The End Is Where We Start From
Communicating the Impact of a Family Music Project to Wider Audiences

Jude Robinson

ABSTRACT: There has been increasing pressure for anthropologists to communicate their ideas and thinking to new publics and so actively engage in national and international debates relating to their field. However, this is not an unproblematic practice and the politics of representation requires anthropologists to consider the sometimes conflicting dimensions of the moral, ethical, political, social, personal and academic. My fieldwork with families linked to In Harmony Liverpool, a children’s music project in England, involved inviting participants variously to take part in interviews, draw maps of musical sites in their homes, construct playlists of favourite songs and take photographs of sites in their homes where music ‘happens’. As my aim is to produce a visual and audio display to communicate with wider audiences, I consider the issues of representation, authenticity, potential damage and ‘othering’ in the planning of the research and how this shaped data collection and the plans for dissemination.

KEYWORDS: community music project, dissemination, families, othering, politics of representation, reflexive practice

‘What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from’.

Four Quartets, Little Gidding (V): T. S. Eliot

In response to the increased calls from both inside and outside the academy for anthropologists to extend the reach of their research, there have been discussions about how we can reach new audiences and communicate our ideas and thinking to new publics. While some argue that such an enhanced profile for the role of anthropology enables us to engage more actively in national and international debates relating to our different fields (Singer 1990; Paine 1990), others are more cautious and reflect that assuming a role of advocacy when arguing a particular point of view, or taking a particular stance, is not an unproblematic practice (Hastrup and Elsass 1990; Kellet 2009). Successive examples of how the findings from ethnographic research have been used both ‘for’ and ‘against’ the interests of the people who have been engaged in the fieldwork (researchers and participants) mean that the politics of representation imply that anthropologists must consider the sometimes conflicting elements of the moral, ethical, political, social, personal and academic dimensions of their work (Kirsch 2002; Scheper-Hughes 1995; Wright 1988).

That the participants may also form part of these audiences has highlighted the need for researchers and their research findings to speak not only to sponsors and other powerful elites, including the academy, but also to local and at times global audiences (Finnegan 2005). This has clear implications not only for the style of communication and the places and spaces where the communication takes place, but also for the nature of that communication (Rapport 1997). There is consensus that an effective communication
strategy must go beyond journal articles and densely referenced reports, and there needs to be careful thought about how films and photographs can be accessed and interpreted (Pink 2006). The politics of representation have far reaching implications for fieldwork practice and reporting, as knowledge of the wider audiences and how words and ideas can be used against communities can affect what is said and left unsaid by participants, and the knowledge that findings may come under scrutiny of participants may affect what is included and what is left out in the creation of an ethnographic text (Guillemin 2004).

The altered (and altering) perspectives and expectations of both researchers and the researched as to what research can do and should do and for whom has been incorporated relatively easily into the participatory and reflexive nature of much of ethnographic fieldwork. Anthropologists participating in applied research are often at the forefront of any discussions and debates concerning the transformative potential of research, engaged as they are with organisations and agencies that have commissioned or supported the research to effect or understand a particular change or development (Sillitoe 2007). Drawing on the use of new technologies and the adaptation and development of research methods means that there are new ways to capture and communicate data, leading to new opportunities to engage actively with wider and even new audiences (Miller 2011).

This article is concerned with these end stages of research – my thinking behind the challenge of communicating the research findings from working with the families of children participating in a music project to their wider local community and also to national and international audiences. After a brief outline of the project I go on reflexively to consider how concerns about authenticity and ‘othering’ made me actively engage with issues of dissemination and communication at the design stage of this project and throughout data collection. I go on to reflect how this ‘forward thinking’ strategy enabled me to identify the research participants and wide communities as the primary audiences I wanted to reach, and so develop an approach to dissemination that resulted in images, sounds and drawings as well as words to connect with these real and imagined audiences.

