Exploring generational differences in how UK-based socially engaged practitioners describe their work and their motivations for it.

John Sloboda (Guildhall School of Music & Drama) and Jo Gibson (York St John University)[1]

Paper delivered at the 9th SIMMposium, Copenhagen, 6 November 2024

Abstract:

This paper derives from a 3-year multi-country comparative project which focuses on participatory music practitioners' work, contexts and beliefs. Previous project outputs have explored commonalities between practitioners working in different countries and contexts.

This presentation focuses on differences between practitioners in the UK, through an analysis of 51 practitioners who completed an online survey (of whom 24 also gave extensive interviews), and about whom sufficient information was available to construct a broad career timeline. Some practitioners that participated in the study began their socially engaged work many decades ago (when the social, political, and economic climate was very different to now - and where doing so would often be lonely pioneering work), others started their work in the last few years (when the work has attained a greater professional definition, with clearer organisational frameworks to align with and gain support from). We were curious to know how starting participatory practice at different periods in time might inform practitioner work and beliefs.

To explore this, we consider career age differences in relation to (a) nature and amount of formal training/preparation undertaken, (b) types of constituencies worked with, (c) the level of specificity in intended outcomes for participants, and (d) alignment of the work with personal political priorities. These data show that even within one country, socially engaged practice is a complex and differentiated field, responsive to and influenced by the historical specificities of the contexts in which individual practitioners operate.

[1] John Sloboda, john.sloboda@gsmd.ac.uk
Jo Gibson, j.gibson1@yorksj.ac.uk

Are there generational differences in how UK-based socially engaged practitioners describe their work and their motivations for it?

Why do we think this could be the case, and why is it an interesting question? In the UK, the number of musicians leading socially engaged practice has substantially grown. 50 years ago socially engaged practitioners would often be lonely pioneers, whereas in recent decades the work has attained greater professional definition, with clear organisational and policy frameworks to align with, and a greater degree of professional support and training available to people entering the profession (see for example Deane, 2014; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Camlin & Zeserson, 2018; Sound Sense, 2021).

On the basis of this, we might expect to find that people starting this type of work recently would have received more formal training for it, and through this - along with the existence of a more developed field of organisations offering socially engaged projects - have a more differentiated and articulated account of the constituencies they work with and the intended outcomes of their work.

On the other hand, the political and economic climate in the 1970s and 1980s was much different to now.

McAteer and Wells (In Press), drawing on Higgins (2006, 2007), discuss the origins of British community music as being underpinned by commitment to resistance, activism, and social justice. They contrast this with more recent observations, such as those offered by Rimmer et al, who in 2014 they describe as finding 'little evidence' of proclaimed activist activity amongst interviewees and instead positing contemporary community music in the UK as a 'chameleonic practice' as it responds to 'shifting policy and funding agendas' whose radicalism had become diminished, or increasingly 'quiet'.

The claim here is that socially engaged practice has become depoliticised and that over time practitioners are more likely to bend their practice to policy or institutional directives (which bring more secure funding with them) rather than being driven by political activism or social change.

Has reforming zeal been tamed by professionalisation? That seems an important thing to know!

Method:

To begin to explore this question we used survey and interview data collected in the UK during the project “Music for Social Impact: Practitioners’ work, beliefs, contexts” which ran from 2020-2023. This was a large, multinational project, different results from which have already been reported in various places, including the 2022 London SIMMpsoium and can be accessed via https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/mfsi.

The online survey questions and interview protocols were co-devised by the international team and executed similarly in each of the study’s four locations (Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK).

For this presentation, our first step was to identify two sub-samples from the 51 UK practitioners whose data gave sufficient information for us to be able to establish the decade during which they began their socially engaged practice.

Group 1 consisted of 16 practitioners who were born in the 1950s and 1960s and began their socially engaged practice between 1980 and 2005.

Group 2 consisted of 20 practitioners who were born in the 1980s and 1990s and began their practice after 2005.

These two groups represent the time and age extremes of our overall sample. If any differences are to be found, they should be strongest in these two groups.

Our four specific research questions will be briefly stated and answered in turn, but in this short presentation we will put most attention on the fourth question, regarding explicit political motivations for the work.

