Giving and gaining: Experiences of three music facilitators working and musicking with asylum seekers in Australia.

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In plain language:

There is little research done in the music therapy field on the topic of practicing music therapy with asylum seekers. This article looks at the experiences of three music facilitators, including two music therapists and one volunteer musician, working with asylum seekers in Australia. The researcher interviewed the facilitators and then systematically analysed the ideas they shared. The outcome revealed that the facilitators (1) gained personal benefits, (2) gave agency (ownership) and (3) built Bandship. The findings are important in understanding the asylum seekers and the experience using music to work with the asylum seekers.
Abstract
There is a significant body of multidisciplinary literature raising concerned voices about the violation of human rights and the deterioration of mental wellbeing of asylum seekers in Australia. However there is little research reporting how music therapists work with this population resulting in the limited generation of resources for music therapy practice. The current study investigated the experiences of three music facilitators (two music therapists and one volunteer musician) working and musicking with asylum seekers in Australia and sought to explicate their lived experience through a phenomenological perspective. Verbatim transcription of interview data was collected from semi-structured phenomenological interviews conducted on Skype which was used for the phenomenological microanalysis. Three global meaning units were identified: (1) gaining personal benefits from the experience, (2) giving agency and (3) building Bandship. The findings contribute an insight into the issues of cultural competency and sensitivity, impact of the work such as vicarious traumatisation and vicarious resilience and the role of music and performance.

Keywords: asylum seekers, Australia, music therapy, musicking, vicarious resilience

Introduction
An asylum seeker is a person who is seeking international protection and whose refugee status has yet to be determined (Phillips, 2011). While they can experience the multifaceted issues of the Refugee Journey (see Figure 1), the Australian policy of deterrence and mandatory detention further complicates their life situations. There is a significant body of multidisciplinary literature raising concerned voices about the violation of human rights and the deterioration of mental wellbeing of asylum seekers in Australia (Hadgkiss, Lethborg, Al-Mousa, & Marck, 2012; Murray, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2008; Newman, Proctor, & Dudley, 2013; Robjant, Hassan, & Katona, 2009; Shawyer et al., 2014). According to Lenette, Weston, Wise, Sunderland, and Bristed (2015), there are many music programs emerging to ameliorate the damage caused by the homeland conflicts as well as the policies in host countries like Australia. However there is little research in the music therapy field reporting how music therapists work with this population, resulting in limited understanding of the people involved and a lack of resources for evidence-based practice.

Literature Review
Music therapy literature almost exclusively accounted for reporting music work with refugees conducted worldwide in settings like refugee camps (Behrens, 2012; Storsve, Westby, & Ruud, 2010), in the community (Ahonen-Eerikainen & Mongillo Desideri, 2014; Felsenstein, 2013; Signorelli & Bright, 2006), in clinical settings (Choi, 2010; Jespersen & Vuust, 2012; Orth, 2005) and in schools (Baker &
Jones, 2006; Cheong-Clinch, 2009; Hunt, 2005; Jones, Baker, & Day, 2004). These studies all attested to the benefits of music and music therapy for the refugees in alleviating trauma and other psychological, behavioural and emotional issues, in social and learning behaviour and in developing coping strategies and resilience.

Robinson (2013) observed the tendency of the health and social care literature to polarise the refugee and asylum seeker population as “either a victim suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or as a resilient survivor” (p.90). This is similar in the music therapy literature with the most of the studies focusing on trauma and the relative symptoms suffered by the clients, often labelling them as “traumatized” refugees (Benedict, Mancini, & Grodin, 2009; Jespersen & Vuust, 2012; Orth, 2005; Zharinova-Sanderson, 2004). This reflects the clinical nature of music therapy research and practice with this population. As Robinson (2013) warned, the emphasis on a singular aspect such as trauma as opposed to the multifaceted needs of refugees and asylum seekers can lead to perceiving them as a homogenous population disregarding their individual and complex experiences.