**Transforming Children’s Lives through Music**

In Harmony Liverpool is part of a wider and growing group of musical projects for children in the U.K. that have been directly inspired by the El Sistema children’s music programme in Venezuela, founded by Jose Antonio Abreu in 1975 (Turnstall 2012). Following the principles of El Sistema, young children who are part of Sistema England are given the opportunity to learn how to play a musical instrument, will go on to join a youth orchestra and eventually perform alongside professional musicians (http://www.ihsne.org.uk). The stated aims of the various projects in England are to transform the lives not only of the participating children but also to have a positive impact on the wider community. In Harmony Liverpool, one of three pilot projects funded in 2009, is led by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (RLP) (http://www.liverpoolphil.com). While In Harmony Liverpool was originally working solely with children in Faith Primary School, West Everton, more recently it has expanded its reach to include other local schools in its activities. An external evaluation has followed the project since its inception and has documented positive changes to the children’s learning and behaviour annually, reflected in the external assessment of the school (Burns and Bewick 2013).

While the parents and carers involved in the annual evaluations have consistently and persuasively reported the positive effects for them from having their child involved in the project (Burns and Bewick 2013), In Harmony Liverpool wanted to understand better the impact on the families to support their claim that they are ‘reaching’ beyond the school and making a real difference outside the school gates. To explore how children’s participation related to their home life, and whether and how In Harmony Liverpool changed or influenced the lives of other family members and friends, I worked with eight families over a period of six months in West Everton, a district and electoral ward in the City of Liverpool, and in surrounding areas of Liverpool.

This was conceived as an exploratory project to test ideas and methods. I attended a focus group in July 2013 as part of the annual evaluation to discuss my initial ideas about the fieldwork with parents. There were three key ideas I took away from this initial conversation that I return to later in this article, and the following quotations are notes of what the parents said at the time: firstly, that they loved watching and listening to their children play music (‘no bigger feeling’), and described it as ‘the experience of a lifetime’ for them and their children; secondly, that they were very keen to talk about what their children were doing and they took pride in ‘knowing that other people know’ and so actively wanted to extend the reach of the project; finally, that they were very concerned about how the community in Liverpool 3 (the postcode of the district) had been ‘dragged down’ by ad-
verse and partial newspaper and television reports and how these representations failed to recognise the ‘good little heart in the community’.

The fieldwork centred on the homes and immediate neighbourhoods of the families of the children, acknowledging that parenting and family life can take place on multiple sites and may involve non-relatives. To raise awareness of the project, I made postcards with a coloured photograph (taken by me) of a child’s hands apparently playing a ‘cello on one side, and a brief overview of the research on the other and these were sent home with each child at the school. The team at In Harmony Liverpool made the first contact with parents and, if they agreed to talk to me, I was given their contact details to follow up by telephone, or by my waiting at the school gates at either home time or the start of school. I made multiple visits to the homes of the eight families to give participants time to get to know me and to discuss how they wanted to participate, and called at different times of day to fit in with the parents’ schedules and work. These visits were sometimes quite short and just involved catching up, or lasted up to three hours. At times only one parent was present, but at others parents, grandparents and their (grand) children preferred to see me while they were all together at home.

While I was given essentially a blank sheet to do whatever I thought would best engage with the parents and carers, working in applied anthropology with external organisations and their partners is never an entirely blank sheet, as a closer look reveals all sorts of lines and fissures across the surface that inevitably shape the eventual design and so influence the nature of the findings. These lines and fissures constitute the unique dimensions of the project, but tend to flow along particular lines and in the following sections I consider how the social, economic and historical; the political and academic; and the moral and ethical dimensions of the research shaped the research design, but at this early stage influenced my thinking about what I was actually going to produce and how the research findings might contribute to the overall project of In Harmony Liverpool.

