

Swim until you can't see land: lived experiences of creative life histories

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Abstract

This six year study draws on some affecting encounters found in explorations of the lives of independent (indie) musicians. Long-term research relationships are not often referred to within creativity literature. Through reflecting on these relationships this study explores the lived experiences and emotions of independent (indie) musicians, among whom value is placed on the quality of their art, artistic autonomy, and artist-led approaches to production. The study provides insights into the construction of the musicians' indie identities, the entwined precarity of their creativity and mental health, and therein my own experiences as a researcher to approaching and exploring the expression of such sensitive yet embodied creativity.

Keywords: Life histories, musicians, mental health, precarity and researching differently

“Sometimes the real world is just too real for me to face and so I run away and hide in another place; a world of beautiful songs, of ice cream, of pretty girls. Things seem better there... Creating beauty out of pain and ugliness has been a big part of what I've tried to do. I can make things make sense in a song that don't make sense in the real world...

...Today has not been a good brain day for me. A bit too edgy and manic. Sometimes I get all manic because I'm so happy or too excited about something or someone, but sometimes it's more like all this water building up and the dam is going to burst unless I can release some of the pressure...

Am I too much of a weirdo or too hard a sell. Why am I not sleeping? I need to sleep...

...So now I've been on this medication for my head for around 6 weeks and how do I feel? I feel like I'm betraying something by running away from my madness. There is so much darkness ...but there's also beauty there.

But is safer good? If you are going to die anyway isn't it better not to run away from your madness? Isn't it better to jump off the tallest building in town to see if you can fly? You'll almost certainly be splattered on the pavement below but if you don't try it...and jump you'll definitely never fly.

I want to fly.”

(Don, Singer-songwriter, 2015)

“To be human is to be emotional” (Denzin, 1984, p.x); emotionality lies at the intersection of the person and society, for all persons are joined to their societies through the self-feelings and emotions they experience on a daily basis (Meier & Wegener, 2017; Sinclair, 2010). While some theorists maintain

that there is an “empirical neglect of emotion” in research (Sturdy, 2003, p. 86) others have begun to write about the emotional framing of their data, recording the emotional and embodied performance of interviews (La Pastina, 2006). However, the norm to date has been that the often strong emotional and embodied experiences which are an integral part of qualitative research are not incorporated into written research accounts (Hatch, 1996). That is, the ‘felt experiences’ that arise as a consequence of engaging in an empathetic openness (Strati, 2007, p. 63), and that allow such embodied feelings of connectedness and genuine emotion to be expressed (Ladkin, 2013). While Rosaldo (1993) debates the value of classic detached observation and argues that the elimination of intense personal emotions from fieldwork distorts the social meaning and limits analytic ability to truly understand a social setting or phenomenon, and this has led notably to what some refer to as the ‘affective turn’ that signifies ‘a new departure’ (Kenny & Fotaki, 2014, p. 18) within social science research. With this turn there are multiple calls for methodological and theoretical ingenuity in order to provide finer-grained studies of the shared lived experiences of researchers and their research participants in order to create shared experiences that enlighten and enrich our research and writing practices (Fineman, 1993).

This study draws on my affective experiences of indie musicians and in particular their accounts of the precarious states of their mental health which were fundamental and omnipresent to the symbiotic nature of their artistic identities and work. Although the (often deep rooted) causes of mental health conditions are multi-faceted, there appears to be a perceptible link between mental health conditions and musicians (Gross & Musgrave, 2017). A central characteristic that defines the relationship between being a musician and high incidences of mental health conditions is that of the precarious nature of their creative vocation (Butler & Stoyanova-Russell, 2018; de Peuter, 2011; Gross & Musgrave, 2018). Studies have shown that being a professional musician can take a difficult toll, particularly in terms of the stress of

job insecurity and related financial worries (Coopers & Wills, 1989), substance abuse rates (Dobson, 2010; Miller & Quigley, 2011) or even rates of mortality (Bellis et al. 2007). A recent study (2017), surveyed just over 2,000 musicians, 71% identified as having suffered from panic attacks and /or anxiety, and 68% from depression. With the growing emphasis on the economic importance of creative workers, the creative industries, and in particular the music industry as a key driver of the 'economy of feelings' (Vincent, 2011, p1372) the issue of mental ill health is a pertinent yet underexplored issue (Gross & Musgrave, 2017; Kenny, 2014; Vaag et al., 2014) that has begun to move up political and social agendas (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013), within the UK at least. As noted above, important here is a finer grained understanding of the methodological approaches to researching the impact of mental health conditions. I therefore also reflect on my own felt experiences of exploring mental health issues as a part of understanding the musicians' lives and creativity (Ladkin, 2013, p.328). I do so in order to address the methodological question of how can we as researchers approach our research (and writing) differently, in a way that allows us to build an empathetic connection among those in the society of explorers (Polyani, 1966, p.6) and experiencers of life?

