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‘We’re NOT all in this together’. Transitioning from practice to research during the COVID-19 pandemic: A period of deep reflection, decentralisation and reframing of social justice
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Abstract

This article explores research positionality by considering the transition from community music practice to research during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a community musician, my experiences of working through the pandemic were shaped by my caring responsibilities of three young children paired with being plagued by working with contested values due to rising inequalities. This experience has become a catalyst for pursuing PhD research which aims to explore how the shifts in community music practices since the COVID-19 pandemic impact and empower women in different cultural contexts amidst the current socio-political landscape. This article aims to illustrate some of the ways I am grappling with this question, and how I understand myself within this process. Critical instances from my autoethnographic reflective journaling will be shared connecting to themes of politics, being a woman and race, which have been fundamental considerations in my research process so far and subsequently shaping my exploration of research positionality.

Keywords: Social Justice, Community music, Covid-19, Intersectionality, Feminism

Swaying amidst the lingering smell of gym kit

I'm excitingly watching Mrs Cooper with her big dangly blue earrings,

it's different to normal school stuff, she's always nice,

we stand tall, 'In restless dreams, I walked alone',

the drums on the tape kick in,

I love this bit,

I feel the tingles on my body,

1992, Aged 7

the bus pulls away, I'm nervous.

I enter the biggest hall I've ever been in. there are no windows

I'm taken to a seat.

through the anxiety and disorientation, I notice I'm amongst rows and rows of other people with cellos,

I don't know them; we aren't allowed to talk.

on a box in front of me there's a white man with curly floppy hair and behind him lots of other children playing instruments, some instrument's I've never seen, in rows of seats that go higher and higher, they almost reach the ceiling.

he smiles.

he tells us this is amazing and that we are the world's largest orchestra.

I lift my bow when the others do.

I hear nothing.

1998, Aged 13

I'm a few rows from the front, Mr Pemberton, our beloved R.E. teacher slowly walks on stage wearing his traditional West African clothing, a bright purple dashiki shirt with intricate multicoloured patterns around the neckline and sleeves.

Thoughtfully looking up, he takes us all in and smiles lovingly

'The higher you build your barrier, the taller I will be'

his deep rich vocals radiate throughout the great hall of our comp,

silencing the boisterous chatter of the 1200 black and blue uniformed teenagers.

1999, Aged 14

I look out across Hilltop Park in West Brom

the sun is shining and it's fun, my cello desk partner always makes me laugh

it's the end of the concert so we quickly find our music for the grand finale

cutting straight in to end section of 'Land of Hope and Glory',

the crowd cheer,

there are some union jack flags held by people sitting on blankets.

I don't get it,

but it's what we always do when we play outside in the summer.

2001, Aged 16

This paper draws on my autoethnographic recall of critical instances that inform how I think about positionality in my work as a researcher. Transitioning from practitioner to researcher during a global pandemic has resulted in practicing the community musician critical characteristic of self-reflexivity (Higgins & Willingham, 2017) at great length. Despite my personal belief in the power of music making and the potential opportunities I experienced through the 'turn' towards online digital musical experiences (Camlin & Lisboa, 2021), I was plagued by experiencing contested values due to the escalating inequality crises, most predominantly, economic deprivation, racial disparity and gender discrimination (Benach et al., 2022; Carmody et al., 2020, McCann et al., 2021), making me reconsider the role of community music in today's socio-political landscape. Entering research during a global pandemic has felt both an enormous privilege and responsibility, stimulating me to initiate research led by my personal values in a way that I have not always been able to in my practice. Through my PhD research, I am exploring how the shifts in community music practices since the COVID-19 pandemic impact and empower women in different cultural contexts amidst the current socio-political landscape. This article aims to illustrate some of the ways I am grappling with this question, and how I understand myself within this process. I will explore some of my childhood roots through the themes of politics, race and gender, which in itself is problematic as such themes are deeply connected and inseparable at times but my aim here is to give space to share how such considerations have influenced my research process so far. The

personal memoirs featured at the beginning and later on in the article have been taken from my PhD reflective journal and are written in nature of how I remember these experiences happening at the time in sync with my current lens of exploration. This approach to writing has encouraged me to ‘explore, without inhibition, aspects of ourselves, that we might be reluctant to share with others [...] we create a coherent narrative that helps us develop a sense of who we are, whilst still remaining uncertain and open to change’ (Etherington, 2004, p.127). I have found it is through understanding how I grew to see the world, and why I gravitated towards community music initially to be the critical factors guiding this exploration of research positionality.

