Giving Power Back to the Communities: writing about positionalities, power, music and the arts in Greek and British contexts

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Abstract

This research paper uses collaborative auto-ethnography to explore positionalities and community work undertaken in Greece and the UK. Through merging the common elements of self-observed data and reflections of these contexts, the paper will explore shifting and challenging positionalities and power. The data and material collected for this paper derived from two university placements involving research in these communities through giving direct support aiming to improve well-being and safety. While working with these vulnerable communities, important issues were raised through community arts and music work. These include the use of language, acknowledging difficult realities, immigration and structural barriers, vulnerability, and creating a space for sharing power and control. Approaching the limitations of this study and recognising that further research needs to be conducted in this area, the paper focuses exclusively on common experiences and reflections. This resulted in motivation for considering the complexities of positionalities of working and systemically benefiting from vulnerable communities.

Keywords: community, power, music, art, positionalities

Introduction

This paper addresses some of the complexities around positionalities and power dynamics in working within vulnerable communities. It is also an exploration and reflection of two facilitators placed by universities in Greece and the UK within communities that needed support; the experiences of this work were also opportunities for research in partnership with their universities. The lessons learned and questions raised from the facilitators' reflections formed the basis of the discussion on the place of vulnerable communities in arts and music work. Additionally, the paper proposes ideas for how facilitators working with vulnerable communities could explore and challenge positionalities. Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study or, in this case, the communities (Coghlan, 2014). Every phase of the research process is affected by the position the researcher adopts. From how the questions are initially constructed, to the ways the outcomes are disseminated and presented to the readers and how holding a positionality of power compares to the individuals participating (Coghlan, 2014).

Although we, as the authors, have worked in different countries and communities as facilitators, we became aware of a commonality between our experiences and perspectives. Our passion for

holistically supporting people and becoming better practitioners, as well as our common lived experiences of systemic racism and violence in various forms, have led us to investigate and approach complex community issues that we hope to transform or challenge. One essential aspect of this paper for us was to use appropriate language to describe our positions as well as the positionality of the communities we represented. In order to demonstrate our desire to support these communities effectively and fairly, we opted to use the term facilitator in contrast to community worker or researcher. The term facilitator represented for us the direct and collaborative work alongside both communities in addition to the research. Both situations were placements and not paid roles but were positions that held authority within these contexts.

The first community context concerned a feminist service that supported ethnic minority women and children fleeing domestic violence. The second context concerned a Greek organisation supporting children living with cancer and neoplastic disease as well as their carers. This paper took a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach and revealed what we felt were key themes through shared discussion and analysis of our learning. Our aim was to understand and explore positionalities, power and community arts and music-based work. Through our discussions and story exchanges, we found a narrative journey - a beginning leading to opening up and learning, which transformed into ideas for action and change. These stages were explored through the shared themes of *immigration and belonging*, *going beyond acknowledgement and vulnerability* and finally, *power-sharing and community*.

Within these settings, the need for understanding the political contexts and systemic barriers the communities encounter was essential to provide a reflection of positionalities within it. These considerations around the political reality of the communities allowed us to think about opening our learning beyond acknowledgement and question our own positions in the organisations. This then created space to consider power dynamics, power sharing and creating a sense of agency for the communities and facilitators. We hope the reflections and experiences shared in this paper will raise necessary questions but also create a dialogue when considering community arts and music-based work.

Methodology

This paper takes two auto-ethnographic accounts from our experiences as facilitators within community placements from which common themes emerged. Auto-ethnography allowed us to

share our insights, feelings and encounters that shaped our analysis and thoughts on working with vulnerable communities and our reflections on positionalities. We were led to a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach in which we reviewed and shared previous research, diary entries and arts and music-making from the time of the work taking place. In addition, we reflected on our community work from a psychodynamic psychotherapy perspective, which aligns with our training as art and music psychotherapists. Reflection within psychotherapy, in particular, is the process of listening to the service user's sounds and silences and processing the data of this interaction to understand its meanings (Cabaniss et al., 2016). We have used the space since these experiences happened, as well as our current training, to create analysis from a collaborative and thoughtful process of sharing.