Creative encounters

Strati (2007, p.62) noted that we bring our bodies and senses to work and we use them to create accounts of our "intimate, personal and corporeal relation with [our] experience of the world", such that our "occupational histories become inscribed on bodies" (Crossley, 2001). Just as with the musicians we bring our bodies as a resource and use them in research practice and accounts (e.g. Essén & Värlander, 2012). Cloutier (2016) demonstrated that how we write is intimately interconnected with how we approach our research, she talks of interviews as emotional and embodied exchanges or an "empathetic openness" (Strati, 2007, p. 63), that allows the expression of such embodied feelings of connectedness. In this way

fieldwork can itself become "a creative endeavour" (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 315), and much like music it is "an embodied, lived practice" (Meier and Wegner, 2017, p. 200). Such knowing and understanding of the nuances, and the chemistry built up through often intimate, emotional and difficult conversations and experiences, where you expose something of yourself can lead to encounters where our "vulnerable selves" (Ellis, 1999, p. 699) are mutually disclosed with whom we engage (Shotter, 2006). These deep engagements lead to the "unfinalizable" nature of research relationships (Helin, 2014, p. 174); those conversations and relationships that give the insights that emotionally resonate in order to think deeply and write differently. Researching and writing differently in this way acknowledges academic practices as self-identity work (Sinclair, 2010) and demonstrates the importance of self-reflexivity.

Cunliffe (2009, p. 95) suggested that: "self-reflexivity means recognizing that we shape and are shaped by our social experience and involves a dialogue-with-self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting: a questioning of core beliefs, and understandings of particular events, and how our own and others' responses are shaped". Through this self-reflexive process we become responsive to others and open to the possibilities for new ways of being and acting by understanding and exploring how we make sense of experience in sensory as well as intellectual ways (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). Sensemaking is inescapably embodied and entwined with identity, "because we cannot avoid inserting ourselves into the process of creating order from the 'unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience'" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162). We make our lives sensible in lived responsive and embodied moments, as many of us have struggle to make meaning [self and project] with others (Cunliffe, 2004); "...in the reflexive project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile" (Giddens, 1991, p. 185) such is the process of "perpetual states of storied becoming" (Ashforth, 1998, p. 213).

Indeed we are all engaged much of the time in inventing ourselves (Rose, 1996). In terms of an approach to the study of mental health, the life history methodology involves making an explicit connection to the lived experiences of past and present places and understanding of how these experiences have shaped what we do and who we are – and why. In this way fieldwork becomes about capturing the ‘texture of an embodied life as it is lived’ (Fotaki et al., 2017, p. 8). To explore the lives of the musicians from with mental health I revealed some of my own vulnerabilities (Ladkin, 2013). An emotional subjectivity reflects the lived experiences of such research with all its twists and creative turns, and removes the notion of presenting “hygienic texts” that are “washed” for the purpose of creating order (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, p. 247). This openness is important to approaching and exploring mental health within creativity research, for “studies of subjectivity have sometimes neglected the extent to which human self-consciousness may be the medium and outcome of uncertainties, insecurities, and anxieties about who we are” (Collinson, 2003, p. 529). Lutz (1988, p. 41) notes, researchers’ feelings tend to be relegated to an unspoken, hidden place that is considered to be “ultimately and utterly private” and most likely to relate to the attempt to produce a neat and rational account for publication (Pullen, 2006). By acknowledging self-reflexivity of emotional and bodies’ presence within research and writing practices, and by understanding and exploring how we make sense of experience in sensory and creative as well as intellectual ways (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012) we can connect through our different vulnerable selves, such as those that Ellis and Ybema (2010) refers to such that our mutual vulnerability allows for an ordinariness of connecting on a human level. Breaking free from constraints of academic norms in this way means that we move beyond sanitised encounters to explore for example the depths of mental illness as described by Don in the opening of this paper, and the thoughts of self-harm and mutilation that feed Don’s creativity.

