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Professional popular musicians' experiences of community, inclusion and mental health in the musicking environment

– There's no difference between me and the audience in that sense. It's quite often, holding each other and crying, because we we've survived something, we've survived it, but we're still bloody doing it

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Abstract

There is growing interest in the intersection of musicians and mental health. Previous research has focused mainly on classical musicians or the detrimental impact of the occupational environment contributing to a widening gap in the knowledge base surrounding popular musicians and their lived mental health experiences. This research explored the lived experience of popular musicians within their unique work environments and under-represented demographics. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to investigate the experiences of seven professional popular musicians. Three themes were developed including opportunities for inclusion and feeling welcome, special connections made through musicking and the good feelings of giving back. This study provides insight into the real-world experience of under-represented musicians to enable deeper psychological understanding within this demographic

Keywords: popular musicians, musicking, mental health, music industry, self-esteem, phenomenology

1 Background

The impetus for this study arose from my role as a psychotherapist working with popular musicians and the frustrating lack of research surrounding this demographic and their lived experience. Unlike classical musicians, who have received more attention in mental health research, popular musicians remain somewhat overlooked and neglected (Barbar et al., 2014; Kenny et al., 2014; Visser et al. 2021). Studies show that popular musicians face higher risks of

suicide, substance use, and psychological distress (Berg et al., 2018; 2022; Newman et al., 2022). Recent research from the United States and Europe highlights elevated levels of anxiety and depression among this demographic, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Taylor et al., 2020) and Brexit challenges.

To structure this study, I explored three prevalent thematic topics in existing literature: musicians' personality traits, music's impact on mental health, and the occupational environment. For contextual clarity, I will now define key terms. The term 'popular musician' includes performers across various genres outside of classical contexts (Berg et al., 2018). The definition of 'professional' is debated (Geeves et al., 2016), but this paper adopts Sanders' view, defining a professional musician being one who is 'economically supported by their skill and acknowledged as a professional by society' (1974: 16). Visser et al. further expand this, defining professional musicians as those receiving financial remuneration for their work (2021: 817).

Musicians' experiences are often studied in isolated topics such as the occupational environment, music performance, listening, or substance use. However, in reality these experiences are dynamic and interconnected characterised by a nuanced blending and interplay of multiple factors. The term "musicking" has been used to contain and explore this vast field and the diverse array of professional and personal experiences connected to it. The musicologist Christopher Small developed the term *musicking* (1998) to describe the *doing* of music, being a verb rather than a noun. This term is further defined as the 'taking part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, listening, rehearsing or practicing' (1998:9).

2 Popular musicians' personal characteristics

Past psychological studies examining classical musicians have established connections between creativity, personality traits, and psychological challenges. These assumptions portray musicians, as well as other creative artists, as potentially having a genetic predisposition to mental health challenges as a result of their innate creativity (Berg et al., 2022; Kemp, 1996; Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992) yet this evidence remains inconclusive.

Compared to classical musicians, there is a dearth of research examining the personality and identity of popular musicians. This scarcity of research could be attributed to the diverse genres encompassed within this demographic or the relatively recent emergence of popular music history. Studies report the emotional instability, extroverted, arrogant and dominant nature of both popular and classical musicians compared to population norms, alongside exhibiting higher levels of neuroticism (Dyce and O'Connor, 1994; Gillespie and Myers, 2000) whilst struggling with the emotional stability of self-experience (Szabolcs et al., 2017; Wills and Cooper, 1987). This instability of self resonates with other existing research suggesting a propensity to greater vulnerability, self-doubt, and feelings of alienation (Dobson, 2011) within the popular musician demographic (Ficek, 2024). Existing research on this complex topic suggests a correlation between personality traits of popular musicians and an increased susceptibility to mental health challenges. However, the extent of this relationship remains largely unknown (Cameron et al., 2015; Woody, 1999).

3 Music engagement

Existing research overlooks the differentiation of experiences among amateur, professional, and non-musicians when investigating the mental health effects of music listening or playing. Although existing research has explored correlations between personality characteristics and mental health difficulties, there is little evidence within the musician demographic that highlights how personal or professional musicking impacts these personality traits and thus, mental health (Saarikallio et al., 2020).