Qualitative research methods can be described as including data in words rather than numbers (Busetto et al., 2020). Moving further, regarding auto-ethnography, Wall (2008) explains that connecting theoretical research to lived experience is a valid and significant methodological approach that creates a personal narrative while involving social and political contextualisation and critique. Chang (2008) supports that there are two ways of exporting data from autobiographical fieldwork that can be used in auto-ethnography. The first one concerns self-observation data when the researcher collects factual data about what is happening at the time research is conducted. The second one is referred to as self-reflection data which describes introspective data representing the researcher's present perspectives, knowing that the researcher has finished their field research/direct contact (Chang, 2008). In this paper, we will focus mainly on the introspective data derived and formed from our contemporary views as art and music psychotherapy trainees, respectively.

In exploring collaborative auto-ethnography, Greene et al.'s (2021) work in conjunction with Chang (2016) informed our thinking on how we could come together to share our stories, interpretations of the experiences and lessons learned within different cultural and community contexts. Greene et al. (2021) share the parallels between musicians and researchers working individually and collectively to perform or create a piece of research. Traditional art making too, can be very individual, but through the choices of the artist can take place collectively, which Talwar (2016) argues can enable socially conscious mutual change. As we shared our experiences, we found that the motivation to work collaboratively was reflected in our placement work, psychotherapy work and in the methodology for this paper. Our introspective data led us to realise the three themes we explored created a narrative of 'beginning lessons', 'learning and opening up', and finally pushing for 'action

and change'. We have delineated the three main themes aligning in parallel with our writing process for this paper, as seen in the table below:

Beginning/Learning	Learning/Opening Up	Action/Change
Theme 1: Immigration and Belonging	**Theme 2: Going beyond acknowledgement and vulnerability**	**Theme 3: Power-sharing and community**

Table 1: Collaborative journey and themes

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The paper recognises that a limitation is set around one of the accounts not being an explicit community-arts placement, though their experience as a visual artist was employed and their knowledge as an art psychotherapist is used in their auto-ethnographic reflections. The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Introduction to Contexts

In order to examine positionalities, we will briefly situate and explain the two contexts where the research took place. The first context for consideration was an LGBTQ+ friendly service supporting ethnic minority and migrant women, children and young people experiencing and fleeing domestic violence from their partners, ex-partners and other extended family or community members. The service was based in a large British city, and will be referred to as 'the first community group' in this paper.

The service provided crisis care and emotional support as well as fulfilling practical needs such as housing, immigration, and community support. Through this placement, the violence experienced by this group and how this was supported throughout other services across the area were researched. This work required a robust understanding of the immigration process for minorities fleeing abuse and how policies and systems often repeat harm. Additionally, there were interactions in assistance with childcare and in working with young people and children in difficult situations through outdoor activities and arts-based work. Alongside other staff, the work required supporting, organising, and participating in vulnerable women's groups and researching relevant policies and writing reports as well as providing direct emergency support to those fleeing abusive and traumatic situations.

The second community group concerned an NGO (non-profit organisation) supporting children receiving cancer treatment in a hospital in Greece. Children from different parts of Greece stayed in funded accommodation alongside their guardians for the duration of their chemotherapy treatment in the Oncology Inpatient Unit. The ages of the main participants of the community music group varied from 1 to 18 years old, usually staying in the provided housing for months, some of them for years, due to the need for long-term cancer treatment and support. Additionally, refugee children and adolescents affected by cancer, and their parents, were also hosted there. The community music service supported those directly impacted by poverty and low-income levels.

As part of a multidisciplinary team consisting of social care practitioners and psychologists, the facilitator aimed to support children's well-being through community music, in accordance with the University's research and well-being team from the Musicology Department. This work required cultural competencies, organisational skills, and community psychology knowledge in order to work firstly with the groups directly affected by cancer as well as the broader community around them. During this period, the public stigma of cancer in Greece was something that was affecting young people and causing psychological distress, among others (Kim & Yi, 2014). Therefore, it was a priority to find ways through community music to examine how vulnerable individuals could be supported.

