two. The last-minute unpredictability of the prison environment was a major challenge throughout the five days of the workshop, and was a tough constraint to have to come to accept.

We had put a great deal of effort into recruiting workshop participants. Initially, despite distributing posters and flyers on the wings, staff informed me of the lack of applications; therefore I had to think of a new way to increase the numbers. I was invited into HMP Lewes to attend a presentation that Billy Bragg and his campaign Jail Guitar Doors were promoting. He donated guitars for the prisoners of Lewes and was very willing to promote my workshop. I used this opportunity to hand out flyers to the fifty men that attended and spoke to them detailing my workshop and surveying what the prisoners would want from a music workshop.

In planning the workshops Jamie and I 'mind mapped' the content, brainstorming ideas on what would suit all levels of ability, including different technical exercises which beginners and intermediate levels could benefit from. We also discussed technical development and above all we planned how we were going to structure the song writing process so that at the end of the week there would definitely be at least one complete song written by the group.

Prison culture is very different from anywhere else I have experienced. The logistics and protocols are extremely rigid. The workshop was planned for five consecutive days and during this time we had to move location, which, in turn, disrupted the flow of the workshop and resulted in confusion about where the workshop was being held. Some prisoners who were told they could attend at just one day's notice were not then informed about the changed workshop venue. This did not assist with attendance as the men had to get themselves to the location on 'free flow' [a system whereby the gates are left open to enable prisoners to move freely around the prison for 20 minutes]. If they are directed to the wrong location they miss the opportunity of attending.

My colleague and I ran a song-writing workshop in HMP Lewes for 3 hours a day for four days. It was planned for five days before I learned of the difficulty of obtaining a room for that many consecutive days. In the end the workshop lasted just four days: two days in the multi faith centre and two days in the education department. By the time positive feedback got around the prison from attendees we had to move location, which reduced further uptake as the week progressed.

Jamie's and my ability to compose songs enabled us to either collaborate with participants or assist those less inspired. I was confident in our skills to offer valuable guidance. I believe this had a close connection with the level of achievement the

group felt upon completion of each song, enabling the men to feel a great sense of inclusion and group contribution. It was rewarding to see prisoners engaged in laughter and ‘banter’ with fellow prisoners and us as facilitators.

Our intention was to obtain daily feedback and to monitor behavioural patterns and/or notice any change - preferably positive, but also negative, feelings towards mood, contribution/creative expression, interaction with other participants and/or teachers, and also to induce an analytical approach with the lyrics written by the group.

A lesson plan was designed for each day so there was structure. When you’re dealing with a variety of inmates with behavioural and mental health problems, giving them routine or structure can help to focus their attention onto a subject and offer clear direction towards a goal, giving them a sense of achievement.

Lessons were planned for ten to twelve participants. In reality each workshop secured two to four participants due to poor communication within the prison, logistical problems, legal and social visits taking priority, access problems, and limited support from the wing staff. Although initially disappointing, Jamie and I harnessed the energy of those who did attend and were able to give more focussed attention to individuals. In our view this enhanced the benefits for workshop participants.

The literacy, reading and numeracy skills of an average prisoner are typical for a thirteen year old (statistics taken from the Ann Peaker Centre Website). This has to be taken very seriously so as to not offend or embarrass anyone who was either fully competent or not. I encouraged a common theme [The Weather] within the workshop, to give a safe direction and structure towards the song writing process. Initially Jamie and I offered close supervision of the song writing but as it became apparent that the members involved in our workshop were highly competent at reading and literacy we encouraged them to compose their own songs, which enhanced their sense of achievement and personal satisfaction. My colleague and I were competent players, vocalists, lyricists and melody writers therefore we were sympathetic to any prisoners who were unable or too shy to express themselves. Based on this judgement we could intervene and offer assistance in any of the lacking areas and continue the flow of the workshop. With the group together we wrote a song which was called ‘The Days Don’t Matter’.