Musicians & mental health

Within the music industries there is an abundance of stories of one-hit-wonders, inauspicious band break-ups, early deaths, and other variations on the theme of the unsustainable music career (Collinson-Scott & Scott, 2018). Musicians operate within informal, non-regulated environments that are perhaps best conceived of as particular sorts of workers seeking remuneration within a complex matrix of industries clustered in and around music (Williamson & Cloonan, 2016, p. 3). Indie music as a colloquial abbreviation of the term independent reflects this community’s historic association with small independently owned record companies, the experience of music in a live setting and the asceticism in consumption (Fonarow, 2003). For many musicians, indie is the spirit of independence being free from control and interference; the notion of self-expression pervades all aspects of the indie community. Such independence conveys a rejection of the status quo to embrace the spirit of rebellion, however its relationship with pathos and the melancholy is also longstanding (Fonarow, 2003) and reflected in the creation of lyrics that are often autobiographical emotion laden acts that become a cathartic release for the songwriter whilst also becoming a way to emotionally connect with fans. However, creating such a connection, or resonating emotionally with audiences is often an “unpredictable result of a reader’s experience with a text...achievable in many genres and works of art, such as music” (Meier & Wegner, 2017, p. 194).

Detailed studies by Cooper and Wills (1988) and Dobson (2010) have shown that popular musicians in particular suffer from the effects of high levels of self-criticism; performance anxiety; the stresses of job insecurity; the highs and lows of performing schedules; isolation from loved ones and from society in general because of challenging work schedules and cultures; and the excesses of alcohol and drugs as a way of coping. The complex inter-relationship of each of these factors suggests that structural,

compositional features of a musical career contributes towards high levels of anxiety and depression amongst musicians (Gross & Musgrove, 2017) as artists lose the will or ability to cope with the insecurity within the industry, or persistent pressure to produce write high quality songs, or the ability to sustain the lifestyle that accompanies fame (Collinson-Scott & Scott, 2018). A lifestyle that necessitated the transition from the routine life of touring and its addictive nightly euphoria and adoration of fans to coming off tour to “fester”, as with Scott,

“You know, not that I have any serious addictions but I do have an addictive personality. For all that I complain about touring, as soon as I stop touring, the disappearance of that nightly emotion is quite difficult to all of a sudden not have any more. There is a massive flow of adrenaline for an hour and a half, two, maybe more each night, which is surely addictive as any drug. So, yes, I would say in that sense I am hungry, I want to become known with more people and there is more love then.”

Ironically in a profession where there is a perceived need for creative freedom and independence, from the musicians' accounts the transition from coming back from tour to a 'normal' life there was a sense of the difficulty of self-managing that transition, and the addictive nature of performing live and the feelings experienced as a part of this in order to then have a structure for a positive mental health. Here James describes the “secret struggle” of the “bipolar” or “dysfunctional” nature of his transitioning feelings and experiences, and the impact on his personal relationships (see Prime and Keenan, 2015).

There is no support for creative musicians when they are facing marriage break-ups or they are facing distress on tour, just kind of have a normal life. I have had two marriages gone, and I would say that is the common cause of stress on tour is trying to get used to, certainly at a young age, at an older age it is slightly different.

I am 50 now and I have been professional since I was about 19 and yes, I have done the rock 'n' roll bit and I have also done having trying to cope with having a baby whilst I am on tour and at the height of the band's career as well. These are things that there is just not a support manual for within the creative industries for people who secretly struggle. We discovered a lot of things about musicians they can be bipolar or they become dysfunctional in that they cannot cope with life at home, because they are not doing anything whilst they are away, they are being managed. When they come home their partners are generally the managers and they have not got time to deal with them (James, Keyboard player, 2012).

While the difficulties the isolation are threaded through the life narratives becoming accepted as an indie musician is recognised as becoming a part of a community-based (Collinson-Scott-Scott, 2018). Coulson (2012, p. 257) describes such musicians as dismissive of “notions of individualistic competition in favour of co-operative networks and a commitment to music as a community, an art form, a source of identity and a way of life.” However, within the cultural market there are no professional standards for judging the competence of one's work. This means that media, peer, and audience critiques are often the only way in which singer-songwriters can feel that they can measure the worth of their creations, the result of which is an insecurity and a fluctuating self-esteem (See Reeve & Gilmore, 2015). Thus, this process of becoming accepted and respected as a gigging indie musician brings with it the intertwined emotional and creative strains of seeking to pursue such a vocation (See O'Sullivan & Chillias, 2015). Such a culture can make it difficult for workers to reveal insecurities or to admit vulnerability (Collinson-Scott & Scott, 2018). This pressure to perform could give rise to relatively high levels of anxiety that can lead to alcohol or substance misuse (Collinson-Scott & Scott, 2018). Understated, but well known and an established member within the Scottish indie scene

Jenny talked about her “monsters” and the emotional lows of recording her then new album documenting her depression, and the highs of living and playing with her band in isolated studio in Wales (see Reeve & Gilmore, 2015), and of finally feeling supported after the mental and physical toll of years being on the road,