Theme 1: Immigration and Belonging

When examining the common ground of our working contexts, a central theme to understanding positionality in these communities was the complex political situations both communities were facing. Not only concerning violence and sickness but also how their status as immigrants impacted their experiences of the services and how this impacted the authors. We felt in this paper that to appropriately represent the communities, it was vital that we presented the varied systemic barriers that they faced and continue to face. We hoped that contextualising the structures and position of the vulnerable community of these placements allowed for a more honest and open reflection of our experiences and positions. This also served as a starter in our journey as facilitators in exploring positionality and power.

We approached the concept of a systemic barrier as one that impacts an individual or community from improving their life or getting access to safety and care; this barrier is structural and political (Santos et al., 2021). When working with the first community group, the impact of gender-based

violence and intimate partner violence (which falls under the umbrella of domestic violence) (World Health Organisation, 2012), and the overall influence of patriarchy as a system that upholds the framework for men to hold structural power over women in numerous public and private spaces, had to be considered. Understanding this alongside the impact of racism, immigration law, poverty, and LGBTQ+ discrimination was also crucial as the community faced prejudice in their need to access support from institutions (Hulley, et., 2022). Critical to the work was the facilitator's role as a witness to the service users' lives, specifically, how the difficulties of reaching support were compounded by immigration law, institutional racism and language barriers which led to further isolation. Community outreach and connection through support groups, creative projects and outdoor activities were vital.

Within the second context, the impact of poverty and the refugee crisis that Greece had been facing as part of global migration was jeopardising the rights of children and young people to receive equal and fair health care when it was much needed. These barriers augmented the inequalities in treating cancer in refugee and low-income children (Sullivan et al., 2019) while putting in danger their lives and well-being. Although the community organisation provided health and accommodation care costs, racial injustice towards immigrant children or their carers raised multiple challenges for the facilitator and the multidisciplinary team. The broader systemic structure around them was not something that could change within a day, so part of our role was influencing how the wider public understood these issues, which also presupposed our own substantial understanding of the issue. Through community music work, support and awareness were established creatively, internally-working with the children and young people with music, and externally- planning and working with carers, the hospital and school communities outside the organisation. Overall, the organisation was attempting to offer holistic support to this community regarding their accommodation, financial, social and health care support.

When writing this paper, we found that our community groups faced similar systemic barriers in being primarily female carers and immigrant communities dealing with racial injustice and violence. Furthermore, the services were created due to the underlying factors that impacted the support the community had available. Following the work within these contexts, intersectionality was a helpful framework that allowed us to understand how multiple connections to identity – i.e. sex, gender, class, disability, race, sexuality – inform personal and collective experiences of discrimination and subordination through different structural oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989). We

believe this is further needed as the immigration, legal and government system remain a major barrier to those needing support (Medact, 2014). These barriers and systems actively recreate abuse through structures that punish immigration status and are enabled by systematic racial bias (Medact, 2014).

These structures and systems are rooted in colonialist, white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal norms, and behaviour outside of the accepted norm is viewed negatively or as a direct challenge to hegemonic power (Talwar, 2019). Through understanding this, we began thinking about how our positions are impacted on an interpersonal and structural level. Reflecting on the project diaries kept through this work in the first context, there is recognition of a sense of connection in being a second-generation immigrant and this helped to create a sense of belonging for the facilitator and the service users. It was unavoidable to not consider the impact of navigating systems that spoke of supporting vulnerable people but, in actuality, did harm and assisted in creating an environment of isolation and powerlessness. As facilitators researching these communities, we questioned our position of privilege and power in these spaces and asked what authority we had to speak for another group.

