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An Analysis of Researcher Positionality in Religious Worship Contexts

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of positionality and my particular experiences and challenges as a religious researcher within musical worship contexts. Reflecting upon my dissertation research process, I explore how my background, experiences, and conceptualizations of worship influenced the research methodological process. I discuss data findings in relation to my researcher subject position, exploring how two different churches' understandings of worship and musical practices both reflected and, at times, worked in tension against my own beliefs surrounding worship. Within the article, I address two ethnomusicological models of reflexive religious subjectivity that were helpful in framing my research methodology and also negotiating my complex subject position. The article concludes with implications for researchers in other community music settings, providing suggestions for maintaining trust and rigour while conducting research.

Keywords: Positionality, reflexivity, community music, church music, worship

Introduction

Positionality locates people and their practices in relation to others, framing one's understanding and outlook on the world. Rather than defining individuals in terms of fixed identities, positionality considers one's location within shifting, changing networks of relationships (Wamba, 2016). Reflexivity, meaning one's awareness of their position as a researcher, has little purpose unless it is connected to a greater understanding of what they are doing, the power they are holding, and the multiple identities they possess in relation to the wider world (Hopkins, 2007). This article considers the concept of positionality and my experiences and challenges as a religious researcher within musical worship contexts. I critically evaluate my own positionality, acknowledging how my biography, previous experience, and following of models of reflexive religious subjectivity (Butler, 2005, 2008; Summit, 2000, 2016) have influenced my dissertation research process. I consider how my research has been constructed, how interview questions were formulated, and how data are presented in response to such aims. I acknowledge helpful aspects of my 'insider' knowledge such as my understanding of evangelical categories and ability to 'speak the language'. However, I also interrogate ethical tensions and difficulties in maintaining trust throughout the research process, and explain how such practices are imperative for other community music research settings.

My interdisciplinary research, which integrates music education, community music, and church music fields, uses sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Theory of Practice* (1977) in connection with religion as a theoretical framework. The purpose of the research is to investigate two churches' contemporary worship music-making practices and how they may both reflect and respond to musical and theological fields in which they are located through case study research (Yin, 2014). Using Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) concepts of habitus, capital and field, I consider how worship leaders and musicians might strategize their musical behaviours and 'disrupt', or possibly affirm, traditional norms of music-making in each Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) setting. Further, I explore how such musical behaviours may reflect and shape habitus both institutionally and individually. Within my dissertation, I propose implications for a dialogical conception of habitus (Akrivou & Di San Giorgio, 2014; Catron, 2021), encouraging conscious conversational practice between agents as musicians in community music and church music settings.

My subject position as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied woman with a Canadian, middle-class, evangelical Protestant Reformed background influences my relationship to North American evangelicalism and its music. In acknowledging my experience leading worship music in several church settings, I consider how my own religious affiliation positions me relative to participants' positions from the perspectives of race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. As an 'observant participant' (Butler, 2005, p. 48), I notice myself resonating with particular church cases over others in their approach to worship. While I have found aspects of musical worship in some settings to be ideologically, theologically, or ethically problematic in relation to my own religious experiences, I have had to actively work against these opinions and understandings of data sites as 'times of worship' for myself. These themes will be further explored in the following.

Background: A Church Music Perspective

The existence of contrasting theological approaches to church music is particularly relevant to this research, as a church's conceptualization of worship directly flows to their music-making practices. Current approaches in music education and community music fields tend to place an emphasis on people, process, community, participation, and inclusion (Higgins, 2012), and scholars argue that when technical virtuosity and excellence of performance come to the forefront instead, young people may be excluded from a personally relevant music education (Wright, 2019; see also Benedict et al., 2016; Small, 1977/1996, Westerlund & Karlsen, 2016). While various Western Art Music traditions have filtered into music teaching and learning contexts such as community music settings (Baker, 2014;

Vaugeois, 2007), church music provides a complex lens through which to analyze notions of participation, inclusivity, and accessibility in contrast to notions of excellence, musical product, the individual, and consumption. Often, community music approaches can be situated alongside frameworks of excellence in church music-making settings, further complicating the matter.