There was a significant age gap between two of the prisoners involved in the workshop and they did not communicate readily with one another. It became understandable that their musical tastes were very different. We paired them up and guided them through a brainstorming session of what artists they preferred, after some common ground was established. We continued with the theme of weather and the lyrics soon

began to flow from both prisoners collaborating in a critical yet enthused fashion. An artist emerged (Johnny Cash) who they both shared an interest in and a song title in the vein of country music was created, 'Complain in the Rain'.

The outcome of this partnership was a great song, written from a strong bond that began as ignorance and ended in a creative unity with a shared view of appreciation for one another's contribution towards melody, chords and lyrics. The prisoners told me they had never completed a song before and were visibly moved by their achievement.

Some findings and reflections

For more than sixty years music therapy has evolved into a worldwide-recognised healing and developmental intervention. Many of the supporting theories still illustrate a growing need for the expansion of music therapy to be accepted as a complimentary form of therapy alongside contemporary medicines. Although Music Therapy [MT] is in its infancy there is a steady growing awareness of the benefits of all kinds of MT and may this positive perception increase alongside the therapist's desire to learn more about this natural alternative to modern day medicine.

Song writing represents a balance between form and an expressive, creative freedom. It is this balance that can provide solidarity during a therapy session. I argue that with a balance of form and freedom it can allow an interaction of memory and past passages of life making a previously unknown feeling become known, strengthening the link between life on the outside and a rehabilitative desire to get out of prison and resume life in society. It could be argued that bringing difficult memories into the conscious in this way is an act of deception when there hasn't been prior agreement to this level of intrusiveness. Facilitators return home when participants are left in their cells to reflect on the issues, which may have become exposed and potentially disturbing. Although a lot of discussion usually disclosed some of their 'true feelings' we were able to understand the words and decipher their meanings, which was: channelling negative thoughts; coping strategies; dealing with aggression; revisiting painful memories and focusing on their disdain for prison life in a safe and constructive way.

A high level of professionalism is required to deal with the challenges of working within a prison environment. Prior to going into the Prison I was totally ill equipped to foresee the cultural, logistical and practical obstacles that would present themselves.

There were measurable findings to our workshop experience, albeit anecdotal, but this gave me an opportunity to cross-reference our experiences with existing findings of benefits of music in prisons:

Music therapy literature and results from this descriptive study report that music therapy can be used in the correctional setting to reduce tension and anxiety, whilst also increasing motivation and ties with reality. In this field, music therapy can provide people with the opportunity to access an adaptive, contemporary and enjoyable medium whilst also providing the opportunity for the expression and constructive release of thoughts and feelings. (Personal Journal)

There is a secondary benefit of literacy enhancement through song writing rather than learning to write in the classroom, against which most prisoners have a strong aversion due to low quality experiences of learning within school. So, music workshops offer an opportunity for better engagement of those alienated from 'the system'. The fact that we were bonding with the group through song writing and music helped to overcome barriers between them and us, as outsiders. We were surprised at how quickly the men appeared to trust us.

Traditional evaluation is problematic within a prison setting and within a tightly curtailed timescale. Ideally, measures such as attitudinal change; enhanced self-esteem and longer term impact on recidivism would form part of a formal evaluation of the effects of attendance at music workshops for prisoners. None of this was possible within the scope of this project, so evaluating the benefits of this project, by necessity, was largely anecdotal and unscientific. Perception findings were that the men enjoyed the workshop, managed to focus their attention for 3 hours at a time and there was tangible mood uplift each day. The primary tangible outcome was the production of three songs by the men attending the workshop, which for individuals who spent most days asleep on their beds was a significant enhancement in their regime and productivity. Other measurable outputs were the development of skills relating to playing guitar and putting lyrics on paper.