There are some studies looking at the social, political and cultural aspects of music therapy with refugees such as the work of Ahonen-Eerikäinen and Mongillo Desideri (2014) and Hunt (2005), used a political voice to describe their work, in order to empower and advocate their clients. Such practice and research has overlapping aspects to the qualities of “PREPARE: Participatory, Resource-oriented, Ecological, Performative, Activist, Reflective and Ethics-driven” (Stige & Edvard Aarø, 2011) that characterise Community Music Therapy (Ansdell, 2002; Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004).

Zharinova-Sanderson (2004) in conceptualising her work with refugees as Community Music Therapy, stated that “torture and traumatic experiences are not their biggest concern” (p. 236) which contrasts the prominence of trauma discourse in music therapy with refugee clients. She suggested that the main goals of music therapy with refugees should be aimed at the clients regaining capacity to trust and integrate from social isolation into the community. She described the role of music as providing qualities of humanness for the refugees in this process.

The works of Lenette and Sunderland (2014) and Lenette et al. (2015) reported findings on the role of participatory music activities for the asylum seekers. Their research is significant as the only study that observed the work with music with asylum seekers (not refugees) who had experienced detention in the Australian context. It is also notable that the study was designed to collect data from both sides of the activity: facilitators and participants. The researchers developed a framework that highlighted four ways that engaging in musical activities could contribute to asylum seekers achieving wellbeing: (1) regaining a sense of being human, (2) creating a sense of community, (3) developing resilience; and (4) regaining agency. This shares some overarching notions to how Zharinova-Sanderson (2004) conceptualised her practice (humanisation and inclusion into community).

Similar to the work of Lenette et al. (2015), there is a corpus of multidisciplinary literature that studied the experience of various professionals working with asylum seekers as nurses, family therapists, social workers and occupational therapists (Codrington, Iqbal, & Segal, 2011; Lee, 2013; Puvimanasinghe, Denson, Augoustinos, & Somasundaram, 2015; Robinson, 2013, 2014; Smith, Cornellia, & Williams, 2014; Suurmond, Seeleman, Rupp, Goosen, & Stronks, 2010). These studies are important in providing an overview of what is involved in working with asylum seekers in Australia and the eventual consequences of the work as reported by the practitioners.

One of the prominent experiences reported by these studies was the challenge of working with language and cultural barriers. The findings of Codrington et al. (2011) attested to the difficulty of
having a different cultural expectation towards therapy affecting the initiation of therapy and engagement in sessions. The family therapists in their study described the feeling of anxiety over wanting to be culturally appropriate and being “hands tied” (p. 136) in trying to ask proper questions in therapy sessions. On the other hand, Puvimanasinghe et al. (2015) reported that the Australian service providers from various professions such as mental health and settlement work displayed an awareness of diversity of their clients and actually acquired sensitivity and even appreciation towards “the culture-based conceptualisations and practices” (p. 18) involved in their work. There is not enough research done to suggest how these barriers are experienced in music therapy or arts and health fields in this context.

Another prominent but negative consequence of the work is the experience of vicarious traumatisation (VT) which is well-documented in the trauma work discourse (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006). Vicarious traumatisation in working with refugees can manifest in thoughts and emotions, memory systems and schemas, self-esteem, locus of control, sense of safety, and worldviews of the people who work with asylum seekers (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015). The recent development in the discourse is the emergence of the concept, vicarious resilience (VR) introduced by Hernandez, Gangsei, and Engstrom (2007) which refers to the positive consequence involved in the work. The concept of vicarious resilience which was further investigated by Puvimanasinghe et al. (2015) in regard to working with asylum seekers in the Australian context, refers to the experience of personal strength, psychological growth and empowerment as a result of learning and witnessing the clients’ stories (Hernandez et al., 2007). The study of Puvimanasinghe et al. (2015) is significant as it was the first study to describe both vicarious traumatisation and vicarious resilience in working with asylum seekers in the Australian context.