Most psychological research surrounding how musicking influences emotions is drawn from music therapy settings within the clinical population or non-musician demographic. These limited perspectives, alongside musicians' increased ability to articulate emotions more efficiently than non-musicians (Greasley et al., 2013), contribute to this complexity. Empirical

studies exploring links between music and the risk to mental health are rare (for a review see Theorell & Kreutz, 2012), yet there is ample evidence linking positive emotional experience and musical engagement (Juslin & Sloboda, 2011).

According to Woody and McPherson, both music listening and playing 'share underlying motives' (2010: 403) and are potentially one and the same. Music listening influences psychological states through different factors such as emotional regulation (Van Goethem & Sloboda 2011) and reducing stress (Baltazar & Saarikallio, 2016). Paradoxically, music listening can also prompt unhealthy coping strategies (Silverman, 2020), where it promotes nostalgic relationship to memories (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), dysfunctional rumination (McFerran, 2019) and undesirable behaviour (Kennaway, 2016). Existing research often overlooks the differentiation of experiences among amateur, professional, and non-musicians when investigating the mental health effects of music listening or playing. Although existing research has explored correlations between personality characteristics and mental health difficulties, there is little evidence within the musician demographic that highlights how personal or professional musicking impacts these personality traits and thus, mental health (Saarikallio et al., 2020).

4 Playing music

In the field of music therapy, non-musicians and the clinical population, playing music has been found to be beneficial in a multitude of ways. These benefits include increased wellbeing (Daykin et al., 2018; Mac Ritchie et al., 2020), community (Ficek, 2024), quality of life (Bonde & Theorell, 2018; Clift et al., 2010), positive influence on moods (Valentine & Evans, 2011) and facilitation of self-esteem (Chang et al., 2018; Perkins & Williamon, 2014), meaning (Ascenso, 2016) or self-development (Perkins et al., 2020). Despite these findings, many scholars advocate the need for further critical examination of research concerning the influence of the arts on health (Clift et al., 2010; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Mirza, 2006).

From the perspective of popular musicians, Raeburn proposes that creativity and active engagement offer a distinct opportunity for emotional regulation and to derive meaning from past psychological traumas (1999). Additionally, music offers a cathartic, therapeutic process allowing musicians to purge negative emotions (Dyce & O'Conner, 1994). However, within these existing studies, there is a noticeable dearth of evidence regarding how popular musicians engage with music for their own mental well-being (Saarikallio et al., 2020).

5 The impact of the occupational environment

From a popular musician perspective, early studies exploring the lives of British and US musicians reported high levels of stress emanating from the precarity of work, low income, work overload, work underload (boredom), music performance anxiety, pressure within relationships, the musicians' lifestyle, and being treated as second-class citizens (Raeburn, 1987; Wills & Cooper's 1984). These stressors were mirrored in recent studies highlighting the negative mental health impact of hyper competition (Berg et al. 2022), touring (Parker et al., 2021), sleep deprivation (Kegelaers, 2022) and social media (Margiotta, 2012).

The touring environment in particular has been found to pose significant distress (Newman et al, 2022; Zendel, 2021) due to the demands for longer periods of touring to offset the diminishing income of digital earnings (McKinna, 2014). The negative impact of the occupational environment (Detari et al., 2020; Vaag et al., 2016) also forces musicians to adopt an autonomous approach to their boundary-less careers further impacting mental health (Berg et al., 2022).

These identity struggles emerge from the intersection between occupational pressure and the stress of commercial success (Ficek, 2024) amplified through the psychological difficulty of separating music and lifestyle (Macdonald & Wilson, 2005). These identity factors can subsequently cause stress for musicians (Parker et al., 2021), often managed through drinking and substance use (Bellis et al., 2007; 2012; Ptatscheck, 2020).

