

All Together Now

The therapeutic potential of a prison-based music programme

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In this article we describe one aspect of a research project on prolific self-harm among women prisoners in a single establishment (HMP Peterborough). As part of the work carried out, we proposed, and then evaluated, an intervention aimed at improving the well-being of prisoners at risk of self-harm. This part of the overall research study was funded by the 'Good Vibrations' charity. The remainder of the project (which we report on separately) was funded by Kalyx (formerly UKDS).

Brief overview of the course and the evaluation

'Good Vibrations' part of the pioneering music charity the Firebird Trust, which aims to inspire and empower people through creative involvement in music making. The Good Vibrations project delivers short courses in Gamelan music in British prisons. Gamelan is a form of Indonesian percussion music which the organisers have identified as being suitable for prison or community settings for several reasons. First, the music does not carry the connotations or group allegiances that many forms of western music (for example, Opera, rap music) may hold which could alienate potential participants. Furthermore, the Gamelan includes a variety of instruments which are easy to play to a satisfying standard without any prior musical experience, and group pieces can be learned within a short period of time without need for the use of musical notation (Eastburn, 2003). Courses have now been run by the charity in several prisons, and in two secure hospitals. Typically, between ten and 20 prisoners participate in the course which can be run over one or two weeks, or on occasion, over a couple of days.

In order to conduct an independent evaluation of the course on behalf of the Firebird Trust, two researchers from Cambridge University took part as participant observers in a week long course run by 'Good Vibrations' in the female part of a private prison in February, 2006. The programme was originally intended to target self-harming prisoners.¹ The Cambridge University research team were already conducting a study within the institution into the causes and management of self-harm within female prisons.

As the prison hoped that the course would prove beneficial to the well-being of self-harming prisoners, the evaluation of the 'Good Vibrations' project fell within the scope of this larger study. The researchers therefore entered the evaluation with some prior knowledge of the particular challenges being faced by the institution, and with some informal evidence from other settings that this sort of workshop could make a difference to self-harming women.

Interviews and questionnaires were administered to participants before and after the course, and two of the researchers completed the programme as active group members. Through taking the role of participant observers, it was possible to experience first-hand the impact of the course on the group, and to identify possible mechanisms for any developments noted. This experiential component of the research proved to be invaluable. The researchers witnessed great changes in certain participants and moments of insight, reflection, growth, and group cohesion amongst others. These sorts of changes in small groups are very difficult to measure using standardised scales, particularly as the impact on each individual may be distinctive.

As a group, we learned a variety of skills on a number of instruments: improvisations, compositions, and recitations of traditional Indonesian pieces. These exercises were supplemented by a number of informal talks and discussions. The week's work was aimed at a live performance to others in the prison, and a few guests, on the final day.

The instructors were rarely didactic in their approach. One participant commented that it never felt 'like you were being *taught*. We learned a lot through discovery'. In general, improvisations and compositions started with a period of free exploration, followed by analytic reflection comprising a discussion about what worked, and what could be improved. This would be refined to define concrete objectives (for example, to balance the instruments more sensitively, and to follow a shared rhythm). The group would then suggest operational means of reaching these objectives (for example, not all playing at once, or following the rhythm of a particular player). The group would play again and reflect on the success of their improvements. As the group's confidence developed, greater responsibility and freedom

1. Figures produced by Safer Custody Group show that 30.2 per cent of all female prisoners self-harmed during 2004, compared to 5.7 per cent of the male prison population (Safer Custody Group, 2005).

were handed over. After the first morning, the group were able to improvise without needing a conductor to bring a sense of balance or cohesion, participants were instead taught how to attend to what those around them were playing and to consider how to best improve or complement what they heard. Set pieces were learned initially through instruction and practice, and then improved using the same process as above.

By the final day, the group were able to perform two traditional Indonesian pieces, one improvisation, a group composition, and a song written by one participant with the backing supplied on the instruments by a number of participants. The performances were introduced to the audience by class members. This performance in itself represented a great achievement for a four and a half day course in an unfamiliar form of music. However, both the type of music learned and the manner in which it was delivered had the potential to benefit the participants in a number of other ways.

The meaning of the music

Although Gamelan represents a style of music that the group were far from familiar with, it still presented an opportunity for participants to reflect upon their lives without the potentially intimidating context of formal 'therapy'. This was apparent from the first day. Whilst learning to keep time with the drum beat, a group member noticed that it was much easier to speed up than to slow down. This quickly sparked a discussion amongst the group about how in life too it is easier to speed up (for example, get into drugs, involved in crime) than it is to slow down. Another participant, currently taking methadone, commented that playing the Gamelan was similar to taking drugs as it gave her a high and stopped her worrying about her problems for a short while.