Social, Economic and Historical Dimensions of the Project

Krumen-Nevo (2012) identifies how, when writing about the lives and experiences of others, we can (un)intentionally objectify and distance ourselves from the people we study, and that this ‘othering’ adds to the multiple layers of disadvantage that people may also experience. Othering was one of the sensitising concepts I considered when thinking about the issues of representing In Harmony Liverpool and the families of the children. The neighbourhood of West Everton is a residential area, a fifteen-minute walk from the centre of Liverpool. After successive waves of regeneration since the post-war period, most of the current, low-level housing has been built within the last thirty years. While some houses are in private ownership, most of the housing is owned by social landlords, and generally incomes are low and unemployment is high. This is associated with poor educational attainment and poor health and in The English Indices of Deprivation 2010 (DCLG 2011) Everton was cited as the most deprived area in the country. The older buildings that remain consist of a few pubs, light industrial units and the Friary, a deconsecrated church, now used by the RLP as a rehearsal space and a place for some In Harmony Liverpool activities. It would therefore be very easy for casual observers to focus on the ‘deprivation’ in these areas at the expenses of other, more positive, facts about the area and to train a camera on the litter and dereliction to perpetuate the public (and academic?) appetite for ‘poverty porn’ (Shildrick et al. 2012; Skeggs and Wood 2012).

The city of Liverpool already has a deeply contested image, as awareness of Liverpool’s rich cultural heritage as one of the wealthiest and most productive maritime trading cities in the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been overlain with pervasive stereotypes of poverty, unemployment, criminal (violence, drug use, theft) and anti-social behaviour (Belchem 2011; Hallam and Roberts 2011). While the local football teams (Liverpool and Everton), musi-
cians and composers (most notably the Beatles) and the development of Liverpool’s waterfront represent more positive images, they are not always evoked when images of Liverpool and of Liverpudlians or ‘Scousers’ (the people of Liverpool) are represented in the U.K. media. West Everton in particular has suffered from negative representations in the national press and in film, as the images produced highlight only the problems they face rather than their successes and achievements (Roberts and Hallam 2014).

As the community is deeply sensitive as to how it is represented to the outside world, this has clear implications for the formulation of a research design. From my first contact with parents I was aware that they would be reluctant to be involved in any project where they might run the risk of misrepresentation and unlikely to engage in conversations of activities that could provide further negative images of the people and the area.

The Political and Academic Implications of the Research and Issues of Authenticity

Such considerations of ‘othering’ and a past of negative representations relate to concepts of authenticity and the desire of the anthropologist to present a deeper and more meaningful account of the object of inquiry that gets beneath the skin and goes beyond the superficial (Theodossopoulos 2013). Yet authenticity is inevitably compromised where there are competing agendas that influence what can be said and restrict what can be seen (Sillitoe 2007). The RLP and In Harmony Liverpool have developed strong relationships with the children, their families and the school over the five years of the project and have appointed a team to work exclusively with the families and the children, to communicate events or messages about an individual child. Such relationships require constant maintenance and an investment of time by both parties, and a certain level of emotional investment as they depend largely on goodwill and a commitment to shared goals. Funding for In Harmony Liverpool is not guaranteed, and In Harmony Liverpool needs not only to demonstrate its value for current funders but to seek out new supporters as funding regimes change and sources of funding are reconfigured.

While the concerns of future funding and concomitant media attention are usually responded to positively by the families, these agendas also mean that there is a shared and heightened awareness that any negative or critical comments about the project could have wide-reaching consequences for the future of the project and therefore for all the children. This presents researchers with a challenge: do they design and construct the research design to elicit any ‘negative comments’ to satisfy interests of academic integrity and ‘balance’, and if they do manage to elicit such remarks, does their inclusion in a report necessarily create a more authentic account? If any negative comments were produced and disseminated as part of this project, I was aware that this could not only damage In Harmony Liverpool in the short term but affect its future. As I was conscious that any findings would be read and discussed by the families I anticipated that any ‘negative’ slant on findings would not only compromise their relationship with myself but with In Harmony Liverpool and the RLP.