Figure 1: The Refugee Journey From Codrington et al (2011). Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
Research Question

The current study supplements the lack of research on the asylum seekers in the Australian context in general and especially how music therapists work with this population. The primary focus was the experience of the music facilitators (including music therapists and musicians) for the purpose of generating resources for music therapy practice and research. The study sought to explicate lived experience using a phenomenological methodology to gain insight into the phenomenon as experienced by the facilitators. For this purpose, the study posed the question: How do the three music facilitators describe their experience of working and musicking with asylum seekers in Australia?

Method

Participants / Data Set Characteristics

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the names of the participants were changed for publication. Luke and Mary were Registered Music Therapists (RMT) and Emma was a volunteer musician. This created an variety of the approaches and activities incorporated in their work with asylum seekers. All participants had experience of ongoing weekly sessions of music and/or music therapy activities for a period of at least 6 months.

Emma and Luke’s sessions were held in community centres and Mary’s program was at a school. The participants mostly facilitated groups of asylum seekers with a diverse range of age, ethnicity and culture. In these groups, the practitioners facilitated drum circles, jamming, group singing, improvisation, and/or instrument lessons. It was also notable that the two RMTs were new graduates who started working with asylum seekers within one year after their graduation. More participant information is outlined in Table 1.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited by advertising on the bulletin of Australian Music Therapy Association (AMTA). The advertisement was directed to Registered Music Therapists as well as other types of music professionals (such as performers and teachers). The selection criteria was the experience of working and musicking with asylum seekers in Australia. A total of three participants were recruited in the period of 20 August 2015 – 28 August 2015 who responded to the advertisement via email.

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne. Following the ethics guidelines, data was collected from semi-structured phenomenological interviews conducted with the consent of the participants. All three participants were interviewed using a video application (Skype) and the interviews were recorded using an application called Skype Call Recorder which produced MP3 files of the audio components. The files were saved with de-identified names in a folder in the researcher’s local hard drive which was locked with a password.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data adhered to the systemic seven-step procedure of the Phenomenological Microanalysis by McFerran and Grocke (2007). However, some room was allowed for “the spontaneous emergence of creative intuition” (Finlay, 2014, para 4) throughout the whole analysis process especially in the act of dwelling in the data which made some steps of procedure iterative, often repeating back and forth. An epoché was developed before and during the data collection stage where the biases and expectations of the researcher were bracketed, written down and reflected for a reflexive research process.

The three interviews recorded as audio files were transcribed verbatim (Step 1 of the Phenomenological
Table 1. *Description of the Participants (pseudonyms used)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Emma</th>
<th>Luke</th>
<th>Mary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Volunteer Musician</td>
<td>RMT</td>
<td>RMT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music therapy experience at the time of work</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>New graduate</td>
<td>New graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of work</td>
<td>5 years +</td>
<td>1 year +</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of clients</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Predominantly Women</td>
<td>Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Community Centre</td>
<td>Community Centre</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural demographic of clients</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Microanalysis) using online transcribing applications ‘Transcribe’¹ and ‘oTranscribe Beta’² with special attention to the storage of the transcribed data. Both applications ensure that the data (both audio file and written transcript) never leave the user’s local storage, thus protecting the data from being exposed to an external storage or in the cloud.

After the interviews were transcribed, the key statements were identified from each interview (Step 2) by highlighting the statements and coding each statement with colours and short comments. The identified key statements were then saved in a separate file in point form in a chronological order. These were then categorised into Structural Meaning Units (Step 3) and Experienced Meaning Units (Step 4). When the Experienced Meaning Units were created, each Meaning Unit was labelled with the exact phrases used by the interviewees. Steps 2 to 4 were repeated and modified many times throughout the analysis stage so that the data and the meanings created by the data could be “sifted and honed, resulting in a fine-grained analysis” (Finlay, 2014, para 9). Experienced Meaning Unit headings were then used to develop the Individual Distilled Essence (Step 5).