The music also provided a spring-board to reflections on one's own and others' personalities. The group completed an exercise of 'musical conversations' where, in pairs sharing an instrument, one group member would improvise a short musical phrase to which the other participant would respond. Group members were very quick to interpret the meaning of their performances. A prisoner commented that one pair of participants sounded like chatty teenagers, as they kept playing over each other, in a lively manner and in a similar way, as if they were continually

agreeing with each other. The pair in question were very pleased with this interpretation as they felt they had become very close, and were always agreeing with each other, even if other people didn't understand them. Other participants reflected on their own playing styles and interactions, and noted meaningful points where (for example) they became frustrated, backed down, disagreed, played calmly or showed aggression. This discussion was entered into with great engagement and sensitivity.

A similar moment of self-reflection occurred whilst the instructors explained to the group four principles of improvisation that would improve their performance. They encouraged the group to reflect on how much time they spent *observing* what other participants were playing, *leading* the group, *following* others, and *opposing* the group to move the piece in a new direction. Again, certain members quickly used these ideas to describe how their playing style reflected their personalities, and the way that they functioned in social groups. The participants were keen to explore this idea, and another insightful discussion followed.

The interpretations given of the music were not always positive. One participant took a strong dislike to a devised piece that the group had developed.

This stood in contrast to her unwavering support and enthusiasm for the rest of the programme. This prisoner was approaching the end of her sentence and greatly missed the countryside where she lived and had spent a lot of time walking. Whilst the Gamelan was often powerfully evocative of a bucolic landscape, with suggestions of streams, trees, and wildlife, the devised piece was just too chaotic for her, and in her mind, too reminiscent of life on the prison wing where people constantly shouted and interrupted others to make themselves heard. Other participants were surprised when their 'musical conversations' turned into 'musical arguments'. On each of these occasions, however, the music provided an aid for participants to reflect upon, verbalise, and discuss these issues, even if they represented a momentary dip in their enjoyment of the music.

At other times, the Gamelan music produced by the participants carried meaning for them that they could not verbalise, or perhaps did not consciously recognise. One (rather spiritual) participant reported to the group how she felt the music spoke to her soul and

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calmed her in a way she could not describe. Other participants expressed similar sentiments — that they had experienced a sensation of peace and connection that they could not do justice to through verbal description. This ‘connection’ to the music was expressed almost subconsciously at times. During the development of the devised piece, which the group had decided was about a storm, the instructors asked the participants to visualise what kind of storm they thought they were portraying. One participant who was new to prison and struggling greatly with her loss of freedom poignantly commented that the piece reminded her of warm, tropical rain, falling on people who had not felt the rain on their skin for a long time and had rushed outside to stand in it. It was this more subconscious meaning of the music for individuals that made it difficult for the participants to reflect upon or verbalise their experiences of the course at the end of the week, as we describe later.

Empowerment

Whilst the meaning of the music was potentially therapeutic, so too was the process of learning. At every stage of the music course, participants were consulted regarding the direction of the work. They would be given options as to which piece or activity should be worked on during a session, who should perform on which instruments, the order that pieces should be played for the final performance and, most strikingly, the group was given complete freedom and trust in collectively performing a spontaneously improvised piece in front of an audience. Each member’s input was valued and listened to respectfully, and decisions were made following either group discussions or practical explorations of ideas. This did not always mean that every suggestion offered by a participant would be agreed with or acted upon. However, the fair and careful consideration that each suggestion was given made this a satisfactory process. Whilst on their own these hints of prisoner empowerment were relatively small, for many participants they represented something far larger. Coming from lives often characterised by abuse, oppression, or lack of opportunity, an experience where each individual’s opinions were valued had great therapeutic potential. Participants were given the chance to develop trust in their own ability to make meaningful and valid decisions.

Improvisations, compositions, and learned pieces, were rehearsed by the group in a dialectic manner, with participants identifying weaknesses, then suggesting and trying modes of improvement. This was clearly a

risk on behalf of the instructors, as the group could have failed to meet their full potential, and behaviour or focus could have deteriorated to low levels. However, it became clear that the sense of achievement elicited and satisfaction gained were greatly enhanced by the participants’ knowledge that they were largely responsible for the excellent progress made. One participant commented ‘it helped me learn about myself, that I can actually achieve something’.

The development of group self-regulation

At the start of the week, many participants showed little consideration for others who were trying to speak to the group or to play their instrument. People would talk over others, or obstruct group rehearsal by chatting, laughing or exhibiting generally distracting behaviour. The instructors were confident that this would die down over the week and they were correct, although this was by no means a passive or inevitable process. For several individuals this represented their first experience of belonging to a positive and supportive group, and therefore required some level of adjustment.