I am political.

I am a product of a now extinct state-run peripatetic music service, having learnt the cello in group classes where my participatory music experiences happened exclusively in and around school. My childhood experiences developed my likes and dislikes of music making, things that I would be in favour of and those I would reject, based on my relation to others in those moments and how it made me feel. I liked playing the cello, I didn’t always like what I was expected to do with the cello or what it represented. I can recall the first time I was given my first on-loan cello, my teacher was so attentive in showing me how I needed to take care of it. I wanted to play the cello because my sister played, and I got picked for cello class along with two other classmates who also had older siblings playing the cello. I have always felt this was no coincidence. I consider myself so fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn the cello, however progressing through music education became increasingly pressured by a growing sense of competition, formality and institutional expectations nearly always focused on performance.

I was born in Dudley and grew up in neighbouring Sandwell in the 80s amid Britain’s Thatcherism, and raised by politically engaged parents who were both members of the Labour party. Dudley and Sandwell are located in the Black Country, a proudly working-class area west of Birmingham which was at the ‘centre of production of coal, iron, steel, bricks, glass and engineering but most recently – since devastating closures in the late 1970s and early 1980s – has been a byword for post-industrial decline’ (Briercliffe, 2020, p.335). Time spent with my maternal grandparents at their lifelong home on the Alumwell council estate in Walsall (another Black Country town) was heavily rooted in care and politics. My grandad, a Labour councillor for over forty-four years taught me

collective care in action, through the growing of vegetables in his beautiful garden, litter picking and taking us to the local park to unhook the swings at the playground. Much of my family time as a child included observing critical debate, visits to the council chambers, election campaigning and Mayor's parlour parties all building in anticipation to Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997. I was eleven but knew that was the moment we had been waiting for. That was the moment it was all meant to change. By the time I was sixteen years old and further inspired by studying A level Sociology, I started lobbying Sylvia Heal my local MP regarding the ongoing New Labour betrayals of higher education fees and the impending Iraq war.

My childhood musical memories, and the political influence of my family, play an integral role in my positionality as a community musician rooted in social justice. I started practising community music accidentally. It happened whilst working as a self-advocacy support worker for a small charity, whose work connected to the wider self-advocacy movement which began in Sweden in the 1960s, as a way for people with learning disabilities to receive training on parliamentary procedures (Brunk, 1991). I explored music making as a way for people with learning disabilities, specifically those with profound disabilities and complex needs, to self-advocate. This interest of using music as a self-advocacy tool has never really left my practice and was the focus of my master's exploratory action research entitled *Hear My Song* in 2009. Working within the self-advocacy movement at a young age and learning from many learning-disabled employed colleagues served ideas of using collaborative and collective action for social change and introduced me to the potentials of grassroots initiatives. Working with this ethos led me to the field of community music, which provided models for participatory processes rooted in social justice.

On reflection, my entry into community music was probably less accidental and more of a conscious political choice. This led me to embrace an alternative understanding to that of my performance-centred music education: 'music making is a fundamental aspect of human experience and is therefore an intrinsic and foundational part of human culture and society' (Higgins and Willingham, 2017, p3). Community music for me became a human experience that could be loving, caring, accepting and fascinatingly political.

From 2004 until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, my community music practice embraced a diversity of context-specific projects representative of the interventionist and facilitated model of community music practice (Higgins, 2012) prominent within the UK. This has meant boundary-walking (Kushner et al 2001, Higgins 2006) working in different areas of practice with different community groups, with participants who are often marginalised by systemic inequality. I have worked and volunteered for many different organisations and start up projects including co-founding the Scottish organisation *Hear My Music* with Emily Carr-Martin who continues to steer its operations now as a registered charity. Regardless of where my practice has been activated, it has been led with the intentions of working with the principles of social activism and with a political imperative in resistance of institutionalised structures and establishments (Higgins, 2006).

This politicised identity can be seen in my choice to use the term community musician, firstly to acknowledge and validate the field of community music and secondly to clarify that I am not a music educator or a socially engaged artist. This tension of my practitioner-identity links to Juliet Hess' book *Music Education for Social Change* (2019) where she discusses activist-musicians, a term I resonate with despite not being a music educator, Hess describes the term:

The hyphenated activist-musicians identity offers a unique praxis-orientated position. For many of these activist-musicians, their activist-self centres equity and critique while their musician self allows them to actively insert these ideologies and critiques into the world (Hess, 2019, p.7).