Within the second context, the facilitator worked in a distressing environment not only concerning cancer treatment but also supporting immigrant and marginalised individuals navigating their treatment, their social inclusion, and the health system, most of the time in a country that was foreign to them. Music, as Akoyunoglou (2016) stated:

> provided a non-verbal form of communication beyond language and created a sense of belonging and empowerment in this new context, as well as contributed to cultural maintenance, social interaction, and possible stress reduction within the safe space of the new community context (p.7)

Additionally, complex issues of race, discrimination and inclusivity were considered, as well as the privileged positionality of the facilitator, e.g. who added to the power imbalance and experience in the group? For the facilitator, it felt difficult to approach the large systemic scale of health barriers and lack of health access the community members were facing. Given these parameters, although we as facilitators were approaching these contexts in a privileged position, we also faced the limitations and the vulnerability deriving from the lack of community tools, such as wider funding

or mental health-related support for staff and service users. These experiences raised the tough realities of people who were often left on the margin of society and revealed multiple layers to the work of stepping into community groups as a facilitator who was there in a position of authority. As facilitators, the impact of patriarchy, racism, and generational trauma, including rooting back from war and violence in Greece (Yehuda and Lehrner, 2018), profoundly impacted the work. We also acknowledge that the building of trust among ourselves as facilitators and these communities was required. These experiences provided space for reflection on our shared learning and in recognising the importance of creating a sense of agency for the community and facilitators.

Theme 2: Going beyond acknowledgement and vulnerability
The second theme of this paper examines how we, as facilitators, approached the common standpoint of moving beyond acknowledgement and thinking about vulnerability within our work with both communities. It also needs to be recognised that, along with the writing process, we realised that this point constituted a middle stage: a transitional phase of organising our experiences as writers of this paper which led to discussing power-sharing within a community and our learning as facilitators working with these communities. Reflecting on our work, we realised that the learning process for us was ongoing and was coming organically while rethinking and resonating with the incidents that had taken place and our practice and research experiences.

In order to evaluate and reflect on our work, self-observation data was collected in the form of diary entries and feedback from the multidisciplinary team and the universities, individual perspectives, service users' opinions and feelings from the sessions and recordings of musical reflections based on our practice after the sessions. Additionally, we were able to revisit these personal records years later with the purpose of writing this paper from a perspective informed by art and music psychotherapies. Consequently, we have observed a sense of radical change within us after the end of our practices. After understanding that difficult realities have been raised during our work, we wanted to explore how we could process this. How could we move beyond acknowledging the positionalities underpinning our practice and feeding this environment of privileged over those who were racially, systemically and financially restricted?

As such, we were wary of only stating our position or sharing our demographic information and questioned what came next after acknowledgement. Understanding power dynamics was a crucial starting point and to do that, intersectional analysis and assessment of material conditions were

required as the intersection of individual and collective experiences informs marginalised people's daily lives, including the facilitators.

Reflecting back, we ask if we recognised our own power and whether we were vulnerable enough to acknowledge the power dynamics as someone entering another person's life in a time of extreme distress. We did not think as facilitators, we were encouraged, nor did we encourage ourselves to challenge the hierarchical nature of this unpaid work. Also, as individuals affected by the long-term effects of gender violence and racism, we question the role of women, being viewed as capable of being therapists, community workers, carers (Morgan-Consoli et al., 2018) but not holding a higher positionality within the organisations' administrations and sectors of where we were working. In an examination of privilege and its impact on an individual, Turner (2018) agrees that if, as individuals, we've been taught to be perceived as superior, then we will reject the idea of being inferior and vice versa. Therefore, to achieve a sense of unity, this dyadic model must be shaken and reformed by those who hold privilege and approach others with humility and respect.

The first step for us towards this direction was to protect and respect communities' vulnerability, by not owning any video, audio recordings, or photos taken during the sessions, in order to maintain and protect their privacy at a time of intense vulnerability. In discussing this, questions on positionality and power began to form, including asking if we could reposition ourselves within these communities without presenting as experts of their experiences, or as vulnerable members of these communities, which we are not. By asking questions such as *what would happen if we could shift the positionalities and give some power back to the communities?, what does that look like in practice?* and *how are the service users considered and treated beyond being seen as solely cancer or violence survivors?,* we began to explore more of our roles as facilitators within the existing positionalities and power structures.