When I was a lot younger I just did not eat, I would do tours where I was not eating, not deliberately, just because I was so nervous the whole time, probably drinking too much and making myself quite unwell. As I have got older I have got better, I have learned, I have learned my response pattern, I know the right time to eat in the day because I know I will not be able to eat after a certain time, like I have made myself extremely sick in the past. Not that I have had an eating disorder it is just like I have been too nervous to do anything else, I have just been totally paralysed by fear when it comes to playing live... There have been times where I have had to take huge amounts of drugs just to get me on the stage, so different things for different people but it is frustrating because it affects my ability to play the music and that is when it becomes annoying because I know that I can do it and then I get this stage fright thing where I cannot remember how to play... (Jenny, Singer songwriter, 2014).

For others like Chris playing live was an opportunity to take on a different identity; a cathartic release. I've known Chris for a number of years, interviewing and informally chatting with him on many occasions. In last conversation that I had with him, he began to open up about his anxiety issues and in contrast to Jenny, how his live performances had helped him to manage his anxiety and nervous energy, in a positive, albeit aggressive way, as an expulsion of negative tension.

I get a lot of nervous energy, I have always been like that and I have had problems with it... sometimes it has gone bad, I have had really bad anxiety attacks in my life, but being

in the band was one of the things that really kept that in check because being in a band and having a channel for that was really good for my mental health. Being able to actually find a sort of coping mechanism for that was fantastic. Getting that real coming off the stage and shaking, but shaking in a really good way because you are just charged and you have just really expelled all this negative tension that is just hanging about, the stress and worry that is out there. Again, that is part of why touring was so good. In fact, a couple of times there was even a kind of kicker to that where we would come back from tour and then we would experience a crash (Chris, Singer songwriter and guitarist, 2015).

In particular for Chris performing live in his “fun” punk band gave him the freedom for exuberance and to take on a different performer identity as a way for him to release his anxieties, that “allowed him to go off the map a little and come back in...because you were worrying less about the technical aspects of the performance,” to the point of him being aggressive and violent towards both himself and his fans. As referred to above, for Chris performing live is his drug, his therapy, and way of coping, which made the come down of coming back from tour was difficult for him to deal with. For others, such as the techno DJs he talks about here, live performing again as a release of nervous energy, and so if they weren't performing they were taking drugs to manage their introspection and heightened states of anxiety.

“The mental health stuff is really important to a lot of people. Hugely disproportionately people involved in the arts and music have mental health issues. I think it is like part of one feeds into the other, I don't think that it is necessarily just a kind of people in the arts are just sort of more in love with the notion of themselves of being these really enigmatic beings. There is maybe an element of that but I do also think that a lot of people who are quite creative, that

creativity stems from a lot of introspection or a lot of inability to analyse and see things in ways that many other people don't, so you get a disproportionate number of people who have issues like that who also rely on their music to really help them cope with those emotions and that honestly overwhelmingly applies across the board"

Postscript

As a postscript, I felt that I should write a piece which somehow reflected some of the experiences of the affecting encounters after the untimely passing of one of these musicians, who's struggles with mental health were well documented through his craft. There was a clear divide between his conflicting identities - his bravado and confrontational stage presence and the introspective, reflective and seemingly shy person that I met and talked with. We met in the City Café an institution in the 'old town' area of Edinburgh serving good food in American style café booths with red leather seats. I had seen Scott perform live a couple of months back, and through experiencing his confrontational on-stage persona, I was taken aback to meet him in person. Scott talked of his shyness and seriousness as a child with his band's name coming from his parents' nickname for him as a child. He talked of his need in adolescence to pursue his creativity and in particular his music (switching from illustration to music during art school). For Scott creativity became a challenge that he could never solve; "that would last for the rest of his life". Scott described the emotional difficulty he had with eye contact with those devotees of his lyrics in the crowd, his "game faces" and always looking "straight out that way...".

"...Being quite a shy person really, is where the name of the band comes from, my mum and dad used to call me that as a nickname because I was so shy..."

It [being on stage] is an act, of course it is actually my thoughts and the way that I want

to communicate but there is a sort of game face that I put on I think you really need to amplify personality a little bit in order to reach the back of the room if you like. There is definitely an act going on there which I think marks me slightly, the bits I don't like..."

"...they [the fans] are quite intense as well, I think it is because of the nature, the albums have been very personal, people have taken them into their own lives and attached them to their own scenarios that they are going through and as a result there are really intensely attached people in the audience, you can feel it and you can see it."