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You’re out there on your own. In here, it’s a jail and you’re on your own. So being in a group ... I’m surprised it worked so well’. Another participant reflected on the solitary nature of her lifestyle ‘I’ve learned to ... work as part of a group. When I do something I tend to go off on my own and do it, even if it’s a crime.

Relatively early on several members of the group emerged who were active in controlling, subduing, or chastising more disruptive group members. This was never reacted to negatively and, quite quickly, even the more disruptive group members adopted this behaviour and took turns to call the group to order. Relationships from the wing or the community came into play; admonishments from a girlfriend or cousin carried extra weight and the potential for shame, but were delivered with greater confidence. Any resulting tensions however, were never more than short lived. This approach was appreciated by the participants, one commenting that

[an instructor] could have been more strict at the beginning, but his way of working

worked really ... We all took it upon ourselves to listen to him in the end.

The development of group self-regulation seemed to be driven by several motivations. First, the participants' respect for the instructors meant that they didn't like to see them be upset by their own behaviour. On more than one occasion participants expressed concern that the group's lack of focus was creating stress for the instructors, and so made efforts to bring the group into line. Secondly, many of the group had a genuine desire to learn. This was especially evident when the instructors were talking about Javanese culture, when there would often not be enough time to answer all the questions the group had. Thirdly, a large number of participants expressed a commitment to producing a high quality performance, which necessitated a focused team approach. This commitment was not just driven by a fear of embarrassment in front of a live audience, but also from a sense of pride that this was something that they could do well.

At some points participants' efforts to control the group were explicit and tactical; for example, one group member, tired of being part of a louder, more distracted subgroup of participants, moved group members so that they were not sitting together or able to divert each other's attention. This upset certain group members at the time, though they later reflected that it was a necessary and effective move. Increasingly, towards the end of the week, group members spontaneously and independently controlled their own behaviour, without needing prompts from the more focused group members.

The music course provided motivation for the development of a respectful and focused group environment, but also for the development of skills with which to achieve this. Whilst at the start of the week group discussions quickly descended into unfocused chaos with individuals interrupting others or starting their own private conversations so that it was necessary to go round the group one at a time to ensure everyone had a chance to speak, by the end of the week no such formal group management was needed. Just as participants had learnt to improvise together by observing, leading, opposing, following, and by reflecting on how well they performed each of these tasks, the final group discussion worked in the

same way. Although each participant was keen to have an input, and excitement was running high as the performance had just ended, it was not necessary for any individual to 'chair' the meeting or for a system to be laid down in order for everyone to speak. Instead, participants could be seen to observe other group members respectfully to ensure that those who wanted to speak could do so, and then allow others to take over the discussion. The lessons learned for musical improvisation could clearly be applied to many social situations.

As is often the case with therapeutic processes, progress can be attributed more to the participants' intrinsic motivation than to compliance with rules. The class environment was non-authoritative, and the instructors were left largely to manage the participants without the help of prison officers. The use of punishments or rewards was never mentioned. The positive, considerate and supportive behaviour demonstrated by the participants at the end of the week could therefore be representative of an understanding and internalisation of the values demonstrated in the project.

Communication

With empowerment came developments in the participants' ability and willingness to communicate. During a session of improvisation and reflection, one group member who had been amongst the most timid of the group during the first day (who also struggled to express herself on the wing) asked the group leader '*are we allowed to say how we feel?*' Once given reassurance that this was allowed, she went on to make constructive criticisms of other group members. She was concerned that another participant was playing too loudly and drowning out her contribution. She made it apparent that she had something she needed to say through her playing, and didn't want this to be silenced by a louder group member. Though a simple comment, this was a turning point for both the individual and the group, as constructive criticism and expressions of opinion became more frequent. Though sometimes contested, these contributions were not met with either hostility or defensiveness.

Many of the participants had come from abusive environments where the expression of emotion would not be tolerated. Prisons too have been said to produce

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a 'non-communicative demeanour', and prisoners report finding it necessary to routinely hide their emotions (Medlicott, 2001). The constant suppression of one's needs and feelings, especially in situations perceived to be unfair, is thought to be detrimental to an individual's self-esteem and mental health (Babiker and Arnold, 1997). The creation of an environment where communication was welcomed may have been novel for many of the participants, but was clearly psychologically beneficial too. One participant, talking about another group member, said

I think she's a very quiet person. And obviously her first time in, the same as myself. But towards the end of the week she come out of herself more. And obviously had her opinions on things, which was really good. Another participant reflected: I've realised that I can sort of speak my mind more. Well, more openly, I suppose, and easier than I thought I could ... I'm actually not afraid to speak my mind or to express myself.