Although Hess' work does not approach the discussion of community music specifically, the term 'activist-musician' has been discussed in depth by Wells (2021) where he advocates that a 'more reciprocal and horizontal relationship [between music education and community music] could mitigate the danger of music education subsuming community music's work' (p.5). This subsuming of community music's work by music education is something I have frequently observed in my practice over many years.

I am a community musician. Political by motivation. Political in positionality.

I am white.

‘Go back to your own country’ was screamed across the road from strangers, of which my Black friend Carla shouted back ‘This IS my country’.

We must have been no older than 8 and I can recall being genuinely confused what they were talking about using the word country. I knew our skin was a different colour and knew somehow this was what it was about. It may have been one of my earliest memories of overt racism. One of the many times my white skin protected me from such hate, hostility, and violence. Some with and some without my awareness.

(Estimated 1992-1993)

Having grown up in Sandwell, an area of high cultural diversity, it is easy to remember observations of racism and religious division both at school and in the wider community. I inherently grew up with it, without ever being subjected to it. Far-right political groups inciting racism have historically been active in Sandwell and Dudley, such as the British National Party (BNP), English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First. Any understanding I had about race as a child mostly came from my mom¹; she often raised conversations about race and other discriminatory issues, she also frequently complained to the school that the reading books I was bringing home were racist. She was the person who introduced me to Black Feminist literature as a teenager. I can’t remember a single conversation about race or racism at school. A prominent memory is recalling a racist political slogan used in reference to the Labour Party and Black people specifically that had been adapted from the 1964 conservative parliamentary candidate Peter Griffiths’ anti-immigration election campaign for nearby constituency of Smethwick (Yemm, 2018). Hearing 1960s references as a child thirty years later, in a 1990s playground, meant I didn’t understand the historical significance at the time, or its influence in the escalation of racist political practices in Birmingham in the 1960s. This included including Enoch Powell’s famous Rivers of Blood speech² which took place only four years after Griffiths’ notorious victory in Smethwick in 1964 (Reekes, 2018).

¹ ‘Mom’ is a common way of saying ‘mum’ in the Black Country.

² Enoch Powell was a conservative member of parliament who famously delivered a divisive hate speech known as the rivers of blood at the conservative political centre in Birmingham.

Following the death of George Floyd on 25th May 2020, there has been a surge of anti-racism campaigning through the increased momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement (Thewall and Thewall, 2021, Nguyen et al.,2021). Within the West Midlands, where my freelance work is based, I observed many community arts organisations begin to offer statements of solidarity and commitment to racial justice. In 2021 I attended a series of anti-racist training sessions facilitated by early years anti-racist consultant Liz Pemberton. Liz opened space by asking what our own educational experiences of race looked like, stimulating me to consider my own taken for granted privilege of having so many black educators in my school years. I attended a low-performing state comprehensive school and when I left school at sixteen, it was a challenge to seek further education settings in music, courses within the borough were limited and courses outside the borough were academically out my reach. These experiences of my education have probably overshadowed elements that were nourishing and caring. Before Liz's session no one had ever asked me about my observations of race and experiences of Whiteness, I have been more accustomed to being asked who my cello teacher is or if my parents were musicians too. Within the training session, I shared the vignette of my experiences with Mr Pemberton in 1999, remembering the love and imagination that he shared through his singing. I recalled the lunchtime hang-outs in his tatty mobile classroom where he taught us how to play *oware*, a traditional board game played throughout West African and Caribbean regions; a game I taught my then 7-year-old son during the first UK lockdown in 2020 as a way to practice his maths. The memories of Mr Pemberton singing reminds me of how music can make us think and feel, and its enormous potential to engage the imagination; despite it not necessarily matching my understanding of a participatory model of music making, it makes me feel like it was probably my first experience of interventional community music. I imagine Mr Pemberton knew exactly what he was doing by sharing that song with us, intentionally counteracting the divisive racial tensions in a low-achieving comprehensive school, through love. My experiences of race are connected to where I grew up, where I was educated and how and why I made music with others, raising critical questions about my practices as a community musician.

I am a woman.

Unlike having some understanding of both politics and race/ism? as a child, my understanding of being a girl and then a woman, in connection to being a musician, and then, a community musician, feels the most invisible. The irony of this statement is that I play a musical instrument that

traditionally, requires perching it between your legs, immediately controlling both in practicality and in a social stigma sense of what clothing I wear. The historical relationship between women's bodies and the cello is discussed using baroque art by Mattson, 2015, detailing themes of posture, status, clothing, sexualisation, prostitution and politics stating:

With an instrument between her legs, dangerous possibilities begin to unfold. Power, control, status, and political and religious reputations are all potential boundaries where these images may have caused cracking (Mattson, 2015, p.14).