As a part of Step 6 in identifying collective themes, Experienced Meaning Units headings from were all three interviewees were colour-coded and printed out for the horizontalisation process (McFerran & Grocke, 2007; Spinelli, 1994). The horizontalised Meaning Units were categorised together, labelled as common, significant and individual themes and then titled with the researcher’s own language, creating Global Meaning Units (step 7) which are presented as the results in the next section. Finally, the Final Distilled Essence was created to capture the fundamental elements of the experience among the interviewees which were then returned to all participants for verification.

**Findings**

Three Global Meaning Units (GMU) were identified from horizontalisation of all participants’ Experienced Meaning Units: (1) Gaining personal benefits from the experience, (2) Giving agency and (3) Building ‘Bandship’. Each Global Meaning Unit consisted of three different kind of themes, Common,
Significant and Individual. Themes were labelled as Common Theme when they were found universally across the three participants’ data and Significant Theme were themes that were common between two. Individual Theme was especially important in shedding light in unique experience of a participant that varied from the other two. The Final Distilled Essence can be found at the end of this section to describe the fundamental essence of the participants’ experience.

**Gaining personal benefits from the experience**

According to the three music facilitators, the experience of working and musicking with asylum seekers resulted in gaining personal benefits. The language used for the title, ‘gaining’ is the exact word used by one of the participants Luke when he described his experience: “I find some work in music therapy, you’re giving a lot. This sort of music therapy work I feel like I’m ‘gaining’ a lot.” The notion of gaining something from the experience is striking in its meaning and implication. Through the horizonalisation and distillation of Experienced Meaning Units of the three data sets, more comprehensive aspects of the concept of ‘gaining’ were revealed (See Table 2).

The five Common and Significant Themes in this Meaning Unit are interrelated and experienced alongside each other. For example, Emma described learning about the lives of asylum seekers when she found out that they are “professionals, engineers, teachers ... people who have way more qualifications than (she) will ever have.” Her statement revealed that she gained an insight into the real people and the real stories that were not distorted or generalised. Musicking with asylum seekers also allowed Emma to learn that “it can be different on different levels. It also depends on where they come from as well and the dynamic of the group.” This suggests that Emma could now see through the assumptions of cultural and musical homogeneity of the group she was involved in. Her remark on the learning experience captured the personal nature of the benefits she gained from working and musicking with asylum seekers:

“It’s definitely been something that's enlightened me, in terms of the way I view people ... It's quite meaningful for me, because that also helps in terms of that perspective of seeing people as people.”

Luke also described his preconception towards a different cultural musicking practice prior to the work: “When I started, I was a bit naive, I thought ‘Oh a group of African women, right, we will do drumming because Africans love drumming’ and that was just an

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**Table 2. Global Meaning Unit 1 - Gaining personal benefits from the experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Meaning Unit 1</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning more about the lives of asylum seekers and their stories (Common Theme)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning more about different cultures and the ways people musick (Common Theme)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing personal growth (Significant Theme)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining emotional fulfilment (Significant Theme)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering and overcoming challenges (Significant Theme)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
assumption I had and it’s incorrect. Not true.” Working with asylum seekers and learning about their lives and stories helped Luke to discard the preconceptions he had. Luke shared a moment where he was demonstrating a few rhythmic motifs to his clients and they started teaching Luke their patterns and “playing with the rhythms and feeding these things back.” It was this moment when Luke experienced that he felt “like (he is) gaining a lot.”

Mary on the other hand described her initial feeling of confusion when she encountered a challenge in the beginning of the work like being “thrown in the deep end where (she) didn’t get a lot of background information on who was coming to (her) sessions and why they’ve been referred and it was like “here’s a group and go.” The challenge prompted her to research the different cultures which she found difficult but in retrospect, she described the experience as “good to jump in and do it and find out what (she is) capable of.” The learning process allowed Mary to push her limits and witness the strength she possessed which she eventually described as “the biggest learning curves (she has) had.” For the participants, these ‘learning curves’ in finding out about the real and undistorted stories of asylum seekers and the variety of cultures and the ways people musicked were enriching, eye-opening and enlightening.