An exercise in vulnerability

The participants we met on the first day of the music course appeared to be very different from the same women we had interviewed a few days previously, during the 'before' stage of the research. In the one-to-one situation of the interview, the women spoke calmly and often quite candidly about their current anxieties and worries, and were unanimously friendly, warm, and engaging. However, when faced with a group of peers, a range of defensive behaviours were observed. Whilst some members withdrew from the group and only communicated through sarcasm, others became more boisterous and presented a tougher image of themselves. Others remained friendly and welcoming, but adopted an unassuming, almost apologetic, demeanour.

However, the course required participants to take small steps towards making themselves vulnerable in front of the group. During the first day participants split into small groups to compose pieces which were then performed to the other class members. This was clearly a challenge to many of the group, leading some into nervous fits of giggles. The realisation that everyone was going through the same experience meant that participants were understanding and supportive of each other. Where groups took risks in embarrassing themselves, by singing for example, the class responded

with encouragement and appreciation. Furthermore, when women shared feelings of nerves during a performance, the experience produced powerful bonds between individuals. Their reliance on each other for the performance to go well and the shared experience of a somewhat aversive emotional state (combined with the uplifting experience of creating music) helped the development of supportive and respectful relationships. The work-group created an environment in which participants could feel safe in making themselves vulnerable.

This was not a straightforward objective and was handled with care by the instructors. On arriving in the prison for the first session, the course instructors found themselves in the difficult situation of being without instruments, due to an operational hitch within the prison. Whilst trying to fill the time spent waiting for the instruments to arrive, the instructors led the group in a series of Javanese chants and accompanying actions. This alienated several group members who removed themselves from the circle and increased their defensive behaviours. One of the few enthusiastic participants in this exercise commented that she was glad she was new to the prison, as she wouldn't have been able to do something like that in front of people she knew. This was an

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unfortunate exercise introduced spontaneously in an attempt to maintain participants' waning interest, through no fault of the instructors. It did, however, highlight what a delicate task creating a 'safe environment' was, and made apparent how suited the formal, planned aspects of the programme were to this end.

This creation of a safe environment helped both reticent and more boisterous personalities to take risks. One participant who had been particularly withdrawn at the start of the week, and who had become very frustrated at times learning the traditional pieces, when given the choice, chose to play the instrument she had found the hardest to learn. She knew that she would find this instrument more frustrating than others, and would struggle to play it to the standard she wanted, but she decided to take that risk anyway. An instructor provided this participant with a way of finding her place in the music if she became lost, so that she wouldn't just give up during the piece. This strategy allowed her to develop her ability with ease. Another participant who was often loud and distracting within the group, and who was reluctant to be seen to take the course seriously at the start of the week, volunteered to make a short speech to the audience during the final

performance. Whilst she had previously responded to group attention with bravado and comedy, she took her final task very seriously, planning and rehearsing what she would say. She delivered her speech with sincerity and maturity, and afterwards expressed great surprise and pride at her achievement. Similarly, the group as a whole took decisive risks, opting to include the hardest piece they had learned in the final performance, for example.

Through the week, an accepting and non-judgmental environment was created. For one participant, one of the most valuable experiences gained was that of *'just being ourselves really'*, going on to say *'everyone puts up a shield, don't they, and I think that shield was let down by every single one of us'*.

The many instances where group members chose to make themselves vulnerable to their peers were small steps. However, such an experience could work well in, for example, preparing individuals for group therapy. The creation of a 'safe environment' and the willingness to expose vulnerable areas of oneself is crucial to therapeutic progress. Experiencing this in a non-threatening context could make participants more willing and able to take risks in a group-therapy setting. One participant thought that the Gamelan project could help other prisoners like her who suffered from poor mental health, 'as they need to understand that people can help them'.

The inclusion of less confident participants

Gamelan music is likely to be novel to most members of the group, meaning that participants enter at the same level of knowledge and experience. Whilst some participants undoubtedly developed skills at a greater speed than others, these members could then assist those who were less able. Early on in the week it was established that participants should be able to help those around them. Time was spent at the start of the course learning how to play an instrument, before passing the knowledge on to another group member. There were many times after this when a participant would spot another person struggling with a technique or idea which they felt more comfortable with,

and would then spend time helping them. One participant had missed the group session on the key principles of improvisation (lead, follow, oppose and observe), and her performance in a subsequent improvisation practice stood out from the rest of the group's, even though all 12 participants were playing simultaneously. The group members spotted this and calmly described to her the four principles, and explained how they improved performance. It was unnecessary for the instructor to add any information. This enhanced the sense of group collaboration and equality.