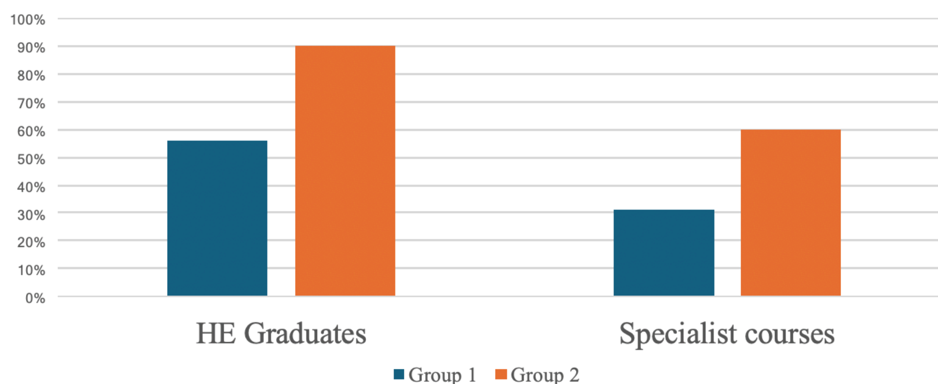
Results:

Question 1. Do the groups differ in the nature and amount of formal training received?

Group 2 had around double the proportion of HE graduates, and of people undertaking specialist courses in socially engaged practice. This reflects wider trends in the institutionalisation and accreditation of professional practice, and

confirms that formal training routes are increasingly supplementing on-the-job learning.

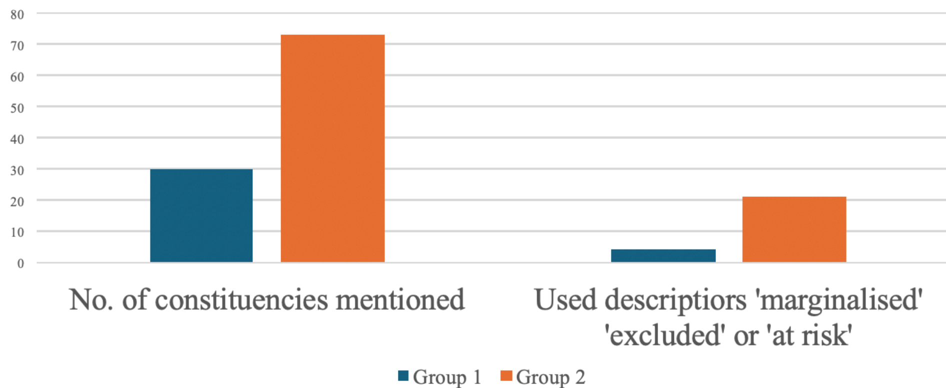
Question 1. Do the groups differ in the nature and amount of formal training received?



Question 2. Do the groups differ in the types of constituencies they describe themselves as currently working with?

Both groups report working with a very wide range of constituencies. Group 2 mention twice as many specific constituencies as do Group 1, and are significantly more likely to report working with groups they characterise as ‘marginalised’, ‘excluded’, or at ‘risk’. Highly general categories tend to be found more in Group 1. One Group 1 practitioner said “everyone”, maybe from a wish not to overtly categorise the people who they work with.

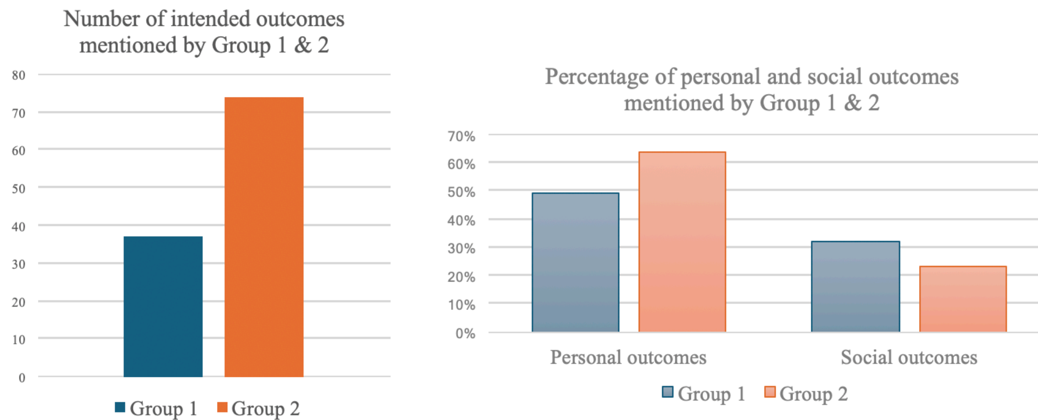
Question 2. Do the groups differ in the types of constituency they describe themselves as currently working with?



Question 3. Do the groups differ in the level of specificity in intended outcomes for participants?

Both groups describe a wide range of intended outcomes but, as with constituencies, Group 2 mention twice as many specific outcomes as Group 1. Perhaps this reflects an unwillingness on the part of Group 1 members to be too instrumental. There is a tendency for Group 1 to mention more social outcomes (e.g. group participation, friendship) and Group 2 to mention more personal outcomes (e.g. well-being, self-confidence), maybe reflecting funder priorities for measurable individual outcomes, and a greater public framing of the work as being oriented towards improvements in mental and physical health.