While the participants usually described the challenges they encountered as a learning experience and a chance to be resilient, there were several issues that emerged that need to be addressed. The first issue was raised by Luke who stated that “one of the biggest barriers to this kind of work is that funding is totally uncertain and never consistent. There’s very little funding.” Motivated by the emotional fulfillment he gained out of the experience, he also expressed his willingness to continue the work even without the financial support. Another challenge was experiencing burnout, described by Mary who said she felt the burnout because the work was “costing (her) a lot emotionally” while she was already feeling like her “cup was full.” These challenges expressed by the participants point to the lack of support for the programs as well as for the facilitators of the programs.

**Giving agency**

While the Global Meaning Unit 1 reported the participants’ experience in gaining something from the experience, Global Meaning Unit 2 (see Table 3) revealed that the participants as music facilitators were also actively giving something for the asylum seekers.

In describing her role in the music activities she facilitated, Emma emphasised the importance of being there to “support and offer skills to do what they want to do, rather than ‘we’re gonna make you do this.’” She also expressed a strong advocacy for people who she musicked with as a volunteer, elicited by learning about their stories and lives in Australia (refer to Global Meaning Unit 1). Her personal stance prompted her to let the asylum seekers take ownership of the musicking. Luke shared a similar experience and attitude when he described letting the asylum seekers to “direct it where we’re going and that means they have a bit of ownership.”

Understanding the stories and the circumstances of the asylum seekers also inspired the music facilitators to create a “Music Asylum” as a part of the therapeutic goals in their work. Although the word Music Asylum was not explicitly used by any of the participants from the interview, the term derives from the concept of DeNora (2013) in which she described it as “respite from distress and a place and time in which it is possible to flourish” (p.1).

In the context of the programs facilitated by the participants, “Music Asylum” is a safe space created by the music facilitators with music and their facilitation skills that has no barriers or threats and where people can come together and be themselves. The statements made by the participants captured this concept strikingly:
Table 3: Global Meaning Unit 2 - Giving agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Meaning Unit 2</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giving agency</td>
<td>Empowerment by Giving Ownership (Significant Theme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creating a “Music Asylum” (Significant Theme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using Facilitation Skills (Significant Theme)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“All my therapy work I really try to create that safe space and just be a container for whatever needs to happen at that particular moment ... Out here is school but you come into this room and it’s time for music and this is a safe place for you to be.” (Mary)

“They sort of realise there’s no threat here, it’s a friendly group, nothing’s going to happen. No one’s gonna tell them off for it and then a sudden laughter and clarity and everyone sits down and then we are all, take in a deep breath and then we’ll do things like slow humming while I strum the guitar and calm ourselves down and then generally we are all together after that.” (Luke)

Music was a significant aspect in ameliorating the challenges experienced by both the music facilitators and the participating asylum seekers. Both Luke and Mary experienced music as “creating a light feeling” (Luke) or “setting the mood and breaking the ice” (Mary). Music provided a way for the group members to flourish and overcome the cultural and political conflicts and language barriers that were often experienced.

Building ‘Bandship’

The Global Meaning Unit 3 (see Table 4) was phrased using the word ‘Bandship’ which Emma used in describing the relationship formed by her music group. Inspired by what she learnt from her experience, Emma had a conviction on promoting equality among the group members that included asylum seekers and the volunteers in the context of her workplace which also has links to the Global Meaning Unit 2 of giving agency. The experience prompted Emma to explore the concept of boundaries and client-therapist relationship and reflect her own relationship with the group members. She felt discomfort over separating “us” (the musician-volunteers) and “them” (asylum seekers) and at the absurdity of policy that forbids the whole group driving to the performance venue together. Her words indicated a special bond existing among the group members when she stated that “we are playing as equals then if we are going to a gig together, we should go together.”