Church music is often directed by understandings of worship as organized ‘vertically’ (doxologically) or ‘horizontally’ (communally) (Best, 1982; Flynn, 2006). These conceptualizations of worship, as well as the church’s overall position in the social field, impact approaches to musical worship. An example of this could be understood as the pursuit of musical ‘excellence’ for God alone verses a church’s increased focus on inclusion of musicians at varying skill levels. With the rise of evangelicalism in North America, such contrasting approaches to church music have been seen to reflect denominations’ stances on cultural adaptation and engagement; divisions that have been integral to the fundamentalist-modernist split as two general branches of Protestantism (Van Dyken, 2017). My dissertation specifically addresses Protestant Christian worship as a major branch of evangelical Christianity in which two church cases, which serve as my data sites, are situated.

Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) in particular has risen in popularity in evangelical churches to advance and expand communities (Van Dyken, 2017). CWM is a contemporary genre of church music that incorporates popular music instruments such as drums, keyboard, and guitars, popular tunes, and tends to focus on believer’s personal worship experiences (Benjamins, 2021; Lim & Ruth, 2017). Some understand CWM to have more of a participatory focus with its links to popular musical instruments, informal/nonformal learning, and accessibility (Benjamins, 2019). The role of CWM in worship, however, varies according to approaches and theological understandings of worship mentioned previously. Therefore, as I collected data from two churches with different philosophies and approaches to worship, including their understandings of CWM, it was necessary for me to acknowledge how my own theology and background influenced my interpretation of and approach to the churches.

Methodological Considerations

When conducting research in a cultural context that is seen as ‘familiar’, I sought to follow Ingalls’s (2018) ethnographic methodological considerations in negotiating her shifting relationship with evangelical Christianity. She similarly conducted research focused on evangelical Christianity both as a Christian worshipper and musician, yet from an ethnographic perspective, which I applied to a case study context.

The standard ethnographic field-research narrative ‘often centers on the researcher’s journey from distance to proximity, as he or she becomes more deeply integrated within the community and as knowledge about a group of people and their practices deepens’ (Ingalls, 2018, p. 25). For ethnographers who are also ‘culture bearers’ (Burnim, 1985, p. 433), meaning they are a member of the culture working in the familiar context and conducting fieldwork ‘at home’, the process tends to be inverted. Following this model, musical ethnography becomes ‘a way to move back from focusing on musical specifics that were already deeply familiar, a means of envisioning broader concerns, musical and human alike’ (Stock & Chou, 2008, p. 109). The process involves forming a space of critical distance, especially by those whose research endeavors closely intersect with their daily lives. A researcher may understand the process as one of ‘de-familiarization’, where ‘familiar and thus often overlooked cultural practices are rendered as a visible source of scrutiny’ (Ingalls, 2018, p. 25). The research field must be carefully and actively constructed when conducting research, possibly resulting in shifts of what constitutes ‘home’. Ingalls (2018) refers to the presence of intersectionality in research – which emphasizes the ‘multiple, mutually influencing aspects of identity that any individual must negotiate’ (p. 26), reminding the researcher that there is often no straightforward classification of an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in particular research cases where the researcher is commonly integrated in the field.

I have spent over ten years serving in church musical leadership settings accompanying worship services and participating in church service planning. Similar to Ingalls (2018), my background and lifelong experience in North American churches provided me with a ‘thorough understanding of evangelical terms and categories for describing worship and religious experience, what some have parodied as “Christianese”’ (p. 28). My ability to ‘speak the language’ fluently appeared to lead to a sense of trust among study participants. In my pre-planned interview questions and non-participant observation, however, I strived to keep a distance from participants. This allowed me to properly represent my position as a researcher and maintain my ability to carefully and critically analyze worship experiences. In this way, when engaging in conversations with participants, I attempted to position myself as a Christian worshipper without giving too many specifics about my theological beliefs or background in a Protestant Reformed church, as this could have stifled conversations as well as participants’ expressions of individual theological beliefs.

The Church Cases

This research used qualitative case study design as its methodological approach (Yin, 2014). Data was gathered online due to COVID-19 using semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, non-participant observation of worship team and choir rehearsals, and document analysis. Participants included active church musicians and worship leaders at two churches. Both church cases were located in southwestern Ontario, Canada and were purposefully selected due to their contrasting approaches to church worship. Data collection occurred from May to July 2021 and eighteen church musicians and two worship leaders in total participated in the study. Both churches were situated in the same city, one of which is a Christian Presbyterian Church and the other a Christian Reformed Church. The Christian Presbyterian Church is part of the broader Reformed tradition and part of a particular domination originating in Scotland. In a general sense, there is not one fixed ‘Presbyterian’ worship style, it is both ‘structured’ and ‘open’, but they tend to follow the traditional liturgical year and follow a balance of hymns, preaching, and congregational participation (McCrostie, 2008). The Presbyterian church focused significantly on the pursuit of social justice through its music, incorporating CWM with ‘social justice equality...[to] be a leading voice in what the music is saying’ (Worship Leader 1).