6 Method

This research paper daws from a critical, realist perspective (Bhaskar, 1975; 1998) which posits how there is a real world in which we all exist, but we all come at it from our own 'socially determined knowledge about reality' (Danermark et al., 2019: 16). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the musicians' salient experiences from an idiographic perspective and also by taking account of where these experiences converge for the group as a whole (Smith et al., 2021). From an exploration of other methods, I deduced IPA to be the most suitable method for the aims of the study. My research was fundamentally concerned with how a particular group of participants view their musicking and mental health experiences. The study involved my interpretation of the musicians' salient experiences from a personal, idiographic perspective and also by taking account of where these experiences converged for the group as a whole. The study did not seek to identify a theory or illustrate objective, chronological events through language. Furthermore, it did not attempt to evaluate a single case study or self-construction through life's oral history, and hence IPA was chosen as the most suitable methodology. The phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic perspectives of IPA afforded a nuanced account of the particulars of personal experience on their own terms, rather than in terms of any pre-existing theoretical assumption (Smith et al., 2009). The goal with IPA is to get as close to the participants' experiences as possible, in order to analyse and examine in great detail how the musicians have made sense of their own experience (Nizza et al., 2021) and where these collective patterns converge or diverge (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Integrating the phenomenological, idiographic and hermeneutic philosophies of IPA enables a nuanced and rich exploration of the participants' lived experiences by placing them centre stage of the study. Additionally, IPA actively incorporates reflexivity and acknowledges the researcher's interpretative bias in the hermeneutic approach to data collection, which is also an integral part of my role as insider-researcher with this demographic.

Overall, IPA research enables an integration of personal and clinical experience, participants' understandings, and psychotherapeutic frameworks, allowing for a wider lens to contribute towards the pragmatic evidence base required within this professional doctorate. Furthermore, Smith and Osborn's suggestion of how IPA is 'especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty' (2008: 53) correlates with the scant evidence and under-represented demographic of the popular musician. Although IPA has previously been described as an off-the-shelf (Chamberlain, 2012) methodology, in the context of this study it was the most congruent and pragmatic method for my research question.

7 The participants

The sample was chosen from the first seven musicians that were available to take part in the study and adhered to the following criteria:

1: Self-defined popular musicians
2: Earning most of their income from music-based activities
3: Adult (over 18) and UK-based
4: They included performance within their musicking activities
5: Non-clinical population
6: Proficient in the English language

The final sample of seven musicians consisted of three males between the ages of 25 to 65 and four females between the ages of 35 and 45. Race and ethnicity was split between White British and Black British. One participant also self-defined with a *limb difference*.

8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity affords an explicit perspective of meta-awareness, providing a deeper connection with the research (Finlay, 2002). My experience as a psychotherapist and

musician placed me in the vulnerable position of an insider researcher (Rooney, 2005) with a personal interest in and a clinical curiosity about this community. From this perspective, my own bias and worldview as a clinician and researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) has been continually, reflexively challenged throughout the interviews, interpretations, data analysis and findings. Thus, the use of supervision, critical friends, journaling, and academic support have been an invaluable tool for the balancing act of this research. Goldspink and Engward (2019) suggest that reflexivity should be sensitively and explicitly incorporated into IPA research to enrich the data. By its very nature, qualitative research involves a complex intersubjectively impactful relationship between the researcher and the researched. There is an apparently paradoxical relationship between the aim of IPA to get as close as possible to an insider's perspective and its recognition of the impossibility of this endeavour (Smith et al., 1999). This conundrum is resolved to some extent by the critical thinking perspective and by conscious, explicit evaluation of the researcher's inherent bias and values (Creswell, 2013; Shaw, 2010) through adopting a reflexive perspective.

Acknowledging our inescapable position as influential central figures (Finlay, 2002) enables us to become explicitly aware of the impact we have on the collection, selection and interpretation of data. Like my personal, co-created, relational approach to psychotherapy, I view this research process as a joint venture involving my own subjectivity and the intersubjective relationship with participants. Moreover, holding an intention of awareness and reflexivity regarding the ways in which my personal experience, race, affiliation, sexual orientation, age, gender, immigration status, responses to participants and many other factors impact the research (Berger, 2015) was crucial to this process. This awareness is made even more complex by my own identity bias (Roberts, 2013) as a musician with an exposed media profile. From my standpoint as an insider researcher, the acknowledgement and active use of my reflective position is a fundamental component of
the double hermeneutic of IPA.