As the only participant who was not a Registered Music Therapist, Emma’s experience of working and musicking with asylum seekers had a different nature to the other two music therapist participants. The bond she had with the group members was not friendship nor a client-therapist relationship. According to Emma, the group members, even after they stopped coming to the music program, stayed in touch with the volunteers for professional-like recording or performing music together. Emma epitomised the nature of their relationship in the word ‘bandship.’

The quality of being close in musicking, as labelled as forming a ‘bandship’ by Emma, was also reflected in the way the three interviewees recalled their special memories of performing together:

“[Performing] was a pretty special moment for us all as a group. Also just because it meant that
we had to be really prepared so we kind of worked a lot harder than we normally do and we bonded a lot.” (Emma)

“We sing songs for all the volunteers, we have food and lots of very heartfelt ‘Thanks You’ s and lots of big applauses from volunteers and they just, they lift up.” (Luke)

“Seeing the students on the last day singing their songs. That was definitely always really really special.” (Mary)

In their experience, the act of performing together was not the only part that was perceived as special. It was also seeing the asylum seekers perform and witnessing their hard work, achievement, joy, passion and the evident Bandship they were sharing with a sense of pride and belonging. Their statements also suggest that the opportunities for performance were not only special for the music facilitators but also for the asylum seekers.

Mary, being the only participant who had stopped the work at the time of the interview expressed her guilt over leaving. This feeling of guilt was an intricate theme because it did not merge in other feelings explored by the participants during the time of work. Mary explored this in the interview:

“I guess I definitely feel a bit of, not remorse, but I feel a bit of guilt about the fact I can just walk away and knowing the stories and what some of those students are going through and have gone through. Yeah definitely a bit of that ... in the end, we ended up, one of the boys he nearly broke my heart, the day I told him I was leaving, ah oh my god, I’ve never felt so guilty.”

For Mary, the act of leaving the students involved ‘walking away’ from something that had been established by herself and the students in her music therapy group. As it was previously discussed, Mary was responsible for creating a safe space – Music Asylum – where the students participated, shared their stories and musicked together, thus creating Bandship. Leaving this special relationship strengthened by musicking left a feeling of strong emotion like guilt for Mary.

Final Distilled Essence

The experience of three music facilitators in working and musicking with asylum seekers involved gaining personal benefits and giving agency to their clients. The element of this active reciprocity provided an opportunity for both parties to form a special musical bond, labelled as ‘Bandship.’

Discussion

Cultural competency and sensitivity

All three participants displayed a remarkable level of cultural competency and sensitivity in describing their experiences in their interview as shown especially in Global Meaning Units 1 and 2 which parallels the findings of Puvimanasinghe et al. (2015). According to Suurmond et al. (2010), cultural competency can be developed in three aspects: knowledge, attitude, and skills. In their own contexts of work, it is evident that the participants acquired cultural competency in
(1) knowledge by learning more about the lives of asylum seekers and their stories as well as different culture and the way people musick, (2) attitude by the way they became motivated to give agency to asylum seekers and (3) skills, in gaining facilitation skills and learning to overcome challenges involved in the work. Moreover, the participants reported their experience of being aware of personal assumptions and biases, which according to Smith et al. (2014) could contribute to forming a positive relationship and process in therapy. Luke’s statement about his current understanding of cultural consideration echoed the cultivation of such relationship and process:

“There's very simple things that make it easier, you need to learn everyone's names even if they are difficult names. You have to know everyone’s names because otherwise they don't respect you. And if you make the effort to engage with their culture even just a little bit, millions of doors will be open for you because people don’t take the time to do that in Australia.”

It is notable that becoming culturally competent and sensitive thus bridging the cultural divide is often perceived as a challenge in the music therapy literature (Jones et al., 2004). The findings suggest that music facilitators seized the challenge as a ground for gaining personal benefits and found it as an enriching and eye opening experience.

Impact of the work

As previously discussed, the impact of the work with asylum seekers often implies negative consequences such as vicarious traumatisation and related emotional distress and burnout caused by limited resources and support available for the practitioners. A similar emotional toll, expressed in the findings as ‘burnout’, was mentioned by Mary when she stated the work was “costing (her) a lot emotionally.” Such impact was also explored in the study of Puvimanasinghe et al. (2015) who found that caring for asylum seekers was emotionally challenging for their participants.

