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ARE YOU LONESOME TONIGHT? EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF LONELINESS IN OLDER AGE THROUGH AND WITH POP SONG LYRICS

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Abstract

My PhD is an ethnographic exploration of the experience of older people in the community dance sessions that I facilitate. Music is a key element of the sessions and this paper looks at how song lyrics might play a role in the sessions.

I selected songs from across the decades, with lyrics that either suggested loneliness or friendship, to stimulate movement and conversation. The approach to using the songs varied: for some, the content of the lyrics was discussed before moving, for others, familiarity with the lyrics was assumed. Data was collected in the form of videoed movement (the dancers), reflective movement (the researcher) and writing reflecting on the movement and the conversations around the movement (the researcher).

Can song lyrics facilitate creative movement exploration of a sensitive topic?

Loneliness is a difficult topic to discuss and to publicly admit to feeling; perhaps a non-verbal mode of expression could make the process easier.

Introduction

My research is an ethnographic study of the experience of older people in an age specific community dance group. It is contributing to knowledge as the researcher is positioned as an insider to the group rather than the more typical outside evaluator. For this paper, I turned a close focus on how the use of music can aid with and lead to informal discussions about social well-being and loneliness.

First Iteration

I wondered what the impact of songs that referenced loneliness would be on the creative process of the dancers. I chose some songs I thought would be relevant (see Table 1).

The Beatles	With a Little Help from my Friends
Gerry and the Pacemakers	You'll Never Walk Alone
Paul McCartney	No More Lonely Nights
Roy Orbison	Only the Lonely
YES	Owner of a Lonely Heart
Anastacia	Left Outside Alone
Various Artists	Blue Moon
Elvis Presley	Always on my Mind
Andy Williams	Can't Get Used to Losing You
Roy Orbison	In Dreams
Elvis Presely	Are You Lonely Tonight?

Table 1: My song choices

In the session, for the first activity, I gave the dancers a creative prompt: imagine that lonely older person, the one in the picture that always accompanies the reports about the people whose only company is the TV. Imagine their feet in front of the TV when they are alone, imagine what their feet would rather be doing. The music was Eleanor Rigby by the Beatles. I saw no indication that anyone registered the lyrical content of the song. For the next activity, the song was Blue Moon. The movement was simply passing a balloon (a favourite activity of this group), and I did not draw attention to the song. One dancer sang along, obviously recognising the song but again there was no clue that anyone was thinking about the themes of the songs. Later in the session, we used 'Can't get used to losing you', again, I made no reference to the song. The creative directions were to move using float, glide, flick and wring. I observed the dancers appearing absorbed in the movements with occasional reflection of the quality of the music (flicking was suggested to go with the pizzicato strings at the end of the chorus) but nothing that suggested the longing and despair that the lyrics suggest.

I then put on 'Return to sender' which one of the dancers later identified as reminding her of loneliness (I don't know whether it has personal significance for her). At the time of playing, I hadn't asked the question about loneliness songs, watching the video back, she keeps her movements small and low (but she does also have physical restrictions that can make high movement painful). The tune is

quite bouncy and playful to my ear despite the distress of the lyricist. She does manage one high wave in the penultimate chorus. Again, I don't have a sense of anyone interpreting the lyrics, more playing with the prop (ribbon sticks) with the music in the background. Once the activity is over, this particular dancer emits a loud yawn and shares that she is tired due to road workers working late (and early) outside her house.

For the final activity, I admitted that I wasn't sure if they would connect with the song. I used Eric Carmen's 'All by myself' which I had incorrectly assumed was an 80s song, Wikipedia reliably informs me it was first released in 1975. Wikipedia also mentions that the verse is based on a Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto which might have been a nice link for the one dancer who is a classical music fan (and recognises fewer of the popular songs than some other dancers) had I realised it then. I reminded them I was looking at loneliness but I was thinking of that moment of bliss when you shut the door on all the crazy and you have room to stretch out and take up space in ways you can't when you have company. The dancers that were familiar with pop music did recognise the song and sang along in parts. I suggested that for the first verse, the dancers just luxuriate in the bliss of the silence and space and then, dramatically on the chorus, stretch out and take up room.

For the stretch and cool down, I used the song "The sun ain't gonna shine any more", again, the singer joined in but in a completely artist led activity, there was no room for anyone to demonstrate that they had noticed the lyrics.

Reflecting back on the session, I realised that a) some of the dancers don't hear the lyrics either because their hearing aids don't pick lyrics up or because they are unfamiliar with the songs and so don't have time to process the words and the movement exploration and b) that songs that trigger feelings of loneliness are personal and can't be predicted by just the lyrics. DeNora (1999) discusses how we attach our emotions to the songs that are soundtracking the events in our lives. I also realised that a dancer is free to express feelings of loss, isolation, or sadness through any movement: small, large, smooth, staccato. I felt I needed to give instructions – dance a lonely dance or, perhaps a better idea, explore a set of lyrics with the dancers and see what movement prompts we could come up with.

Iteration Two

I asked dancers to share with me songs that either reminded them of lonely times or that made them think of loneliness. To minimise distress people wrote down their songs on a piece of paper, they didn't need to share the stories the songs were attached to and they didn't need to distinguish between songs that reminded them of their own periods of loneliness or just loneliness in general. But in many cases, the dancers couldn't just hand over the paper without sharing something of their story. I was touched by the generosity and the openness of the dancers to share their personal stories.

"I've only come up with one. My husband was a fantastic singer but you couldn't get him to perform in public. After he passed away, I took a trip to Ireland and there was a man and his guitar (Dan played the guitar too you see) and he started to sing 'Danny Boy' and I just dissolved..."