9 Analysis

The data was generated through transcribing semi-structured interviews that were conducted personally using a digital platform. These recorded interviews were approximately one hour in duration and transcribed verbatim.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) consists of a loose set of stages used to gain insight into how people understand their lives. The idiographic perspective of IPA requires that each participant's transcript is fully analysed on its own merit before moving onto other cases. This analysis involves making explanatory notes, identifying experiential statements from these notes, grouping and clustering, and finally constructing experiential themes into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) (Smith & Nizza, 2021). When this process is completed for all seven participants the analysis shifts to the development of emerging Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The criterion for these higher-order GETs was met by ensuring that they were present in approximately 70% of the sample, which in this instance meant being represented by at least four participants. The GETs were developed from the hermeneutic circle shifting between the higher order concepts of convergence, the PETs, experiential statements, and original transcripts.

The rigour and strength of this data were evidenced through the explicit trail leading from the initial transcribed extracts through to the interpretations, analysis and subsequent formulation of GETs to ground the thesis. This trustworthiness was also enhanced through my ongoing reflexivity regarding the ways in which my personal experience, race, affiliation, sexual orientation, age, gender, immigration status, and responses to participants impacted the research (Berger, 2015).

10 Findings

This study highlights the various ways in which musicking brings people together providing insight into how the musicians' mental health is impacted through different notions of community and giving back. These salient experiences were categorised into the following three sub-themes:

1. Opportunities for inclusion and feeling welcome in the musicking environment
2. Special connections made through musicking
3. The good feelings of giving back

11 Opportunities for inclusion and feeling welcome

Four of the musicians made explicit reference to a sense of inclusion, acceptance and feeling welcomed through their musicking communities. These sensitivities to community are especially significant in respect to the participants' diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.

In Fiona's extract below, she describes the feelings of being acknowledged as a woman in a male-dominated band environment.

> *With the band thing, I've had so many messages from fans,"I'm so happy and excited that there is a woman in my favourite band" and I've got messages from parents and stuff being like, "we were at your gig and my, my son started playing drums or my daughter started playing drums" and I'm like, that's brilliant. It doesn't matter, there shouldn't be a barrier there because you're a boy or a girl, so if you want to play something, you just should, but I think you just kind, you learn to just have like, tough skin and it shouldn't be like that.*

Fiona describes her feelings of acceptance when she received approving messages from fans explicitly referring to her gender. The extract illustrates Fiona's reflections on the wider picture of gender discrimination and the associated cultural assumptions of drumming being a male pursuit. Fiona's use of the phrase *"you learn to just have like, tough skin"* could be interpreted as her own resilient approach to the discrimination she may have felt. By suggesting how "*it shouldn't be like that",* she illustrates her frustration towards existing, repressive cultural constructs within musicking from her female drummer perspective. Overall, the extract conveys the opportunities musicking afforded to Fiona for experiencing uplifting approval and challenging cultural norms.

Fiona's gender perspective within a stereotypical male environment is also resonant in Gloria's experience of inclusion. Below, she describes her feelings of acceptance at being invited into a female-only community:

> *It was nice to be a woman releasing other people's music. And then, the indie label market did a woman-only indie label market that we got, like female lead labels, markets and stuff like that. So it was really nice to be a part of.*

Gloria describes the positive impact of feeling included within a female community of musicians and industry professionals. She illustrates how her gender perspective made the inclusion more pertinent and empowering in the statement of how it was *"nice to be a woman"* within the dominant male framework. The extract could also be interpreted from a wider, gender perspective, highlighting Gloria's achievement of creating equal opportunities for under-represented women in the "*indie label market".*

Bruce's feelings of inclusion as part of a racial minority resonate with Gloria's experience.

> *I was there, you know, one of the few blacks that was there. I can look at myself and say, oh, my God, I was a unique lad, the biggest, like, as much as you think that, we're going through a state where there's racism, and there's all different sorts of negativity, right. I never let any of that. I just fit into, right into that group of people.*

Bruce describes himself as "*unique lad"* due to his acceptance within a predominantly white crowd during a period of racial and social unrest. The extract illustrates his sense of surprise at his seemingly anomalous inclusion. His use of the word *"unique"* could be interpreted as referring to his act of courage against the backdrop of racism, or to how he felt uniquely accepted by the predominantly white crowd.

Bruce also explicitly states how he actively resisted being influenced by these "*different sorts of negativity"* around racial tensions. By just fitting in with *"that group of people",* he illustrates his feelings of being inconspicuous and accepted as one of them. This is similar to Claire's experience as a female with a limb difference.