All participants in the current study expressed the positive impact they experienced in working and musicking with asylum seekers. The experience of personal growth and emotional fulfilment found in the current study has simaliries to the concept of vicarious resilience and it is noteworthy that the findings can contribute to the concept in the refugee and asylum seeker discourse in Australia. In particular, the idea of reciprocity was captured in the purposeful labelling of the titles in the Global Meaning Units as “gaining” and “giving.” The finding of vicarious resilience from the experiences of music facilitators in working and musicking with asylum seekers is significant as it can “allow therapists to anchor their growth within a universe of coexisting possibilities, with the potential of transcending dichotomies between positive and negative aspects of the work” (Hernandez, Engstrom, & Gangsei, 2010, p. 73). Emma’s remark on her experience can testify the nature of the work:

“I guess they've got so little but they're so willing to give. I'm really glad I can have some positive impact even there's only a couple of hours a week. We can have a little bit of fun and break the monotony and stuff. So it makes me feel really really good ... I can also say about the group, I've never left there feeling worse than I went. So there's sometimes, when I've got a headache or I'm sick or I'm tired or I had a bad day or something but I've never left there feeling worse than I went. Which I think is pretty powerful thing.” (Emma)

Role of music and performance

Interestingly, in contrast to the prominence of its issues in the related literature, language barrier was perceived differently by the music facilitators of this study. The findings of the current study showed that while the participants acknowledged the inevitable
barrier in communication existing in between them, other staff and asylum seekers, they could lessen the impact of the barrier using an effective communication agent – music. In musicking, the language difference became an opportunity to learn each other’s language and songs from other culture (“We try to get the members to bring their own music ... and everybody learns each other's language which is cool”, Emma). The idea implicates the uniqueness of music in the setting and the success of musical activities in communicating and interacting with asylum seeker population over the barriers.

Music was also a humanising agent which enabled sharing of the qualities of being human and allowed the music facilitators and asylum seekers to connect and share humanity in exploring aesthetics and emotions together.

“Music it sets the mood, it breaks the ice initially. It’s definitely allowed more emotional expression in a way that words can’t quite communicate especially when language is an issue. It’s such a basic human form of contact.” (Mary)

The finding on the special quality of music in this setting is congruent to the framework developed by Lenette and Sunderland (2014) who described ‘huminisation’ as one of the roles music had in their participatory music program. Moreover their concepts of community, resilience and agency are all implied in the findings of the current study. With the addition of the theme on special experiences formed by performance, the findings of the study also implicate relevance of the theoretical framework and practices of Community Music Therapy in working with asylum seekers.

On a final note, the current study being the first to describe the experiences of music facilitators in working and musicking with asylum seekers had several limitations. Firstly, the scope of the study was broad, focusing on experiences of both working and musicking which subsequently missed more comprehensive discovery of data. For example, findings are based on experiences over a significant period of time, with 6 months being the shortest, which sometimes produced an overall impression of experience rather than specific. Phenomenological interviews can be effective when focusing on a single moment of experience (one session) which can produce more thorough explication of lived experiences. The current study lacks emphasis on the music experience so a narrower and focused scope on musicking is recommended for future research.

Secondly, there was limitation in participant number and overall research time. The methodology of phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to verify findings with the participants by returning distilled essences to ensure trustworthiness of data. This process can take a long time and more planning should be required if there is a time limit.

The phenomenological study provided an overview of the three music facilitators’ lived experience and found that the experience involved gaining personal benefits, giving agency and building a banship. The findings can contribute a perspective to the discussion of cultural competency and sensitivity, impact of the work such as vicarious traumatisation and vicarious resilience and the role of music and performance and moreover support the development of practice and research to encourage the music therapy field to offer music asylum for those who seek.

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References