Despite this long history of gender construction within music, the only time I can recall a discussion relating to gender was when one of my female cello teachers complained that all the fingering edits in the sheet music were always male, and therefore rarely suitable for women with small hands. Of course, my music education was patriarchal. I played an instrument originally designed for a man, and playing music men had written or, as I now realise, sometimes claimed to have written. I can't remember one time I studied a female composer or performed music written by a woman on my cello. Consequently, I never wrote my own music as I didn't know how and had never seen it done, mirroring Birmingham Contemporary Music Groups' Learning Director Nancy Evans' personal reflections that 'composing was something other people did – mostly people from the past, and mostly men' (Evans, 2022). I did, however, become heavily inspired by the cellist Jaqueline du Pre, the visual imagery of her free-flowing hair and short skirts were very appealing as no other cellists ever looked like that.

Aside from this invisibility of gender within my education, I had no shortage of feminist role models in my family. As mentioned earlier, both my mom and my maternal grandmother – my nan – were politically minded tenacious women. My nan, one of eight siblings from a very large catholic family – many of whom worked in the nearby coal pits – became president of the Mothers Union in her church. Despite her devout Catholicism, she was exceptionally outspoken against some of the teachings, including the church's opposition towards abortion. It was through my maternal grandmother that I knew from a very young age that women had died to gain voting rights. She ensured this, teaching through action what politics meant as a woman; challenging other women who said they didn't vote, or only voted who their husbands told them to.

Covid-19, Contested Values and Shaping Positionality.

my white skinned able-body keeps me at lower risk from COVID-19.

my female body subjects me to constant and disproportionate negative impact.

my economic co-dependency enables me to feed my children.

we are not experiencing this in the same way.

we're NOT all in this together

2020

Community musicians' responses to COVID-19, support the notion that community musicians are committed to and seek out accessible music making opportunities (Higgins 2012). For example, through the transfer of face-to-face facilitated music making to online models (Crisp, 2021; Dowson et al., 2021; Morgan-Ellis, 2021; Gibson, 2021; Gupta, 2020; Jaber et al., 2021; Joseph & Lennox, 2021; Salvador et al., 2021), the increase and exploration of online choirs and singing (Daffern et al., 2021; Foulkes, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021; Fekete & Eckhardt, 2022), Makaton choirs for people with learning difficulties (Quigley & Macdonald, 2022) or through street music during lockdown (Barnes, 2021; van der Sandt & Coppi, 2021).

My community music practice was interrupted in March 2020, with some of my freelance contracts being ceased with as little as seven days' notice. I empathise with practitioners who chose not to run their programs, due to fear of excluding people and highlighting digital inequality (Price et al., 2021). Simultaneously, alongside the issues of digital access and inclusion, I did have opportunities to work with women who had previously been unable to attend community spaces due to deteriorating health conditions, the need for a carer, or the cost of transport to get there due to physical disabilities. My experience as a practitioner resonates with emerging findings that online community music can both hinder and help participation (Crisp, 2021), understanding that it is vital to recognise 'not all practitioners or participants are able or have the skill to access digital technology' (Gibson, 2021). Online community music engagement can facilitate opportunities for the expansion of human relations (Jaber et al., 2021) but also brings challenges for learning new skills, pressures of operating digital formats (Daffern et al., 2021, as well as the loss of embodied experiences, changing our relationality with the other (Jaber et al., 2021). Alongside the

technicalities of sustaining projects, the pandemic stimulated ‘an outpouring of self-organized care and support by communities and people for each other’ (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, p. 13). Through my practice, I observed this by many colleague practitioners, projects managers and Community Interest Company (CIC) directors, often through personal sacrifice of increased, and unaccounted for, unpaid work. WhatsApp support groups played a significant role in my practice, connecting to wider global trends of self-organised care, such as the COVID-19 mutual aid groups (Carstensen et al., 2021; Häyry, 2022; Ntontis et al., 2022; van Ryneveld et al., 2022) which also were aided through WhatsApp support groups (Chevéé, 2021; Taiwo et al., 2022).