> *I'll kind of get less and less, like conscious of my hand, I'm just kind of, you know, at the merch store or whatever, I'll just be talking to people and, just not even being aware of it. Whereas, you know, sometimes I'm kind of almost like I'll hide it, subconsciously, because I don't want to upset people or scare people or whatever. But on tour, that kind of gets stripped away.*

Claire's feeling of acceptance and inclusion is illustrated through her experience of touring and audience interaction. The extract conveys how these musicking relationships allowed her to feel less consciously aware of the negative psychological impact of her limb difference. This implicit sense of acceptance strips "away" her fear of upsetting or scaring the audience through increased feelings of inclusion. This diminished personal awareness of her disability could also be a result of *"talking to people*" from the perspective of her artistic context and identity. Thus, Claire's touring and performing identity could facilitate an escape from her normal home environment allowing her a greater freedom of flexibility in her identity and subsequent self-acceptance. Like Bruce, Claire's extract illustrates the impact of self-awareness, difference and the ways in which musicking experiences afforded her an opportunity to feel more included.

These idiographic experiences of inclusion and feeling welcome are summarised in Fiona's acceptance and validation from fans; Gloria's inclusion within a female community; Bruce's fitting in from a racial minority perspective; and Claire's feeling of oneness with her fanbase.

12 Special connections made through musicking

One area of convergence within the musicians' interpersonal connections was illustrated through descriptions of a protective community, gang or family. The use of the term "*bubble"* by both Fiona and Ed expressed their unique feelings of support and containment within their band relationships. This is explored by Fiona below:

> *I just love the connection of the people or the person that you're onstage with. They kind of just have like, that it's like a bubble, almost where you're playing. And I think with the drums and bass, you've got these new secret bits that you're so in sync for just this part, you're like, no one will notice that but we have (laughs). And it's just, it's fun, it's really fun. It's like sometimes it's just the simplest things that make you feel good, though, isn't it? (880).*

The above quote demonstrates Fiona's "*love*" of connection on stage and the resultant feeling of a secret, shared space between herself and bandmates. Her use of the term "*bubble"*

initially suggests the contained relational boundary between band and audience. Alternatively, the use of the term "*bubble"* could also convey a protective boundary that keeps others away from the band's intimate space.

She expands this intimate and secret encounter through the personal and temporary musical synchronisation, which is unknown to the outside but acknowledged internally. This internally shared and jointly acknowledged experience prompts feelings of fun and a deepened connection, akin to an inside joke between the two musicians. This covert synchronicity and connection impacts Fiona's sense of enjoyment, conveyed through the phrase *"sometimes it's just the simplest things that make you feel good".* Fiona's reflection suggests the importance of being part of a community and the special safe connections this affords.

Ed also shares a reflection of a special relationship through his use of the term *"bubble"* in the transcript. Ed further describes his relational perspective below:

> *It felt like being in a little bit of a gang, and er, we used to rehearse all the time, and then we'd go out drinking together. We would go to gigs together and all that camaraderie of it, and creating songs was just like a, it felt like, you know, everybody would kind of share the load a little bit.*

Ed shows that he has a similar view to Fiona in relation to the special connection he felt owing to the unity and containment of the community relationship. Ed describes the experience as being in a "*little bit of a gang",* which suggests a slight reluctance to fully commit to expressing the idea of being a "*gang".* In this example, the term "*gang"* could be understood to mean a social community of shared interests, rather than the more malevolent and violent associations with territorial gang culture. Ed further outlines this shared community of mutual interests by describing the shared activities of their relationship.

"*Rehearsing all the time"* suggests the level of joint commitment within the group when dedicating their personal time to the mutual endeavor of musicking goals. This collective commitment to musicking was also mirrored in the communal activity of the group by way of social "*drinking"* and watching other musicians when "*going to gigs"*. Ed further outlines the strength of this joint social and musicking companionship when using the term "*camaraderie"*. In the later part of the extract, Ed reminisces about how, in the past, this "*gang"* would share the responsibility of the perceived *"load"* of creating songs, suggesting the pressure he may feel in his current solo role compared to being in the group.