Turner (2018) refers to a level of necessary vulnerability or humility in recognising privilege to challenge the position of power we could hold as facilitators. Upon reflection, we agreed that a level of discomfort must be engaged with to reconcile our positions as facilitators working within vulnerable communities. We must sit with the power differences by going beyond acknowledgement and privilege discourse. We must also reconcile what power we wield over these communities and recognise that they are trapped within a system that often holds them in contempt.

We also recognise that it was imperative to consider that our experiences of feeling vulnerable were affected by the differing contexts and our own differing personalities and experiences.

As part of this reflection, we asked why it's important to consider positionality and power. An interrogation of political and personal power systems and dynamics is vital as it can allow the facilitators to be vulnerable enough to examine alternative ways of support that could centre the experience of the vulnerable communities themselves. It also allows the community we hope to serve the chance for agency and control over the support they need, in relation to the projects we take part in. Thinking about our vulnerability as facilitators could open a dialogue between ourselves and the communities, which, as facilitators, we agree are the ones who can best approach the ways that they want to be cared for and supported. We both agree that this shift of positionalities demands the confrontation of our vulnerability as individuals and "expertise" as facilitators and community arts could play a pivotal role in assisting this shift. Furthermore, this leads to a crucial consideration of how power operates on the structural level, as in theme one, the personal level as in theme two and the collective level, which we will explore in theme three.

Theme 3: Power-sharing and community

Moving forward, we determined a final theme titled *power-sharing and community*. This was the final part of our learning in which we investigate how we can purposefully take action towards shifting positionalities. As facilitators, it is essential to interrogate the power dynamics within the context we are working with and approach our own privilege of being placed as persons of power in work with a vulnerable community. The lack of experience as young facilitators on the issues surrounding power and positionalities within a vulnerable community can seemingly offer safety for the facilitator. Yet, at the same time, the guilt of not doing enough for these service users could leave us at risk of incapability to support them and powerlessness to impact someone's life that may need us effectively. Though, we understand that this issue needs to be further investigated in the future, we also recognise the limitations of our study.

Space also needs to be given to question how power is used for domination over others. Foucault (1979) argues that truth in our society derives only from multiple forms of constraint and induces regular effects of power. While, anti-racist and feminist perspectives of power can challenge and reposition where power can be re-directed and how it can be used collectively to uplift (Allen, 2021). Golob and Giles (2013) debate that although power operates as a constraint on action, its

effects are never only repressive – the exercise of power always simultaneously both inhibits and enables action (Golob & Giles, 2013). This is where we believe our positionality lies as facilitators.

As community music and arts facilitators, our roles expect us to offer empathy, care and support alongside a creative outlet. The confrontation of our vulnerability as individuals and "expertise" as facilitators in community arts and music could play a pivotal role in assisting this shift. Multiple community arts and music activities, for instance, role-playing within music, taking turns creating art, or expressing our emotions in a non-verbal way which could be safer for an individual in distress; could initiate the reciprocity needed to develop this shift in positionalities and allow the facilitator to better understand the context they are working within. Due to the communicative form of arts and music (Markworth, 2014), without necessarily making use of the language and its implications, we could reframe powerlessness and positionalities through shared music or art and, consequently, shared power.

While practising liberation from the positionalities we have situated ourselves into, we can reframe positionalities while holding accountability and awareness from that in a reciprocal way: both from the facilitator as well as the vulnerable community. Reflections we have on how we could further embed this into our practices include:

- providing a safer non-judgemental space;
- making room for control over decisions on varied themes of proposed activities;
- opening possibilities for non-verbal communication;
- encouraging culturally specific music and art connection;
- creating an environment for music and art creation in the moment and having that be validated are forms of power sharing as well as shared learning.