The second church case is part of the greater Christian Reformed Church of North America. The Reformed tradition, often linked to John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli from the Reformation, includes a broad range of churches and denominations. The Christian Reformed Church broadly tends to follow a ‘blended’ worship style including a patterned focus of worship with the use of hymns and psalms in conjunction with some CWM trends. This denomination, with roots in the Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands, places a high value on theological study and application to current world issues (Bratt, 1984). Participants from the Christian Reformed Church maintained a ‘balanced’ approach to worship in terms of musical performance versus facilitation, explaining that as musicians, they understood their role to be leaders and facilitators in the congregation’s worship of God. As one worship leader explained, they need to be doing their best, ‘but you’re not doing it to perform, you’re not doing it to glorify yourself’ (Worship Leader 2). Both of these cases have different emphases on worship and prompted me to consider my complex position as a church musician, Protestant Reformed worshiper, and community music researcher.

My study was constructed for the purpose of examining music-making experiences in churches, a phenomenon that is of interest to me because of my lifelong engagement in the church through leading and accompanying worship services. I purposefully designed my semi-structured interview questions to

be open ended, inviting participants to explain ‘what worship means for them’ and ‘why they lead music in church’ without too many boundaries in terms of how the questions were framed. I invited interviewees to respond in as much or as little detail as they were comfortable, and I kept an ongoing journal to write down my initial thoughts about participants’ responses. Later in the research process it was helpful for me to go back to my journal and see how my interpretations of participants’ responses changed and developed over time in the process of data analysis.

Models of Reflexive Religious Subjectivity

Butler (2002, 2005) and Summit (2000, 2016) provide two helpful ethnomusicological models of reflexive religious subjectivity that were beneficial in framing my research methodology and negotiating my complex subject position. Butler (2005) begins his research on Pentecostal music-making in an Afro-Caribbean context by stating his position as an African American Pentecostal Christian musician, emphasizing that his experiences in the field paint a ‘multi-sited’ canvas of research that contributes to a particular distinctiveness of research. Butler (2005) also refers to the involvement of ‘rhetorical acrobatics’ when negotiating between the dialogues of faith and scholarship as a researcher who is both an ethnographic and religious ‘observer’ (p. 48). In acknowledging the difficulties of this negotiation, Butler’s (2005) anthropological fieldwork moves away from ‘participant observation’ toward the ‘observation of participation’. This shift moves away from ‘dispassionate observation’ towards the ‘participatory aspects of field experience’ (Butler, 2005, p. 48). Drawing from Butler’s (2005) work, I have focused on the participatory aspects of field experiences, observing my experience singing along in my head to songs in worship rehearsals that I have observed, and acknowledging that I perceive through observation the religion that I am studying in multiple ways.

Summit (2000) similarly maintained a complex subject position throughout his research as he continued in his role as a rabbi studying Jewish congregational music-making. He explains that as a committed Jew, he approached his research ‘well equipped by [his] religious and cultural background’ and felt like both a ‘guest observer and a participant’ (Summit, 2000, p. 5). When considering research participants, he writes, ‘I was encountering people who were simultaneously “me” and “not me” [and] as I studied others’ identities, my identity was constantly in flux, a situation common to researchers engaged in fieldwork’ (Summit, 2000, p. 6). As an insider, Summit (2000) reflects that he had to pay careful attention to how he approached informants, taking care not to talk with informants in the ‘shorthand’, trying not to be too quick in understanding participants’ responses in order to avoid cutting short ‘valuable observations and explanations’ (p. 8), while also trying not to ‘show off’ his knowledge of the

liturgy and music which might possibly ‘intimidate informants and keep them from sharing information’ (p. 8). I attempted to follow similar advice in my process of data collection, approaching participants carefully with eagerness to listen and engage, rather than provide quick responses.