There were times when it was necessary for the instructors to spend time working individually with certain group members. Although done with the apparent aim of helping individuals master certain techniques, these one-to-one tuitions also worked well to raise confidence and self-esteem. Advice was often passed on to help the participant cope with their own frustration. For example, one group member who frequently became lost during the traditional pieces was advised to stop playing when this happened, take a moment to collect herself, and then start again when she knew where the group was, instead of trying to carry on regardless. This had the effect of calming the individual and allowed her to face the piece with confidence, even though she was aware that she would still make mistakes. Another participant became deeply frustrated as she struggled to learn a traditional piece whilst maintaining the various techniques used to play her instrument. The instructor identified the techniques that were not necessary to play the instrument and which were there only to improve the sound. He advised the participant to concentrate on learning the piece, then add in the extra techniques when she felt comfortable with the tune. Again, this simple advice allowed her to carry on without frustration, and she quickly developed the same level of confidence as the rest of the group.

The integration of more vulnerable participants to the group was not always easy. The course was originally intended to be targeted at self-harming women within the prison. However, uptake from this particular population was unexpectedly low. Managers were faced with a short time period with which to find

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participants to fill the remaining spaces. Those brought in to fill the group could be largely classed as 'vulnerable'; the GHQ-12 (a screening measure of anxiety and depression) scores for the group showed a high number of the group to be highly distressed. There were, however, members of the group who appeared to cope less well with their distress than others. One such participant, Jo², struggled greatly to integrate with the group, and left early.

Jo had been approached on several occasions by an officer who thought that she could benefit from attending. She had suffered from bullying in the prison and described her time there as being dominated by feelings of intimidation. She had almost completely withdrawn from social interaction. Jo had a history of self-harm with recent episodes and she had felt suicidal at times. She did not believe she was receiving meaningful support either from within or outside of the prison. Due to her continued experiences of bullying, Jo was worried about being expected to work as part of a group:

I'm not a group sort of person. I like to work on my own so if anybody bothers me they're gonna get a drum over their head.

She was, however, willing to put aside her fears and hostility for the opportunity to, as she said, '*get out of my cell ... and mix with other people who know how I feel*'. Although several of the members of the group were previous or current self-harmers, Jo was faced with a group containing several confident and outgoing personalities, and she quickly retreated within herself. Jo had been able to bring a supportive friend with her to the course, without whom she may not have attended at all. However, this did mean that Jo was not pushed to socialise with new people, preferring the company of her friend instead. The prisoner she had brought with her, whilst encouraging, also supported Jo in her rather negative feelings towards the group, which again did not aid integration.

The instructors were sensitive to Jo's experiences of the group, and spent time working with her individually during a break. At this point Jo came to life, was fully engaged with the instructor, and visibly enjoyed

the music. When the group returned, she stayed with the instructor at the same instrument during an improvisation. However, the instructor then suggested that Jo take the next step of choosing an instrument to play by herself. This was done with the intention of encouraging her towards group integration, and to prevent the other participants from viewing her as being marked out as someone 'special', in need of unusual instructor attention. Jo, in haste, chose a loud instrument physically isolated from the other partici-

pants. The following improvisation was a particularly good one that the group were proud of. Jo sat at her instrument but did not take part. This experience of 'being the outsider' during the improvisation appeared to have a negative effect on her as her posture became more and more introverted, and, unseen by the rest of the group, she started digging the handle of a beater into her arm (though without breaking the skin). The power of the bond felt between participants during inspirational moments of improvisation was very strong. As Jo was not taking part, she felt a heightened sense of isolation. Jo did not return to the group following this session.

It is clear that Jo, despite her many apprehensions, attended the course with expectations regarding the make-up of the

group that were not met. Other individuals, however, demonstrated that even apprehensive, distressed, or self-harming prisoners could be encouraged to take part, with considerable success.

Anger Management

A report produced by 'Good Vibrations' about the use of Gamelan music in prisons (Eastburn, 2003) suggests that the use of percussive instruments can be therapeutic in that it involves 'small acts of controlled violence' (p. 11). The instruments are struck with hammers or mallets, at times with considerable force, though the musical context renders this act harmless and potentially cathartic. This experience was verbalised by one participant who noted that the course had helped her feel calmer, saying '*I just throw anything about me, do you know what I mean, in temper. But I was just taking it out on the instruments*'. During the week, the music appeared to have a calming effect on

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2. Participants' names have been changed for the purpose of this report.

many of the participants, and gave them an opportunity to vent unresolved frustrations. One particularly shy participant worked on the 'musical conversations' exercise (described earlier) with the male researcher. After a couple of minutes of playing, the participant suddenly became much more (musically) aggressive, making a louder, harsher, deeper noise, interrupting the researcher. She stopped momentarily to comment 'I think we're having an argument!' before carrying on with the same energy. The participant clearly enjoyed this opportunity to express her anger without restraint, and other pairs reported similar experiences.