The Moral and Ethical Dimensions

Most discourses about people described as ‘poor’ focus on deficit of one kind or another by referring to their ‘vulnerability’, their ‘needs’, what they lack and how they are ‘disadvantaged’ (Lister 2004), and to some extent in this article I acknowledge that by referring to ‘deprivation’, unemployment and poor health in the discussion of ‘othering’, I have participated in this process. The problem is that these discourses of ‘lack’ and ‘want’ are shared by those who wish to access new resources for people in poor communities and those who feel that they already have too much assistance and would do better on less (De Goede 1996; Hartman 2005). Therefore organisations that wish to access resources and rally public support need to emphasise what they are bringing to a community or population, and so for them to be adding value what they bring cannot already be there. As a result, both discourses emphasise the deficits that exist in communities, even through their motives for doing so are very different. Furthermore, funding organisations demand ‘evidence’ that projects are making a contribution to address these ‘gaps’ and ‘lacks’, and in many cases such arguments are considered most convincing when they are expressed as numbers and percentages, even if it is generally accepted that stories are more persuasive.

In the wider narratives about El Sistema, there is an assumption of cultural deficit and, more particularly, musical deficit in the communities that participate in the project, and I found that I needed to consider this further and discuss my concerns with the team at In Harmony Liverpool. The social effects of participating by playing in an orchestra has been well theorised
(Ramnarine 2011) and as a disciplined, co-operative endeavour it is anticipated that participants translate these values and practices into other areas of their lives. While the orchestral model has also been critiqued, this was not my concern or even my starting point when I was designing the research. Instead, it led me to reflect that the emphasis on the ‘flow’ of what was being given and what was received was conceptualised in these theories as uni-directional, and what was less clear was what the members of the orchestra, and in the case of In Harmony Liverpool their families, were contributing to the success of the orchestra. Therefore, in an extension of my concerns about othering and deficit, I wanted to know not only what the orchestra and school were giving to the children and therefore their families, but what the families and communities were giving to the school and to In Harmony Liverpool.

With this emphasis on the positive contribution of parents and with the encouragement of In Harmony Liverpool, I designed the research away from ‘lack’ and ‘deficit’ as I did not want the line of questioning to be about what they did not have, what they did not or could not do and instead focussed on developing ways of enabling them to reflect on what they did do and could talk about, by thinking of music as less about the performances and repertoire of the children in In Harmony Liverpool, and rather as a form of ‘everyday magic’ present in their homes and elsewhere (Cihoudariu 2011). Central to this was an exploration of whether or not the people in West Everton were really ‘peoples without music’, to parody Eric Wolf (1982), or whether they also had rich musical lives of their own. Following Finnegan (2003), I wanted to incorporate the idea that music is part of everyday life that should not be separated from other aspects of people’s lives and that this project would emphasise the links between the people who produce it and the people who listen to it.

Starting from the End (and Working Backwards)

This detailed and reflexive consideration of the background to the project meant that I was determined to gather data that would enable me to engage with the families in new ways, and produce more than the usual report to the funders, with some feedback to participants. So in terms of the end stages I thought about how I could produce a concise and visually appealing ‘display’ and extend the life of the project beyond the usual boundaries to capture the reaction by different audiences and incorporate this into the findings. As part of this active engagement with the participants, I planned the end stages of the research to include an exhibition of the findings of the research firstly in the school and at another community venue in West Everton to get the response of the wider community. The purpose of this is to get a sense of the extent to which the audiences think that I have captured elements of their ‘lives and music’ and have adequately represented them before extending the dissemination to others. The reactions of the audiences will be audio-recorded and depending on their responses revisions will be made to the display before moving it to the newly refurbished foyer of the RLP, where the process of eliciting audience responses will be repeated.