(Scott, Singer songwriter and guitarist, Frightened Rabbit, 2013)

How emotions related to mental health are explored has implications for creativity research 'as embodied sensations are intrinsically part of being-in-the-world; the body and the embodiment of senses are always already culturally mediated' (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, p. 147). Language and symbolization in particular serve as a social and cultural media, such as music, that brings to expression the 'mute' inter-corporeal perception of the sensible. As much as senses are co-constituting culture, they are also constituted by cultural worlds (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 453) and domains of expressive sense-making (Toadvine & Embree, 2004). Such sensual relations can be interpreted as socio-cultural (Howes, 2003), which is "highly relevant for understanding embodied organisations and its likewise bodily and embodied members and processes" (Küpers, 2015, p. 5). Linguistic and representational limitations to expressing emotion, embodied sense-making and socio-cultural structures constrain alternative forms of expression particularly within the standard pro forma structures and guidelines of journal articles. Here the research journal is often used reflexive tool in qualitative research. It provides a mechanism through which researchers can document the methodological decisions they make throughout their studies and

documents their analysis processes and insights, considers their own emotions and the roles they play in the process (Orange, 2016). Journals provide an insight into the defended self, in that as researchers what we consciously document is only part of the story (Clancy & Russ, 2018). Journals also provide an insight into what is excluded, hidden and not transparent to ourselves (Hollway, 2009). Such an approach is important because it is not only about a researcher capturing emotions, but also about the ways in which emotion captures the researcher. In this sense, we are contributing to broader arguments about research as both personal involvement and professional distance. Unconscious emotions associated with the researcher's role and relations provide insights into the emotions we experience and create.

My personal experiences mean that when I begin to engage with those I interview I absorbed the emotional responses of my encounters. The life history approach allows me to do this; it is a freeing and creative methodology. Such freedom brings emotion into research, analytical processes, and writing to allow for the space and time (to breathe) and those with whom we engage to open up and to gain a deeper understanding of our different selves and how these different facets of self can influence how, what and why we research and write. Such research can strengthen the 'finer grained' emotional resonance much needed in management studies, particularly in relation to exploring more deeply the emotional consequences of mental health. In relation to this paper, emotional resonance is how most musicians engage and connect with their fans through their songs, albums and live performances. Be it heartbreak, loneliness, anguish, sadness or happiness, if there was more emotion and empathy in our different research processes we may find out what the stuff that (ourselves and) songs are truly made of (Watts, 2016). As such future research within mental health might consider adaptive approaches to show our own vulnerabilities to soften the perceptions of academic identity (not least to dispel the perceptions around the identity of an academic). Therein we may also want to consider

how we research mental health within the diversity of contemporary workplaces and arrangements, many of which can be isolating and mentally draining.

Such processes in many respects are reflective of the research and the creative processes of musicians. For example, the lived experiences and struggles of becoming an academic writer and researcher with the idiosyncrasies, routines and rituals that are a part of this in order to express ourselves through our work; the open-ended need to question and for reflection, and of the need to create a new every time that is a part of creative and academic lives. By exploring these seemingly opposing professions within which emotion and by extension those involved in other forms of work where creativity and independence, are centrally important. These complex, inter-related and transient work contexts are typical of the evolving nature of work that places challenges on organisational effectiveness and survival (Shrimp, 2009), and this precarity therein has implications highlighted within this study for the mental health of workers, and the management of workers' mental health. In particular, the nature of creative work is increasingly characterized by insecure, individualized and competitive work arrangements; and flexible employment patterns (Grey, 1998). Recently there have been questions about whether this trend is actually leading to post-bureaucratic forms of organization, or is simply a transformation of hierarchical arrangements (Hassard et al, 2012). But there are also emerging arguments that project-based work provides the best examples of post-bureaucratic organization (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006).

This study sought to give a better understanding of some of the underlying emotional experiences of mental health conditions among musicians, and the patchwork portfolio precarity of such work which is characterized by being insecure, individualized, and competitive (Grey, 1998). In addition, I have sought to touch on my own felt research experiences of exploring these conditions with the musicians and my approach to these differing encounters and relationships. In this sense, the mutuality of experience

is reflected to some degree in that fact that creative (and academic) work are sites for “realising the project of self” (Grey, 1994, p. 482) and therein tends to be an expression of those “continuously engaged in the emotions of repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002, p. 626). Needless to say, more research is needed both within mental ill health and its management within the diversity of organizational workplaces and environments, so that there is a better understanding of lives and the impact of such conditions. In addition, particularly within the management literature there is a more pressing emphasis on understanding the appropriate approaches to understanding and managing mental ill health and its impact on living and working.

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