When the UK COVID-19 lockdown commenced in March 2020, my twins were just 8-months old, and I had already been in a state of deep reflection about working as a community musician for some time. The exposure of escalating inequalities alongside the pause of ‘normal’ life, even within its chaos, gave a window to consider intersecting issues of inequality. During the pandemic I found myself co-delivering online music sessions with my then 7-year-old son, often baby carrying one of my twins whilst the other roamed free on the floor. The exhaustion was relentless, and I had to accept that working as a community musician was not sustainable alongside my caring responsibilities and took difficult decisions to step back from some of my practice.

Over the last decade my practice has had a primary focus of working with women. During the COVID-19 lockdown periods this included making music with newly arrived mothers and their children, isolated women in need of mental health support, and mothers or carers of children with additional support needs. I frequently facilitated sessions with women who were not able to afford adequate food and healthcare supplies and were also experiencing multiple bereavements from COVID-19. The health disparity of COVID-19 and the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement heightened my own community musician power, authority and privilege more than ever. I had a rising conflict towards the sense that community music practice was being used as a replacement for adequate social policy and my anger at the daily witnessing of state negligence and health disparity was palpable. COVID-19 exposed deeply entrenched systemic inequalities of society and is what Maestripieri (2021) states as a ‘clear example of an intersectional phenomenon: the impact of individual and community exposure to COVID-19 is the results of multiple and interrelating structures of inequality’ (p.1). Despite the growing literature on community music practice since the pandemic, I was eager to understand deeply why the system was so broken. Whilst working on a project entitled ‘Women in Lockdown’ in 2020, we - the artistic team and community cast - all shared a personal item that we were connecting with during lockdown. I

shared an old book gifted to me by a friend and former collaborator, Emily Carr-Martin, with the message inside that said fondly in the spirit of our youth ‘*Here’s to many more chats about saving the world through music*’. The pandemic was highlighting for me that I wasn’t on the mission I thought I was and hadn’t been for some time causing discomfort in considering how complicit have I been to power and systemic inequality within community music practice in the UK?

Embracing Feminist Research

Commencing community music research has opened opportunities to engage with critical literature correlating to my political interests. Topics include; community music’s loss of radical roots (Rimmer et al., 2014) it’s relationship with neoliberal agendas (Kronig, 2019), the social and political influence of governing funding bodies on community music discourse (Humphrey, 2020, p. 56) and the moral failure of cultural policy (Belfiore, 2022), which particularly connected to my own lived experience when working as a single mother financially reliant on working tax credits (a state welfare provision for low income households). Engaging with this literature caused a conflict with my previous ideological perspective as a community musician, connecting to reflections by Currie, working in community music arts management, through which she clarifies shares the same ideological values as practitioners, asking ‘I cannot help but wonder how the ideological intentions of community music activity is intervened with by the infrastructure that it operates within’ (Currie, 2021, p. 191).

I had an eleven-year gap between completing my Masters research in 2009 and starting my PhD. Within this time many significant personal events have occurred that have brought me new perspectives on the roles of women. These include marriage, motherhood, poor mental health, divorce, single parenting, bereavement, twin parenting and taking a prominent role in my new-born niece’s life during the palliative end of life care of my sister. I entered research as a mother of three, still breastfeeding my one-year-old twins around the clock, therefore the role of the female carer was the fundamental positionality with which I entered the academy. My heightened awareness of racial inequality was a fundamental consideration upon entering higher education, leading me to not only consider my own white privilege but that I was entering an institutional white space.

Whiteness is not just an individual identity, it is one embedded in different institutions – such as schools, universities [...] In such white spaces, whiteness and white Western practices are the norm and those which do not comply with these are seen as outsides and others (Bhopal, 2018, p. 25).

This white privilege was exacerbated when I began engaging with western-dominated community music literature from Europe and colonised countries such as the US, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia. This made my transition increasingly more uncomfortable in my considerations of what I could offer. My explorations of politics, race and being a woman have led me to intersectional feminist research rooted in Black Feminist Thought, drawn from the work of Hill Collins (2014). Intersectional feminist research connects to ethical practice between the researcher and those being researched, ‘stressing equality and sisterhood [...] there should be a move towards a collaborative non-hierarchical inclusive relationship (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 89). Hill Collins & Bilge (2020) discuss intersectionality as:

investigating how intersecting power relations influence social relations across societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. Intersectionality [...] views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, ethnicity, and age- among others- as interrelated and mutually shaping one another (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 2).

Intersectionality can be used as a ‘method, a disposition, a heuristic and analytical tool’ (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 303) utilised through the critical inquiry and praxis of scholars, advocates, practitioner’s and activists across interdisciplinary fields (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 1).