As well as providing an opportunity to express anger, the course helped participants to deal with anger that could not otherwise be released. On the final morning of the course, before the performance, antipathy which had developed on the wings between two participants came to a head with an accusation of bullying being made by one against the other, accompanied with a threat to withdraw their participation from the performance. The anger this course of action elicited from the remaining participants was high. The accusation was believed to be spurious and malicious, the participant was integral to the performance of a particular piece of music, and the accused was a respected and trusted member of the group who participants reported feeling highly protective of. However, despite the high levels of anger experienced (as one participant explained 'the whole group wanted to kill her,'), the participants worked hard to avoid a confrontation. Some chose to speak calmly with the individual and explain why she was needed for the performance, whilst others chose simply to keep their distance and focus on the work ahead. One participant explained that they didn't act on their anger as they had 'worked really hard towards the performance and didn't want to mess it up'. Several participants expressed surprise that they had managed to control their own anger, and were pleased with the achievement. Outside of the programme, prisoners may not have had the motivation to place a group's need before their own anger as they were able to in this instance. It also seemed to us, however, that participants had learned new skills for controlling their anger. One participant thought that the course had taught the group to 'listen a bit more before we jump in', though she was unsure as

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to whether this skill could be retained by all the women. These new skills were learned via the discipline of group awareness during performances and improvisation, but also through role-modelling of the instructors, whose calm and controlled demeanour, even when stressed, impressed the participants.

The relationship with the instructors

The instructors quickly established a relationship with the participants that was quite different to the style prisoners were used to with the majority of prison officers or fellow prisoners. Several participants were struck by the instructors' ability to communicate softly and calmly, and felt that this was made a welcome change from daily prison interactions:

There was a nice way about him [the instructor], you know, gentle ways ... You don't often come across that you know, with the officers and that, or other inmates, certainly not. And it was nice how we got used to listening to someone talk gently, rather than shouting ... Because when someone shouts at you sometimes, like if the officers shout at you, a shudder goes through you.

A sense of equality was developed between the instructors and group members, which participants appreciated. This was done through simple acts such as sharing responsibility for making hot drinks for the group, or through the course by passing decision making back to the participants as described. Again, the instructors' style of communication was valuable:

The way he taught us — he didn't shout at us, speak down to us. He spoke to us on a level. So that made us listen.

By treating participants as equals, the instructors earned respect from group members which meant that displays of authority were not reacted to negatively. One participant noted that the group 'were quite flattered that he put his foot down, because this meant they were worth putting their foot down for'. Participants were keen to learn from the instructors' manner — for example, their ability to stay calm when stressed and the fact that they made every effort not to

interrupt another person when talking. Group members reported 'trying out' this approach to interactions back on the wings, with apparent success:

I don't have to shout to make someone leave my room. I just say, 'Excuse me. I hope I'm not being rude, but would you mind if we spoke about this later?'. You know, I'm trying what [the instructor] does and it actually works.

The style in which the instructors presented themselves and the relationships they developed with the participants not only aided in the success of the project, but were valuable in their own right.

The Prison Context I: Drugs

The programme took place within a prison environment, and this inevitably influenced the impact and success of the course. Challenges are faced in prison that might not be experienced in a community setting. An important example concerns the large number of participants who took daily doses of methadone and who had to leave at a certain point in the morning to attend the clinic. In the hours before receiving their methadone, the participants' behaviour and attitude was markedly different from that seen afterwards. Many reported finding it much harder to concentrate in the mornings, resulting in greater levels of frustration and stress. Even the most enthusiastic group members could become difficult, uninterested, and distracted whilst waiting to receive the treatment they needed for their drug addiction. Several of the women suggested that in future the course be run only in the afternoons. The course had distinct benefits for those prisoners taking methadone, however. Some participants commented that the course helped them through their course of methadone simply as it took their mind off of it for several hours. For others, playing music produced a 'buzz' which they saw as analogous with, and in some cases superior too, their experiences of drugs. For one prisoner, participation in the course provided proof that she was capable of enjoyment in life without being on drugs; she commented that the course had shown her that:

I can do normal things and ... can get a good time out of it. But before, I couldn't. I needed

drugs to do that, you what I mean? But I done [the course] sober, so I can do anything if I could that.

The Prison Context II: The prison staff

The prison's frontline staff were also influential in the running of and success of the course. At times, it was necessary for officers to enter the workshop space and reprimand a prisoner. For example, if two participants were seen to be getting too close to each other an officer would step in to separate them, before leaving the room to continue observing the group through the door. This could result in a slight escalation of

behaviour as the prisoner 'played up' to the officers outside. It was interesting to note that participants' sensitivity to staff presence was heightened when officers distanced themselves from the group, by sitting outside the room, for example. On the few occasions when an officer sat in the room with the group and appeared engaged in the activities (even if passively), their presence was felt to be much less intrusive or distracting. When staff took the extra step of joining in verbally by adding their support, or expressing how the

music had made them feel, this was greatly appreciated by participants as the officer represented their first objective audience, and affirmations were remembered and reflected back upon for the rest of the week.³