Question 3. Do the groups differ in the level of specificity in intended outcomes for participants?



Question 4. Do the groups differ in the alignment of their work with stated personal political priorities?

We looked at all the statements which appeared to express a personal political perspective. This went beyond the description of the work's nature and formal objectives. We began by searching for responses which mentioned the word "politics" or "political", and then fanned out to adjacent text which often clarified and expanded the point. We only chose those statements which both of us independently judged to contain a clear personal political perspective.

Unlike for the previous questions, Groups 1 and 2 offered around the same number of politics-related statements, an average of between one and two such statements per person. And we could not find any strong difference in the content or the orientation of these statements between groups. This offers a heartening challenge to the pessimism of Rimmer et al's informants (2014).

We identified two main types of political engagement manifest in the statements, with examples of each being found in both groups. One respondent actually explicitly mentioned both of these types of engagement in the same quote

> *"I have a very political outlook on it (music), in both a small and a large sense. So, a lot of the work that I will end up doing will have a political focus of some sort. And that could be a grand political process, or it could be … a [targeted] political process about equality and inclusion and those kinds of issues."* [UK 17 Group 1]

So to expand on this, we identify the first type of engagement as one where music is being used in **direct political action.** The same practitioner goes on to discuss an example of this;

> *"writing songs on the streets with protesters, supporting friends who are protesters, being part of the protest movement under the [named group] and various other times."* [UK 17 Group 1]

This can be coupled with a realisation that music is only one tiny contribution to the wider effort;

> *'I have so much admiration for people who work with the bureaucratic stuff. People who work in like the Citizens Advice or the [named] Refugee Centre………. But, you know, people who are actually really, really good at all the legal stuff, people who've become human rights lawyers. I wish I could do like them, but I just don't have the kind of skills for that kind of thing. So being a sort of socially engaged musician is a kind of cop out response. I still see myself as working in tandem with these people, doing these other things."* [UK 04 Group 2]

The second type of political engagement focuses more directly on participatory music practices as creating mini-worlds where the political priorities that practitioners seek for the entire society can be exemplified or modelled, at least within the confines of the practice.

> *"So to set up an environment where everyone is equal and listened to and respected. Which in my humble position is my contribution to what I imagine the world should be like."* [UK 21 Group 2]

In exemplifying this, one participant expresses that many would see this as a foundational premise of much community music.

> *"I share the kind of ideology that I suppose goes back to the tradition of community music in the best sense and that everyone is a musician, that idea that innate musicality of some kinds of people can, without specific prior training, do something aesthetic, of value."* [UK 18 Group 1]

Or as one participant summed it up:

"Be the change you want to be." [UK 20 Group 2]

Conclusions:

In sum, this small exploration into generational comparisons suggests that there has been increasing professionalisation of the field of practice with the consequent institutionalisation of training and support mechanisms. This professionalisation has resulted in practitioners being more specific and detailed when talking about the types of people they work with and the outcomes they intend for their participants. But this professionalisation has not depoliticised them. We see many examples among older and younger practitioners of a zeal for social and political change, and articulated accounts of how their work can contribute to that change. The passion for change is alive and well in our profession, despite all the pressures and discouragements practitioners can face.

References:

Bartleet, B. L., & Higgins, L. (2018). Introduction: An Overview of Community Music in the Twenty-First Century. In B. L. Bartleet, & L. Higgins (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (pp. 1-22). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190219505.013.20

Camlin, D. A., & Zesersen, K. (2018). Becoming a Community Musician: A Situated Approach to Curriculum, Content, and Assessment. In B. L. Bartleet, & L. Higgins (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (pp. 711-733). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190219505.013.7

Deane, K. (2014). *ArtWorks code of practice*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. http://collective-encounters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ArtWorks-code-of-practice-pdf.pdf

Higgins, L. D. (2006). *Boundary-walkers: Contexts and Concepts of Community Music.* https://hdl.handle.net/10344/1213

Higgins, L. (2007). Growth, pathways and groundwork: Community music in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Community Music*, *1*(1), 23–37. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.1.1.23_1

McAteer, N. & Wells, R. (In Press). Community Music and its Political Imperative: Music-Making and the Struggle for Social Justice. In J. L. Aróstegui, C. Christophersen, J. Nichols & K. Matsunobu (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of School Music Education* (pp. 253-269). Sage.

Rimmer, M., Higham, B. & Brown, T. (2014). Whatever happened to community music? *AHRC Research Network Project Report.* https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/47880

Sound Sense (2021). *Training the Community Musician Events.* Sound Sense. https://www.soundsense.org/developing-practice/ttcm