Yerichuk and Krar, 2021 connect feminist frameworks with community music and advocate that:

Feminist frameworks and (more recently) intersectional analytical frameworks, offer robust ways for scholars and practitioners in community music to think deeply and critically about how music activities relate to social justice work, as well as the ways in which community music may be at risk of reproducing the systems that have marginalised people in the first place (Yerichuk and Krar, 2021, p. 25).

The complexity of understanding the term social justice will no doubt be an ongoing endeavour through my research life. My PhD project however has gained momentum from Silverman’s (2009) reflections of social justice within the contexts of community music. Silverman discusses social justice in the notion of hearing the unheard stating that ‘not being heard is a way of not-being, of not mattering, of not existing’ (p. 180) and draws from the words of poet, Audre Lorde (1993, p. 7):

There is a timbre of voice
that comes from not being heard
and knowing you're not being
heard noticed only
by others not heard
for the same reason

Silverman (2009) also utilises bell hooks' holistic understanding of love as 'an integrated and working combination of care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, knowledge, self-other listening, and open communication that we practice (or should practice) each day' (p. 180).

Reframing social justice through Black Feminist ethics of love, and specifically engaging with themes which Silverman (2009) connects to community music-making has, in turn, guided my overarching research question and methodological choices. My research seeks to explore how the shifts in community music practices since the COVID-19 pandemic impact and empower women in different cultural contexts amidst the current socio-political landscape. My methodology values lived experiences of women through the Women of Community Music Collective, a global online Critical Participatory Action research (CPAR) group, alongside my own lived experiences as a community musician working in the UK, through autoethnography, which can be used 'as a pathway to explore meaning of study phenomena to uncover new knowledge from the study of the individual of the self' (Throne, 2019, p. 1). Action research holds an emancipatory purpose to 'influence or change some aspect of whatever is the focus of research [...] Collaboration between researchers and those who are the focus of the research, and their participation in the process, are typically seen as central' (Robson and McCartan, 2016, pp. 199-200).

Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) 'takes a particular view towards what participation means, focusing not only on participation in a practice but also on their participation in public spheres' (Kemmis, 2013, p. 85). Using Critical Participatory Research for feminist intersectional praxis is compassionately executed in the work of Fine and Torre, 2019, who discuss that 'as well as being a methodology, (CPAR) is an epistemology – a theory of knowledge – that radically challenges who is an expert, what counts as knowledge and therefore, by whom research questions and designs should be crafted' (p. 435). Despite 'feminist insistence to question top-down

authoritative ways of seeing' (p. 436) CPAR does not remove disagreement from the process, but is embraced, by 'researching together [...] not quieted by the pressure to reach consensus' (p. 435). This methodological approach aligns to my political imperative and feels in-sync with my community music practitioner positionality, valuing processes over product and collaboration over the individual.

Concluding thoughts - Moving forward with fluidity

Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next (Roy, 2020, p. 8).

This transition into research has been stimulated by my personal determination to not return to normality. I have struggled with many higher education institutional practices, simultaneously, I have experienced caution and challenge from some practitioner colleagues relating to my new researcher status, triggering discomfort in practice spaces. I am becoming more accustomed to moving with tension between spaces of practice and research. This also includes being intentional with emotional and physical boundaries of where I choose to work as a practitioner and engage as a researcher. As boundary walkers (Kushner et al., 2001, Higgins, 2006), community musicians adapt and respond through their context-specific practices to current social and political times. Moving into research is no different and will bring ongoing reflexivity of my positionality, particularly questioning my power and authority. For community musicians working for social justice, Turner (2021) asks '[i]f we seek social change, do we include ourselves as open to being changed?' (p. 30); a question I feel is a prerequisite for social justice research. I already experience this change that Turner speaks of, particularly through my autoethnographic journaling. I prepare for this to deepen 'as the autoethnographic voice evolves along the journey of doctoral study', where Throne suggest 'the new researcher may also experience shifts in awareness and articulation of research positionality and identity' (2019, p. 55). Therefore, this transition from practice to research and exploration of research positionality is not complete, it is ongoing and therefore important to embrace a state of change, moving forward with fluidity.

In this paper I have drawn on my autoethnographic recall of critical instances that inform how I think about positionality in my work as a researcher. I aimed to illustrate some of the ways I am grappling with the questions within this, and how I understand myself within this, as an ongoing reflexive process.

1. 'Mom' is a common way of saying 'mum' in the Black Country.

Keywords

2. Enoch Powel was a conservative member of parliament who famously delivered a divisive hate speech known as the rivers of blood at the conservative political centre in Birmingham.

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