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Qualitative Music

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Qualitative Music

Abstract

Qualitative research has provided a home for innovative approaches to collecting, analyzing, and representing data (Hesse - Biber & Leavy, 2006; Janesick, 2011; Ketelle, 2010). Reflexive journaling, photography and photo elicitation, poetry, video representations, dramatic enactments, visual presentations, and play - writing are but a few of the creative techniques embraced by qualitative researchers in search of ways to help their audiences move beyond reading and into experiencing the data (Collier, 2001; Deacon, 2006). These formats have opened doors to re - inventions of traditional thick, rich descriptions and provided living, intentional metaphors through which a reader can filter data via their own emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and scholarly lenses. Music, however, is one area that has been minimally used as an approach to mining and re/presenting data. This piece explores the use of music in a qualitative research project. My intention is to initiate a conversation on how music can capture both participant and researcher experiences in a way that naturally challenges words, thoughts, reactions, and assumption.

Keywords

Qualitative, Music, Creativity, Portraiture, Reflexivity

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qualitative music

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Qualitative research has provided a home for innovative approaches to collecting, analyzing, and representing data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Janesick, 2011; Ketelle, 2010). Reflexive journaling, photography and photo elicitation, poetry, video representations, dramatic enactments, visual presentations, and play-writing are but a few of the creative techniques embraced by qualitative researchers in search of ways to help their audiences move beyond reading and into experiencing the data (Collier, 2001; Deacon, 2006). These formats have opened doors to re-inventions of traditional thick, rich descriptions and provided living, intentional metaphors through which a reader can filter data via their own emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and scholarly lenses. Music, however, is one area that has been minimally used as an approach to mining and re/presenting data. This piece explores the use of music in a qualitative research project. My intention is to initiate a conversation on how music can capture both participant and researcher experiences in a way that naturally challenges words, thoughts, reactions, and assumptions. Keywords: Qualitative, Music, Creativity, Portraiture, Reflexivity

qualitative music

what are words, anyway?

streams of letters combining to make meaning of what is
 sensed, intuitive, factual

so what is music, then?

cascades of notes forming
 cadences, aural sentences
 of interpretations,
 heard imprints of events, emotions, evocations

are they really all that different?

one has legitimacy in the Research World
 one has its home in the artistic world

words are music, i say

how enunciations are made, melodic phrasings of intent sounded,
 intonations, intimations, exclamations emitted

these all create impressions on my listener's brain

and must find expressions that become
 sensible to the reader, the reader
 who is eavesdropping, layering
 her own interpretations upon
 my interpretations

the music is where i meet my participants.
 seems funny to ask someone
 “is this what you sound like?”

but isn't that what we do when we ask them to
 “read what i've written, please—
 is what i think you've said what
 you really said?”

i am not putting words to music
 or music to words
 i am doing what any decent researcher does,
 taking note of what the words don't say,
 what is behind, intimated, obstructed
 by viscous verbalisms,
 filtering out my own voices
 and finding an expression of truth
 that is so very personal to my participant
 yet also perhaps known by so many
 word is like a god,
 unchallengeable to those who worship it

well, i challenge you, word.
 and ask you to give attention to the
 themes, harmonies, rhythmic emanations
 of transcribed truth as heard
 by the heart as well as mind,
 through an other way of knowing,
 through music

according to Drs. Lincoln and Guba,
 i as researcher am
 a human instrument
 so i will tune up, tune in, listen, and play

Recently I embarked upon an intensive exploration of the role of spirituality in the work lives of higher education administrative leaders for my doctoral dissertation project (Beer, 2012). I conducted a series of interviews with highly ranked administrators at a mid-size Western university and used a variety of creative methods to access deeper levels of the experiences they shared. The very nature of this study demanded a high degree of confidentiality in data representation which translated into challenges of analysis and organization. While reading transcripts and listening to the voices of those I interviewed, I was always aware of the need to simultaneously exemplify and disguise what was often very personal and previously private life views. The stories and insights gathered profoundly affected me, and I felt a heavy responsibility to accurately and respectfully transform their words into representations in a way that did justice to the level of intimacy we shared in our meetings.

At one point during the interviewing process, I discovered one long interview had not recorded on my recording device. I was extremely distressed by this event and immediately spent hours re-creating, from memory, the conversation I had had with this participant. I re-

membered events, discussions, and memories into quotes, stories, poetic forms, and illustrations. Once finished, I felt exhausted and worried that I had potentially lost invaluable data. My mind began to wander, and suddenly I entered a quiet space inside myself and simply remembered what this person had said, how they said it, what their body language was like, the rhythms of their speech, and the overall tone of their being. These impressions began to synthesize into musical melodies and harmonies, and after internally listening for awhile I got up, turned on the recorder, and began to capture the sounds on keyboard, violin, and the Native American flute. When I listened back to what I had recorded, there was a sense that this music somehow directly represented this person. I became aware of experiencing who they were at an essential level. In our next meeting I brought this music and played it for her, and her response was immediate: “That’s me? Yes, that’s me”. This sparked a musical/scholarly journey that resulted in music portraits of each participant. And every one of these people acknowledged, after listening to “their” music, that the piece did indeed capture elements of who they and how they are in the world.

Why music?