This theme of sharing within musicking relationships, illustrated by Fiona and Ed, is also a fundamental part of David's musicking ethos, described below:

> *But sometimes, the audience will be singing along and I'll be looking at all these pointing fingers, the fists, the smiles, tears, and it just carries me along, and I'm just like, fucking yeah, we're doing it. I don't know what we're doing, but we're doing it and it's like, yes, you know. But, I just want to hug them all, and we're all in it together. You know, now I look around at the band and I can see them really enjoying it. You know, banging away there, on the bass, he'll look up sometimes, I'll give him a wink. You know, he sort of smiles, and it's like a big smile written all over his face, and that for me is, yeah, as long as they're all enjoying it, I'm happy doing it.*

In this extract, David, like Fiona, describes the connection and communication with his bandmates, alongside the love of witnessing the audience enjoying the performance. The sound and sight of the audience jointly singing his personal lyrics and physically gesturing *"carries"* him along. David's use of the phrase "*carries me along"* conveys the power and unstoppable flow of the performance being akin to a water current. The temporal nature of the performance is therefore held in this energetic and supportive current of potential movement. The physical

gestures of expression and mixed emotions of tears and smiles offer a support and motivation to propel him through the performance. The metaphorical moving together prompts David to reflect on the ambiguous nature of this joint venture.

His words, *"I don't know what we're doing, but we're doing it"* suggest that meaning is tangential to his feeling of perceived reciprocal love for, and from, the audience translated through his desire to "*wanting to hug them all".* In a sense, David views his audience as one entity within the symbiotic performance experience.

Like Fiona, David has a visual cue and a moment of intimate connection with the bass player through giving him a "*wink".* This gesture of affection conveys the mutual pleasure derived from the interaction between the two musicians. This explicit reference to an emotional expression, growing from a "*sort of smile"* to a "*bigger smile written all over his face"* seems to prompt a sense of reflective validation and to provide motivation to continue. David's statement of "*as long as they're all enjoying it, I'm happy doing it"* suggests the level of importance he places on witnessing other people's enjoyment, both in terms of the audience, the band and his "*sharing and caring"* ethos mentioned earlier in the transcript.

Claire echoes this sentiment, but frames it within a protective, intimate tribal community, in a similar way to Ed's experience of camaraderie. Claire describes the magical nature of creativity within this shared experience below:

> *One of my favourite things is playing with other people, and that sense of connection and of, creating something magic out of nothing. Erm, and just yeah, having fun and feeling like you're part of a gang or family that are on the same sort of wavelength.*

Claire's description conveys the emotional importance of the special connections of creativity and kinship within the parameters of "*playing with other people".* She further frames this endeavor through the impact of "*connection"* and *"creating something magical out of nothing"*. This fertile void of potential creativity is described as "*magical",* which conveys Claire's wonderment at the process, which is enhanced by the presence of others. This creative process is embellished through the sense of fun and community, described as the feeling of being in a *"gang"* in a similar way to Ed and alluded to by Fiona and David.

Being part of a *"family"* on the same *"wavelength"* also depicts the deeper connection Claire feels when musicking with others. In this context, it could be deduced that the word "*family*" suggests a greater level of security than the image of a gang, in the sense that family is bonded by blood rather than friendship. Claire develops this narrative of connection through her description of the community being on the same *"wavelength"* in terms of common interests, opinions and shared understandings.

This sub-theme demonstrates how the musicians have experienced special connections within communities of bandmates. The next sub-theme follows on from the reciprocal nature of bringing people together by exploring how the musicians give back to musicking communities.

13 The good feelings of giving back

This next sub-theme represents how the musicians bring people together by giving back to surrounding musical communities. This sense of personal achievement from the sharing of life experiences with others is illustrated below through Gloria's account.

> *I did a talk for a music business school about self-releasing in the music industry, and I felt like it was a really nice experience. I was able to give all my knowledge over the years, and people had really good feedback and people found it really helpful, I think. And it felt really honest, like the right level of vulnerable and, and sort of confident with what people could do. And so that was nice too.*

Gloria conveys her experience as being enjoyable, authentic, helpful to others and personally validating, through connecting to her own vulnerabilities and achievements. Her use of the word *"honest"* describes the level of personal authenticity she was able to impart through explicitly reflecting on her own struggles, limitations and the *"confident",* realistic possibilities of what others can achieve. The words *"right level"* illustrate the emphasis Gloria places on being able to hold and impart the pragmatic, practical overview of possibilities within the music industry, gained from her personal experience. The extract conveys the importance of authenticity for Gloria and how she managed this with "*honest"* and mindfully reflective communication.