Once I had identified this as the end point of the project, I considered what kinds of materials (data) I would need to create the kind of display that would actively engage the participants and the wider community as opposed to other external audiences. Furthermore, this display should include material that would enable the audience to have a real insight into the home lives of participants and their musical experiences (DeNora and Witkin 2001). I concluded that I would need more than ‘words’ and this line of thought helped me identify that, ideally, I would want pictures and sounds to start to build up multisensory representations. I therefore decided to incorporate talking, writing, drawing, photographing and to audio-record the sounds of children practicing at home and this last idea led me to think more widely as to how I could incorporate other musical sounds into the presentation of the findings. New technologies, such as the interaction between QR codes and smart media devices would enable me to embed images and/or sounds and these approaches would enhance any final stage reporting of the project on the In Harmony Liverpool website.

So, in addition to the narrative interviews with people in the eight families about the place of music in the parents’ and carers’ lives, and talking to the children about playing and practicing at home, I asked the parents and carers to think about their ‘playlists’, the soundtrack to their life in around one to twenty songs. The purpose of this was more than the music, but as another way to reflect on music as a means of making the self (DeNora 1999, 2000; Henning 2001) through the formulation of a ‘musical habitus’ (Bourdieu 1982). This approach was also underpinned by the idea that through listening to music throughout your life particular pieces may acquire an additional emotional significance and be attached to a memory of a particular time and place (Born 2011; Negus and
Roman Velaquez 2002), forming ‘moments in the longer trajectory of people’s ongoing (and again variably) musical lives’ (Rimmer 2010: 258). Parents were quick to interpret the term ‘playlist’ in a way that reflected their own musical life, with some parents preferring to include a musical chronology that reflected their parents and children’s favourite songs as well as their own, while others included broader statements about genres and particular artists and bands, and some included whole albums that they listened to in the present.

In addition to talking to parents and carers, they and I drew maps of their homes, noting the sites where music was played or listened to, and this activity variously included photos of the site of the musical activity, photos of any instruments, and photos of objects associated with the playing/listening to music. The parents who drew their own maps included additional sites (cars and vans) and some illustrated them with pictures and descriptions. In line with the concerns about reproducing images that could contribute to value-judgements or deficit, I used a macro (60mm) lens that enabled me to focus on the object of study and avoid including the wider context, although some parents wanted me to include whole rooms and settings which they had ‘staged’ for my visit. The resulting data are in the process of being assembled for display to the wider community, and the next steps will be to involve the parents in commenting on the proposed display, encouraging them to suggest alternative ways and generally critiquing how I have chosen to approach ‘their’ data. Once they are happy with what is proposed and the team at In Harmony Liverpool consulted, then these findings will be presented to the school and community of West Everton and their reactions will be recorded.

Concluding Remarks

With this particular research project, I am convinced that had I not engaged so early on with a reflexive consideration of the issues of representation, I would not have been able to engage as effectively and as actively with the participants. While most of the parents and carers were relaxed answering questions about themselves, others were more reluctant to do so, suggesting that a reliance on interviewing and talking for this particular project might not have resulted in such rich data. Others loved the thought of the playlists and while my ideas of a ‘Top 10 Songs’ was a stretch for some, others asked for it to be extended to a ‘Top 20’ and I received a few additional emails and texts of second thoughts and additions days later from participants to make sure that all their songs were there.

Understandably, not everyone wanted to have their home photographed, but others were very relaxed and one family even ‘staged’ their home so I could take particular angles against particular backgrounds. In line with Hastrup and Elsass (1990), the advocacy in this approach lies in providing appropriate and considered material that can be used by others to promote the cause of the project to funders and sponsors. The pleasure of doing this kind of research comes from not only the opportunity to consider the different dimensions of the research but the engagement with planning the research with the participants in mind – not only as participants but as the eventual audience, and leave the other audiences, including the academic, to follow on.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Four Quartets, Little Gidding (V): T. S. Eliot

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References