Based on Butler (2005) and Summit’s (2000) two models of reflexive religious subjectivity and difficulties that were addressed, I found it necessary in my research to establish honest, trustworthy relationships with participants while clearly acknowledging and reflecting upon my own subjectivities, positionalities, agenda, and thinking throughout the research process. While I was able to move in and out of various roles and vantage points as a researcher, I found that my own religious affiliation positions me in relation to participants and their religious backgrounds along with their current church contexts. As a result, I constantly worked between a sense of familiarity and distance with participants. This complex subject position, however, was not a ‘weakness’ of mine, as I found that my insider position provided me with access to interpretations not possible otherwise.

During processes of data analysis, I was able to first reflect on my own position in relation to data and then consider other interpretations. A self-reflective process was integral in helping me maintain my complex subject position as a researcher. I was also careful to include a ‘reference group’ of other individuals, such as my research supervisors and some trustworthy colleagues, to check my interpretation of findings and suggest alternative readings or interpretations. For example, there were a few times where I interpreted a church’s worship practices much more simply than they were (i.e. generalizing a worship leader’s musical practices to be associated with the church’s denomination at hand). My supervisors encouraged me to look at the findings more deeply from a critical sociological lens, drawing on more of Bourdieu’s concepts. They suggested considering the ‘rules of the game’ (doxa) and the ‘shared belief in the nature of the game’ (illusio) present within the particular church, further exploring the worship leader’s practices in accordance with implicit rules present within the social field. I quickly learned from my reference group that my data could have multiple interpretations, each with several layers. Further, I engaged in member checking with interviewees to ensure that I was properly representing their comments and approaches to church worship within my findings.

Data Findings in Relation to Positionality

Findings from both church cases indicate a clear link between each church’s conceptualization of what constitutes worship and their resulting musical practices. While this theme, along with others, are

further discussed elsewhere (Benjamins, forthcoming), here I discuss it in relation to researcher positionality.

Participants from the Presbyterian church explained that their musical director/worship leader was relatively new in her role. As she became integrated into the church, the musical director introduced more CWM repertoire with a social justice focus. As previously addressed, she saw her role as a leading voice in the pursuit of equality and social justice through music. When observing their musical rehearsals, I found myself wary of some of the theology expressed and the ‘end focus’ of the lyrics of the repertoire. My background and theological/social positioning have impacted my preference for church music with lyrics focused on Biblical content, ‘training’ and ‘teaching’ worshippers in their theology as they sing. While this was present in much of the repertoire at the Presbyterian church, I noticed a slant towards current world issues such as climate change, educational and environmental justice, poverty and more. When speaking with musicians, some of them indicated that they appreciated the current repertoire, helping them express their spirituality in new ways. As the researcher, however, my positionality and particular church background prompted hesitation on my end listening to these responses, feeling like worship should focus even more on its ultimate ‘end’, meaning, God. As I felt tensions within me, I strived to maintain a neutral position and not let my feelings impact my responses in the semi-structured interviews.

Yet other participants also expressed concern with the current direction of the first church’s repertoire. One musician described the music as being ‘less prayerful than it could be sometimes’, where music is done for music’s sake alone (Participant 1). I found myself resonating with this participant’s responses, as I felt similarly. The inclusion of CWM repertoire played a role in my internal dialogue as well, as I tend to take a moderate approach to CWM. Growing up, I found the entrance of CWM in churches to be fascinating. I grew up watching local congregations grapple with these new ‘praise and worship’ melodies, popular tunes, and increased focus on personal worship experiences. I heard conversations of hesitation in letting ‘worldly popular culture’ enter the church. Yet I also saw some increased congregational engagement with the entrance of this repertoire. In my roles as a worship planner and musician, I tend to take a careful approach when incorporating contemporary repertoire. I understand my role as a worship musician to be focused on the facilitation of congregational worship to God, and understand that while some worshippers may feel more comfortable with traditional hymns, others resonate with contemporary repertoire. I attempted to keep these realizations in my mind when conducting interviews and engaging with participants.