This creation could also initiate an open dialogue that would first benefit the community's voices to be seen and heard. As facilitators, we have used various community arts and music techniques to empower communities to find their voice and communicate in the best way possible to support them. Some of them included writing songs about being stigmatised and raising awareness while sharing it with the public, creating art that could be sold to support the community's best interests or presenting a theatrical play based on lived experiences of racism and what could have been done differently to change this narrative.

When reflecting on shared learning and power dynamics, we thought about the use of unpaid labour from both sides, the facilitator and the communities. We aim to raise awareness about two positionalities that could be taken advantage of, existing within a common wider systemic frame. On the one hand, facilitators work voluntarily to support universities' purposes of action, such as research and community support led by the institution using unpaid human resources, who many times are vulnerable individuals as well. On the other hand, unpaid community members who participate in the sessions as service users and research subjects immensely enhance facilitators' learning and universities' research while participating in sessions that could also feed wrong positionality patterns within the organisations or even re-traumatise them in the name of learning and achieving community work aims.

Community facilitators that are not directly part of the community they are hoping to support, also need to be open and vulnerable enough to ask if they should be there. These can be the beginnings of conversations that allow exploring community structures that reposition power. Adrienne Maree Brown (2020) shares insight on people who focus on someone else having it worse, and how in doing so, they are avoiding talking about what is hard for them. In considering this, the dynamic of a privileged community facilitator, entrusted with creating an environment of safety and support for vulnerable individuals, must work towards self-reflection. In doing so, questioning structural barriers and their replication in services, where the community is not deciding what is best for them, feels like a necessary starting point. We hope in our future work to allow better for the community we are hoping to serve, the chance for agency and control over the support they need and in a way that is giving power and control back to them in a non-intrusive, humble and supportive way, which acknowledges the existing systemic barriers of positionalities.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to highlight a broad conversation on the importance of context. Our discussion together raised difficult realities and challenges systems that we live and work in, in parallel with our own positionalities. Through our reflections, we aimed to go beyond just acknowledging our positions and interrogate the complex power dynamics of working with vulnerable communities, while acknowledging our own position as student facilitators. We accept that being vulnerable within these contexts was a crucial step in acknowledging and understanding a person's experience as well as the first step in exploring power-sharing.

We purposefully thought about the word facilitator and what that could represent in these contexts, and we carefully noted the roles we inhabited were unpaid. It is crucial to recognise that when suggesting power-sharing and shared learning, we encourage the need to further discuss the role of payment openly. Will these vulnerable communities that benefit researchers also receive fair payment? We presented these contexts as examples to explore positionality and power but also to discuss how and if at all, community music and arts could play a role in leading these changes that we ultimately feel could give power back to vulnerable communities. In opening up the creative process and working with the collaborative nature of music playing and art making, we considered how community arts could be part of this dynamic.

While writing this paper, we clearly distinguished our learning and practising process as facilitators in three areas: Beginning/Learning, Learning/Opening Up and Action/Change. Aligning with that, three main themes were created comprising how our work combined into collaborative thinking and writing: Theme 1 being about *immigration and belonging*, Theme 2 about *going beyond acknowledgement and vulnerability* and Theme 3 about *power-sharing and community*. Moreover, we expanded on the importance of hearing the communities' voices regarding their own care, hoping it can open a dialogue and offer chances for control and determination of the support they need. Specifically, that they would be able to have a voice in what their support looks like. We explored the importance of our own vulnerability within the community sessions and how to work to achieve these spaces and attempts at power-sharing. Part of these proposals is to ensure we create a sense of agency within the vulnerable communities, but also for the facilitators. We aim for the facilitators to create a space that truly supports vulnerable communities and reframes thinking of positionalities and the impact we could have as community facilitators. Understanding how this power is used for domination and control of others is necessary; within this framing, we work to change how power can be given back to the community. We understand this paper's limitations and acknowledge that further action and research should be taken to transform the ideas and proposals suggested. We believe that these actions can take place through individuals but that we can be more successful in creating positive change if we begin to transform collectively.

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