This sense of how musicking affords possibilities for others is congruent with David's *"humbling"* experience of impacting and *"changing"* the lives of his audience members, described below:

> *It's humbling, you know, obviously the nature of what I do, and because of the band I was in, it's not, people coming up to me and saying, oh, I think you're fantastic. Can I have your autograph? It's people coming up and saying thanks for changing my, you know, thanks for changing my life. And if it weren't for you, blah, blah. It tends to be ninety percent of the people that talk to me, at gigs are all talking about their sense of survival, or what they've been through, or the way that this band's music helped them through a bad childhood or something. Erm, so it's, it's more like, there's no difference between me and the audience in that sense. It's quite often, holding each other and crying, you know, because we we've survived something, you know, we've survived it, but we're still bloody doing it.*

David conveys the humbling and emotional experience of giving back to his audience. David highlights this sense of humility by articulating how his audience do not seek to idolise him through the adulation of "*autographs"* or tell him he is *"fantastic",* but merely want to express their gratitude for the "*life changing"* impact of his music.

David understands this life-changing impact through the co-journeying and joint survival that link him with his audience members, alluding to how they are one and the same. He states how *"there's no difference between me and the audience"* in his perception of the nature of his giving back, rejecting hierarchical boundaries or division in this journey of joint survival. The extract illustrates how David's musicking provides a sense of hope and resilience through the joint experience of communal survival. This imparting of hope and community is further highlighted by his description of the physical experience of *"holding each other and crying".* Using the term *"each other"* describes the provision of resilience, support and hope through his musicking, benefitting both himself and his audience. This provision for others was also described by Claire.

> *I enjoy making someone else sound as good as possible. So, you know, adding parts, adding vocal harmonies that are going to enhance what they're doing, and being really happy for that to be my role, instead of being like, it's all about me and trying to pull focus, which I think I did a lot when I was younger. If I'm fronting my own band, I am the focal point, and that's fine, but I'm also trying to give opportunities to spotlight the other musicians in my band. So I feel that's been a good, a good change to sort of, yeah, that feels like I'm doing it for the right reasons. And try to just, just create, we're creating something bigger than ourselves, and that's the magic, and that's what we're all aiming for.*

Claire's extract illustrates her giving back through the desire to make others *"sound as good as possible",* with a need to create something *"bigger than ourselves".* This giving back is described through her transitional journey, where she previously needed to "*pull focus"* towards herself but now *"spotlights"* the other members in her band, rebalancing her old self-absorbed narrative.

Claire describes this focus on others as a *"good change"* that feels more congruent with her new identity as a person doing it for the *"right reasons".* This revitalised desire to enhance others prompts her to feel a sense of *"magic"* in striving for a common goal. This collective perspective conveys the mutually enriching, reciprocal nature of Claire's giving back, which is similar way to David's communal, co-journeying relationship with his audience. Overall, the extract conveys Claire's shift of focus from being egocentric to her current desire to enhance, empower and allow the voice of others to be heard for the benefit of the greater whole. This relational focus on empowering others is also a resonant theme within Bruce's experience.

> *We're a very politically aware band, with everything happening around us. We done everything on our own as you know, we were never, we could never be rock or pop stars, you know, because we had too much to say. Yeah, and we were the voice of the people. Yeah, generation, you know.*

Bruce describes the politically aware nature of his band and how this provided a "*voice of the people"* to give back to an unheard *"generation".* He describes how his band were too politically aware and explicitly expressive to be *"rock or pop stars",* especially within the socio-political environment of late 1970s Britain. He highlights how the band achieved success on their own merits, despite being ignored and repressed within the mainstream music industry.

Bruce conveys his feelings surrounding the suppression of outspoken and politically aware voices of non-mainstream musicians. His use of the phrases *"we were never"* and *"we could never be"* rock stars shows that he felt the band's potential for commercial success was limited and their commitment to equality and unity.

This sub-theme highlights the ways in which the musicians give back through their varied interactions within their musicking communities.