The second church case – the Christian Reformed Church – upheld more of a blended approach in terms of musical repertoire which I aligned with. The primary worship leader spoke of maintaining a ‘balanced flavour’ in repertoire and referred to the need for repertoire to be ‘friendly’ for congregational song. When leading this semi-structured interview, I felt that my philosophy of worship clearly resonated with the worship leader and the church’s overall approach. I acknowledge that my background in the Christian Reformed Church and my personal beliefs positioned me closer to the second church’s data findings. In interviews, therefore, I attempted to maintain a consistent position and keeping a regular journal of my reactions to participants’ responses aided me in the process. When considering my findings in relation to my research questions, I found it interesting to consider each church’s positioning in the overall social field of musical worship and how their musical and theological beliefs reflected and responded to such positioning, shaping future musical decisions.

Overall, I found that study participants maintained a ‘well-honed reflexivity’ (Summit, 2000, p. 9) when addressing their music-making practices. Some of them noted why they preferred certain genres of church music over others, acknowledging their background, experiences, and current theological positioning. They were thoughtful in their observations about their church’s worship and music and their overall participation in the church communities. Other participants had a difficult time answering questions about worship in the semi-structured interviews. With these participants, my research aimed to open critical dialogue and contribute to new ways of considering and understanding church music-making practices. Similar to Ingalls (2018), I aimed for worshippers to find my scholarly perspective on church music informative and helpful as they critically analyzed their practice and sought to make worship reflect their theological ideals. Further, I aimed to provide insights regarding the responsibilities of positionality within the research experience, being transparent about my location, background, and religious positioning. Moving forward, I plan to share my findings with all study participants as well and continue to engage in further dialogue with them.

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

Researchers in other community music settings may face similar ethical tensions and difficulty in maintaining trust when they resonate specifically with the community in which they are studying. When reflecting on my experiences and challenges as a researcher within religious worship contexts, I believe it is imperative for researchers to locate themselves, their biography, and experiences when entering a site of data collection. Within all aspects of the research process, including data collection, interactions with participants, analysis, and dissemination, it is necessary for researchers to critically reflect upon

their assumptions, experiences, and positionality. My broader research findings from my thesis propose implications for a dialogical conception of habitus (Akrivou & Di San Giorgio, 2014; Catron, 2021), encouraging conscious conversational practice between agents as musicians in various settings. While this implication for practice is further explored in relation to worship leadership and facilitation, ‘disrupting’, or affirming, traditional norms of music-making (Benjamins, forthcoming), in the context of this article it may also be understood in terms of researcher positionality and methods. Reflecting on this process, it has informed how I understand myself as a researcher and the need for increased intentional, conversational practice in various data collection sites. A reflexive position that models such practices may have resonance for other researchers as well. Facilitating spaces of open, honest dialogue with participants is helpful both in terms of maintaining trust and rigour while also contributing to participants’ awareness of their own practices, tendencies, and habitus in relation to music-making.

Another complexity of my research that deserves recognition is the impact of the COVID-19 on my processes of data collection. There were a small number of churches willing to participate in the study and all methods of data collection occurred virtually. I found that since interviews and observations occurred over Zoom, it was more difficult to build a positive rapport with musicians and make connections, finding commonalities between our backgrounds and my familiarity with the Christian faith. The virtual platform made it difficult to judge participants’ reactions to the interview questions as well as assessing any risks to participants (Eynon et al., 2017). To account for challenges of virtual research methods, I ensured that participants were informed that they could leave at any point and abstain from answering particular questions. Further, using multiple sources of evidence as processes of triangulation helped ensure that I was adequately accounting for the ‘naturalistic’ behavior of musicians in the virtual setting (Marotzki et al., 2017).

This article aimed to critically examine my own researcher positionality, exploring how my biography, previous experience, and implementation of models of reflexive religious subjectivity influenced my research process. In extending some of these themes to other community music research sites, I found that the implementation of models of reflexivity proved to aid me significantly in the research process. As I aimed to follow such models which served as a guide and provided me with confidence in the research process, others might find different models of reflexivity to implement within their particular research contexts. Such models may be a helpful guide in negotiating tensions that the researcher may face. Finally, drawing upon a fellow community of researchers for feedback and dialogue throughout the research process is one of the key strategies I found helped to keep my work honest and trustworthy. Engaging in member checking contributed to my study’s validity and reliability as I considered my

positionality, beliefs, and biases in the research setting. The positionality that we hold is an integral element of our research that can influence the research process in its entirety. Interrogating our experiences, potential beliefs and biases is a difficult, but necessary process to maintain reliability, validity, and rigour.

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