Whilst some staff appeared distant or uninterested towards the course, others were hostile, mocking participants through the door window. This elicited various reactions from prisoners, from repressed frustration to greater shows of bravado. The indifference or apparent hostility of staff members was due, in part, to a lack of understanding as to what the course involved. On several occasions it was noticed that, when presented with a task or duty they previously knew nothing about, staff adopted a defensive and somewhat obstructive demeanour. When time was taken to explain the programme and what was involved, they often quickly became more than helpful. Furthermore, the 'Good Vibrations' music course created an environment that was markedly different from that of the rest of the prison, and inexperienced staff may have not come across anything like it before. The visible empowerment of the prisoners, and the equal respect with which

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3. In a subsequent course at the same prison, an officer was detailed to work with the group for the entire week and was able to participate as a full group member. Her participation was appreciated by the other group members.

participants and instructors interact, was unsettling for some staff and led to mistrust or opposition.

There was a great deal of confusion amongst wing staff as to whether attendance was voluntary or not. Some participants claimed that they had been told they had to attend or they would be placed on report, and two participants who decided to withdraw their participation at the start of the week were still made to come up to the workshop area every morning with the other participants, as it was thought they had no choice in the matter. They would then have to wait at the side of the room until a member of staff was free to escort them back to their cells. These attitudes or practices created uncertainty and resentment within the group, which threatened the ethos of the course, especially during the first few days. Whilst some participants reported that they were glad they were told that attendance was compulsory as they did not believe they would have otherwise attended, it was certainly the intention of the instructors that participants should be encouraged to attend in a less coercive, more enthusiastic manner.

Leaving the course

One of the advantages of this course was that it created an environment that was slightly different to that of the rest of the prison. Each day was characterised by high levels of trust, communication and good humour. However, prison life continued as usual, and participants found this adjustment difficult on completing the programme. As the prisoners left the final performance of the course to return to their wings, they witnessed a prisoner attempting to throw herself from a balcony. The prisoner was stopped in time, however this highlighted the different environment they were re-entering. One participant commented that this type of incident 'is just the way of life in prison'. Over the weekend they were faced with the struggles and pressures of their lives inside, but were no longer surrounded by other prisoners with whom they had developed mutual trust and respect through this shared experience.

This effect was reflected in the before and after quantitative data collected from participants before participation, and then early in the week following completion of the course. With the exception of 'feeling calm', personal well-being scores did not significantly improve. In fact, in answer to questions on anger,

stress and tension, participants appeared to be in a worse state following the course than they had been prior to it. This may have been related to the weekend's events. In retrospect, we should perhaps have conducted the 'after' survey immediately following the performance on the Friday afternoon. The course had clearly provided participants with respite from the every-day pains of imprisonment: 'it took all me problems away. I forgot all about them being here [on the course] until, like, you go back to your room'. For several of the women, the positive feeling acquired during the day could extend into the evening too: 'the

evenings were easier to handle, with that door locking, when you'd been out associating with other people all day ... The evenings were easier, yeah'. The 'loss' of the secure group and the more relaxed environment which had been created at the end of the week was clearly felt by several of the participants. One prisoner noted that two participants were 'isolated, and they got brought into this group and then they've been took out of it again. So I don't think they've, like, enjoyed [the weekend] too much. They enjoyed the group but now it's all stopped again'.

Others reported having felt 'depressed', 'sad' and 'bored' since the course had ended. The participants were 'glad they had taken part' and 'would want to do it again'. But they needed help in readjusting to 'prison as normal'. Simply starting a new job within in the prison was not enough to counter this effect. One participant noted wistfully 'when you're in the workshop, you don't get the same atmosphere. Everybody just gets straight in there and gets the job done.' Sensitivity therefore needs to be shown by the prison in helping participants to leave the programme to avoid an increase in distress. Planning for exit should probably be part of the exercise. Ideally, perhaps the whole prison environment should be more active and therapeutic throughout.

Conclusions

From the researchers' first-hand experiences of this course the therapeutic potential for prison-based music programmes, such as Gamelan, seemed great. Music provides a non-threatening and accessible stimulus for self-reflection and analysis. Further to this, the manner in which the course was delivered may have helped to prepare vulnerable participants for more formal therapy by developing their sense of empowerment, their

One of the advantages of this course was that it created an environment that was slightly different to that of the rest of the prison

communication and interpersonal skills, and their willingness to make themselves vulnerable in front of a group of peers. The sense of achievement experienced at the end of the week was invaluable for the recognition it provided of participants' abilities and hidden potential, which many had lost sight of during their formal education. In many ways, the workshop increased women's interest in many things (including the music *per se*), and their willingness to participate in other courses and activities. For such interventions to be successful in increasing well-being, however, sensitivity needs to be practised in integrating more vulnerable prisoners, or those with poorer coping skills, and this needs to be shown by both the course instructors and the prison staff more generally. The course instructors and prison staff may need to work together to find a way to help participants leave the course.