(In writing) "I would not object to any song or music being played. I am more interested in the tune and rhythm because I rarely know the words. Having a hearing problem for many years I have become used to the feeling of loneliness deafness can bring, but I don't let it overwhelm me and I listen to Classic FM all the time as background company..."

(In writing) "Eleanor Rigby is one of the songs that makes me think of being lonely. I don't feel strongly about any of the songs we have. In general music can make me feel lonely because of either associations or because of the intrinsic qualities of the music itself e.g. Faure's Requiem and Bach's Prelude and Fugue have tones of sadness and loneliness throughout. I feel lonely when listening to the Carmina Burana because of its associations for me..."

*(Me) "I don't know this one (Sand and water – Beth Neilson Chapman)" "My husband suggested it. It's about a wife – well, she's saying goodbye to her husband, he's dying"; Time to say goodbye –
Andrea Bochelli*

*Bridge over troubled water – very much played at the time of my
divorce; Bright eyes; Return to sender*

*Are you lonesome tonight; It will be lonely this Christmas; Love me
tender “I’m an Elvis fan”*

Puccini Arias – I only ever hear them at sad times

It was interesting to note that I asked people about loneliness and they talked to me about loss: funerals, divorces. I wondered if this was a reality of older age but in an unscientific pop quiz with my contemporaries on social media, the songs they chose about loneliness were songs that represented break ups, endings and leaving. If we conceptualise loneliness as loss it may aid understanding why some people are happy in their own company and some are unhappy even with friends/family around. The only song that appeared on both my list and the dancers’ list was ‘Are you Lonesome tonight?’

Whilst writing this paper, I saw someone on the street blow their nose just like my recently deceased uncle used to and I was hit by a painful pang of missing him. Later, on reflection, I realised being reminded of a missed loved one (by music or however else) might conjure up happy feelings or it could be a sad moment. As the community dance artist selecting the music, this could lead to an ethical dilemma as the outcome is in the balance: community artists must not shy away from difficult emotions but to deliberately provoke sadness seems unethical.

Asking respondents to recall personal experiences of loneliness should have reduced the idea that loneliness is something that happens to other people (which is what happens a lot when we try to discuss it verbally but with me delicately trying not to put anyone on the spot). Loneliness brings up images of widows for the dancers, I’d guess that about half the respondents were widowed, one I (now) know to be divorced, though the rest still have a partner at home.

Third Iteration

Not wanting to put people in a potentially distressing situation, I resolved not to use songs that people had picked (for their group). To explore ideas about loneliness in a physical/non-verbal way I used some ideas from Liz Lerman (Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, 2004). Lerman is an American dance artist who does runs contemporary

dance performance groups for older people, and using my own dance artist experience, I structured some tasks to explore the lyrics of some of the songs I had originally identified as being about loneliness.

I used three approaches. I worked with two ideas (derived from Lerman, 2004) with the lyrics of the song 'The sun ain't gonna shine any more'

- Lyrics as movement metaphor: what movements are suggested by the words
- Lyrics as missing details: imagine the singer (or the writer) where are they? What can they see? Use shapes and patterns as a suggestion of movement

I came up with one further idea: lyrics as springboard. Using a different song ('Destination anywhere') we looked at the overall theme (escaping to a safe wonderful place) and used the shapes and movements in the mental images created by this prompt to suggest movements.

For many reasons I don't have a published video of the dancers responding to these prompts. I do, however, have my dancing of an amalgamation of their movements to give you a taste of what they produced. Please see <http://youtu.be/Lbd9fSGAM2Y> to watch the video.

Analysis

I have chosen to follow Barone and Eisner (2012) and consider the choreography as a fictional account of real life experiences – no less accurate than other forms of social science writing. One way of reading dance is to use Laban Movement Analysis. Certified Laban Movement Analysts (LMA) have spent years undergoing expensive, intensive training, I am not a Certified LMA but having used Laban in an amateur context for many years I feel able to offer a simple reading. Firstly consider the use of space: the dancers are mainly active in the upper front part of their kinesphere with occasional use of the lower front and upper rear. The trace forms (the lines they made in space) were a few straight lines (flexion and extension of the arms), the majority were curved lines (add abduction and adduction movements) with some twisting and spiralling (add rotational movements). When considering dimensions, the dancers move through all three planes: vertical, width and depth.

Looking at the dynamics of the movement or the effort used in the movement, the focus is indirect, the pressure or weight is light and delicate, the use of time is mainly

drawn out and unhurried with occasional sparks of accelerated movement and the flow is mostly bound (ready to stop), direct and sustained (gliding), (Newlove and Dalby, 2004). On its own, LMA does not diagnose or read into what is behind the movement, it is simply (at least the way I use it is) a way of languageing movement.

Another way to look at the movement is by considering metaphors. When I viewed the movement I saw a lot of movement that crossed the belly area. I saw this as a metaphor for protecting the self and keeping other people away. A dancer reflected that maybe this act was trying to protect oneself from loneliness. There was also an image of reaching behind, if we link this to metaphors of the past being behind and our future in front maybe this can be read as a reaching back for people, places or times that are no longer with us. The imagery in the first line of the song 'Loneliness is a cloak you wear' led to movements that showed being shrouded or engulfed by loneliness which links back to my first image with notions of impenetrability.

In conclusion, I draw no conclusions about this movement work. Barone and Eisner (2012) remind us an artist merely directs a viewer's attention but does not fix the meaning for them. Who we are today is a sum of our unique history + biography + biology + sociology and that will uniquely colour how we view a piece the movement and the meanings we can derive. The next step is to continue to use these creative techniques to support non-verbal expression.

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