My original assumption was that a larger group of men [approx 9-12] would satisfy my plan to song write in groups of three, provide more material to analyse and provide 'richer pickings' for the benefit of this report and my learning journey. Also the assumption was that more men would then benefit from the opportunity to become involved. In reality, due to the low numbers, the individuals who did attend received a higher quality of input and individual attention and tuition. So although fewer men benefited, the benefits were greater for those few. Equally, the smaller numbers, indeed, did not curtail my learning, as this allowed me to reflect more and structure the time better, rather than be focussed on the group dynamics and numbers. With hindsight a larger group may well have proven intimidating and inhibited my personal learning. This also highlighted the need for us as facilitators to be responsive and flexible rather than seek to adhere rigidly to a pre-conceived vision.

A significant finding was the logistical impossibility of getting all the men who expressed an interest in the workshop into the room. The assumption that filling a room with participants just because they are a captive audience in prison is a false premise and we would need to invest even more effort in gaining the support of the prison to facilitate this in future.

An unexpected impact of the workshops was experiencing intrusive thoughts after delivering the workshop. Although we were not informed of the prisoners' offences due to confidentiality and a conscious decision to avoid bias, some individuals chose to disclose during the workshops. This left me and my co-facilitator wondering whether it was safe to self-disclose; ambivalent about the relationships we were forming with them and how far to trust them. This raised the question about the importance of having a debriefing session with an experienced worker to mitigate any negative impact of the sessions and avoid any prejudice towards participants at future sessions.

The officers present can deem the subject matter of the songs controversial, for example lyrics condoning violence, substance misuse, misogyny and racism. As facilitators we had to make a judgement about the need for congruency to capitalise on potential therapeutic benefits, without allowing the content to become offensive to other participants.

When analysing the musical material shared during the programme it was found that many topics were explored and many feelings expressed. Topics discussed included criminal sentencing, coping mechanisms and the challenges of changing aggressive behaviours that result in conflict into more effective strategies for conflict resolution. (Personal journal)

This ensures that no personal interrogation takes place and the prisoner feels comfortable to disclose information at will. This freedom of expression results in the songs containing true feelings and passionate depictions of past and previous experiences and perceptions of life in and outside prison.

Based on my findings I conclude that the workshop was essentially worthwhile and effective and certainly enhanced my own learning about the topic. Undertaking primary research was invariably superior in relation to my learning and engagement with the topic than simply hypothesising and undertaking secondary research. My main conclusions are summarised below:

I underestimated the prison environment.

Understanding the prison culture prior to running the workshop would have enabled me to have realistic expectations of the logistical and communication problems which

arose. Direct contact or communication via letter with prisoners who volunteered to attend is likely to have secured better attendance.

Equally, communicating directly with the supervising Prison Officers in advance of the week could have strengthened triangulation between the Prison Officer's perception, the prisoners' and the workshop leaders' views of the benefits of music therapy in prison. This may have increased understanding and support for the intervention to secure greater attendance and success.

The workshop proved to be effective with prisoners

The planned tasks interested the men and their excitement was evident. This resulted in them being very focused and positive with their creative energy and the results were in the quality of the songs. This was mirrored by the attitude and willingness of the prisoners to be helpful and engaged, qualities which are not normally forthcoming in such a group.

The supervising Prison Officers' perceptions were positive. They expressed surprise at level of engagement by the men in particular from one bipolar offender who is well known for low levels of concentration.

Three complete songs were produced in their entirety by the group, which illustrates application to the task and elicited a sense of achievement.

Clinical Improvisation works well with low numbers. Larger groups may favour a more structured approach.

I believe the low number of participants worked in our favour. I failed to realise how difficult it would have been to be in control and supervise that many prisoners. Instead what followed was a casual number of no more than four persons per day on the workshop. This was a favourable number for collaboration in groups of three including one teacher per group.

A more structured approach would be important for a larger group due to the potential for disruption as a result of high numbers of participants with behavioural problems, ADHD, mental health issues, lack of boundaries, drug problems, need for literacy support and the possibility of conflict between the men.

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