Some of the benefits we as a research team observed were not mentioned directly by participants in the subsequent interviews. Though they were keen to express how much they had enjoyed the course, interviewees were often frustrated by an inability to clearly verbalise or 'do justice' to their experiences. Further to this, the results of the questionnaires used in the before and after stages did not reflect the major, but individual level, changes we witnessed in the majority of the participants over the week. The follow-up questionnaires were administered three to four days following completion of the course, over which time some participants struggled with their return to 'normal' prison life and the loss of the cohesive group which had developed. As such, with the exception of feelings of calmness, the improvements found in participants' wellbeing scores were not statistically significant. The qualitative data, on the other hand, suggest that these kinds of interventions have a lot to offer, as well as the importance of developing a sensitive exiting strategy for participants when the course terminates. The concept of prisoner *empowerment* has repeatedly been referred to in the context of the psychological wellbeing of female and male prisoners, both in theory and in policy. Heney (1990) found that the situations identified by female prisoners which they thought would enhance the risk of self-harm were characterised by feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and isolation. The authors suggested that this is because such environments replicate the prisoners' experiences of childhood abuse. Babiker and Arnold (1997) also noted that self-harm is often used

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to deal with disempowerment which has been embedded in women's experience through histories of abuse. The lives of the women interviewed for this project were remarkable for their high levels of abuse and oppression. Whilst clearly difficult to tackle in an environment as inherently controlling as a prison, Babiker and Arnold recommend allowing self-harmers the opportunity to inform and control their management and the treatment they are offered. This is the approach encouraged by the new ACCT system of in-prison self-harm management.

Researchers have reported that the management of distressed individuals who self-harm can benefit from a certain degree of therapeutic risk-taking — the retention of responsibility with the individual with recognition that this may lead to a temporary worsening of behaviour (for example, Crowe and Bunclark, 2000). If participants are given the freedom to make certain decisions (to self-harm or not to self-harm, in this example), then any progress made will provide a greater sense of accomplishment for the individual, enhance the patients' level of self-trust, and also provide a more valid reflection of therapeutic progress. This is analogous to the musical and behavioural progress of the group over the week's course. An experience of empowerment with positive results such as we experienced alongside a group of women, may inspire confidence and a previously absent sense of self-belief.

If each of the originally targeted self-harming women had also been approached by an enthusiastic and informed member of staff, Jo might have found herself in a group of similar people, as she had hoped. This staff encouragement, however, did not always happen. Whereas Jo had first heard about the course from an officer who spent time talking with her and encouraging her to attend, others reported that they had not volunteered to take part and that an officer had signed them up for the course, then given them a slip of paper about it. These prisoners were confused about what the project would involve and were anxious as they did not know who else would be there, or how large the group would be. They also thought that they wouldn't be able to come as they believed a nurse had signed them up for a 'self-harm therapy group' for the same week. It is possible that the nurse had been referring to the Gamelan music course. If more time had been spent by staff talking with individual prisoners, demystifying what the course would involve and who would be there, they may have been more

motivated to attend. The success of 'Good Vibrations' music courses in, for example, Rampton, which was aimed specifically at highly disturbed and distressed women, was attributed largely to the staff who worked there. The course had been run in the hospital's day centre where the staff had built good relationships with the participants, and were able to take part in the programme themselves. The continuity and security the staff represented, and the encouragement they offered is thought to have helped the instigation and management of the programme.

Jo explained that she self-harmed as 'it relieves a lot of stress' and because she feels 'angry and upset'. The cathartic nature of the music could have provided a safer alternative, and the focused work could have provided a distraction from her worries.

Clearly, with regards participant recruitment and encouragement, greater education of staff regarding the project would be beneficial. The senior officers in the prison in question concluded at the end of the week that it would be helpful to identify a select number of officers who would be briefed fully about the project and assigned to work with the participants for the full week. This was achieved with some success more recently. The general staff population should also be informed as to the content and purpose of the course, as participants will have interactions with other staff when they are back on their wings during the evenings and following the course. It would be easier for staff to encourage and support attendance,

and to feel part of the process, if they were aware of what the course involves. As we were writing this account, a second course was coming to an end at Peterborough, with a more explicit attempt being made to target the workshop at vulnerable and self-harming women. The initiative was taken to introduce more vulnerable prisoners to the course through a short session using only a small group of potential participants. As before, the final performance was superb.

We hope that further lessons continue to be learned about how to adopt creative and unusual arts projects in prison, and that the benefits for staff wishing they had more to offer, and for prisoners needing more support, will continue to be seen.

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