14 Discussion

All three sub-themes offer nuanced perspectives on the various ways in which musicking brings people together and how this positively influences the mental health of the musicians through feelings of inclusion, special connections and reciprocity. Existing quantitative research outside of the professional musician demographic reports the community and social aspects of music engagement to be the most impactful components of mental health (Weinberg & Joseph, 2017). Within the popular musician community, Vaag et al. (2016) also report social and peer support as being an important source of wellbeing within the professional world. Paradoxically, other research suggests that professional musicking prompts distrust, toxicity, bullying and cynicism towards peers and other relationships (Van Den Eynde et al., 2016; Wills & Cooper, 1988). The positive embrace of community and belonging described by the participants in this study challenges this cynicism and expands the limitations of this existing research by drawing on idiographic meaning-making. This wider understanding is illustrated by the musicians' personal insights, involving areas such as how musicking offers opportunities for inclusion and feeling welcome, facilitates special connections and prompts joy from giving back within the musicking environments. Furthermore, these feelings of inclusion and welcoming acceptance had a greater level of importance due to the diverse cultural perspective of the participants and their respective communities.

These community relationships have shown that despite the musicians' diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and their differences of race, gender and disability, musicking is a source of inclusivity and mutuality. Bolger articulates these feelings of mutuality as 'a shared and responsive relationship between participants, resulting in shared responsibility for the process towards a shared goal or understanding' (2013: 79). This mutuality is evidenced through the musicians' experiences of being welcomed despite race, accepted as a female in a predominantly male environment or a disabled person in an able-bodied world. These special

connections, made through musicking, highlighted the feelings of community through their connecting bubbles, camaraderie via their familial gangs, and the special, intimate relationships with their respective audiences.

These findings also illustrate the importance and personal understanding of wellbeing and emotional warmth derived from the musicians', musicking communities. The value of these special connections provides an alternative perspective to the reported heightened levels of narcissism, self-influence and grandiosity in popular musicians when compared to the classical demographic (Wills & Cooper, 1988; Szabloc et al., 2017).

The third sub-theme outlined how the musicians felt positive emotions when they were able to reciprocate or give back through various forms of musicking, both inside and outside the occupational environment. Adding further experiential evidence to Small's theory of the mutual reinforcement within similar relationships (1998), the value of giving back could be viewed as a type of mutual musicking reciprocity. This reciprocity involved a wide range of emotional experiences, such as: developing personal self-worth when expressing vulnerability; validating other musicians; being humbled by changing audience members' lives and giving voice to the repressed. The study illustrated the importance, desire and need for the participants to reciprocate and give back to other musicians and communities through their musicking and the subsequent good feelings this evoked. This active, community-based focus on joint wellbeing is a surprising and novel find amongst a demographic that is often described as self-obsessed and grandiose (Szabloc et al., 2017) and an academic corpus focused on the distressing occupational environment (Loveday et al., 2022)

15 Conclusion

The study highlights the importance, value and positive impact of relationships and belonging within a small demographic of professional popular musicians. By focusing on the experiences of professional, popular musicians and general musicking, rather than solely, professional musicking or occupational identity, the findings have shed light on and moved beyond the often-cited reductive polarisation of therapeutic versus destructive impact, where music-making is considered therapeutic, but making a career out of music is destructive in this seemingly paradoxical occupational environment (Ficek, 2023; 2024)

Furthermore, the sense of belonging and community derived from professional musicking could also be viewed as a mitigating factor in the occupational environment, yet more research is needed in this area.

16 Further research

While the study offers valuable insights into the meaning-making process and mental health of seven musicians, it does have certain limitations regarding the diversity of the sample. The sample was appropriate and representative for the study, and adhered to the criteria of adult, performing, popular musicians, all of whom earn most of their income from music. It also included mixed age, gender, race, ethnicity and disability, according to availability at the time. In future studies, it may be beneficial to refine the sample by narrowing down the participant pool to create a more homogeneous group, in keeping with the focus on homogeneity within IPA. This could involve recruiting participants within a narrower age range, similar musical status, and, whenever feasible, similar gender, race, and ethnicity. Alternatively further research could be approached from a more flexible research method such as thematic analysis. By expanding the group size and potentially conducting the research over a longer stretch of time the results could offer a wider context surrounding the mental health environment for this demographic.

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