I am at heart a musician. I began tinkering with melodies on the piano at the age of four, started violin lessons at age six, and over the years picked up several other instruments. I found it natural to include music in my data analysis procedures as it is an integral part of my work identity, my self-identity, and my way of understanding and managing the world.

I am also a performer, with a deep-seated, almost primal need to share what I create. It is not an egotistical need, for I worry endlessly what others will think before I perform or make any piece public. I fret anxiously over how it will be perceived. It is not an easy process, but one, through much practice, has become more acceptable to my psyche. I do not take what I create so personally any more. I play it and leave it to the audience to resonate, agree, or disagree with.

In adulthood I became a music therapist with advanced training in clinical music improvisation. This specialized work gave me the tools to create musical reflections of clients for therapeutic use. Extending these same skills into creating music portraits for research participants was fairly easy; I felt capable of creating music devoid of personal interest and based solely on the rhythms, tempos, and melodies of spoken phrases of participants. I strongly caution other researchers who consider taking this path to be realistic about their capacity for such work, for my ability to do this is based upon over 24 years of professional music therapy work and decades as a performer of music improvisation pieces. The style I have created is unique to me and perhaps a few others in the research world. This work is not “the outcome of uninformed beliefs” (Seale, 2003, p. 181) but built upon theory, experience, and knowledge.

self as instrument

In creating an artistic, more active encapsulation of data, Deacon (2006) suggests “The key is that the researcher also needs to be overt about his/her own interpretations of the products ... and should clarify his/her own reactions from those of the participants” (p. 105). I was mindful of this need throughout the process of creating music, for I knew the music I heard in my head as aurally representative of participants had to be filtered through my own musical skills, preferences, and abilities. I also needed to constantly monitor my own reactions and acknowledge intuitive understandings. Janesick (2001) asserts going beyond traditional data representation is essential: “the extra step is to reflect on, describe, and explain the intuitive moments and creative moments in any given qualitative research project”

(p. 531). Early on in the music making I found I had to shake out my own tendencies in order to keep attuned to the rhythms and melodies I was trying to capture. A piece came out of this releasing process that I listened to constantly after I created it. It provided me with a sense of musical ground that I could move out from and retreat to during this creatively and cognitively trying period.

“Self as instrument” is presented here as a hyperlink for you to click on and listen to. The first portion of the piece reflects my anxiety about the interviewing and music-making procedures. The second portion captures the emotional tenor of connecting with participants and the satisfaction I felt when moments of deep appreciation and meaningful insights spontaneously arose.

[self as instrument](#)

A Personal Perspective

I offer here an early excerpt from my data collection journal in order to highlight the congruency I felt between the research process and music. In it I talk of music and my need to play while immersed in the data collection phase of research. This was written just before I began contacting participants:

Today, I have determined, is the day to start calling potential interviewees. As preparation for this, I opened my violin case, and played. Practicing for countless hours to make sure I am not out of pitch is a history I have that is my foundation for clarity and creativity. Composing and improvising music is similar to collecting data and synthesizing it—listening closely to heard and unheard voices and nuances, writing down fragments of thoughts, pulling lines of melody/themes out of these fragments, and creating some kind of harmony (whether harmonious or dissonant) from the strands that become sound.

Making it sound. Making the data sound. This is what I want to do, and why I commit myself to playing music throughout this process of listening, questioning, transcribing, and identifying. To give the underlayer of unspokenness a hearing, to bring it into the conversation, to not minimize or overlook it. Make it sound.

I am very used to private practicing in a small room, sharpening my skills for public presentation. Paying attention to the subtleties of tone, pitch, tempo, phrasing, expression so that when I present it, it seems effortless, obvious. Figuring out how to finger a phrase so that it flows easily from my hand, planning the bowing so there are no apparent breaks in a long, lovely melody. There is so much to do, so much to pay attention to, yet I can only tackle one at a time and then fit it all together into one coherent piece. How similar is this process to collecting and writing up data! (data collecting journal, June 13, 2011)

Portraiture

With its ability to hold paradoxes and dualities, portraiture (Chapman, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) was chosen to frame the use of creative forms. Portraiture creates an amalgam of a participant, weaving together quotes, observations,

impressions, and details to create a picture that is unique to the participant as well as to data gathered. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) said, “One of the most powerful characteristics of portraiture is its ability to embrace contradictions, its ability to document the beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationships” (p. 9). This containment of seemingly oppositional thoughts and formats was well suited to the study.

Finding an artistic way to express an interviewee’s voice through portraiture, or the creation of individualized and tailored images of participants, was an integral part of data representation (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005). This achieved two aims: it liberated the information from the personal sphere and placed it in a universal realm of shared experience, and gave the reader a sense of what it was like to be this person. Though the inspiration came quickly, its enactment was not easy, for preparing a portrait “is extremely demanding and labor intensive. Virtually every statement in the portrait should accurately reflect the totality of the objective information in the transcripts and the totality of nuances in the passages the investigator has studied” (Witz, Lee, & Huang, 2010, p. 398). Creating and reading portraits is similar to writing and reading contrived stories, but, and this is very important to stress, portraiture is not fiction but a carefully stylized representation of voices, scenes, and artifacts gathered through systematic, disciplined, and closely monitored research methods. Crafting portraits is a process of writing in a state of heightened and focused creative awareness, in which all thoughts and intuitions are concentrated on the participant’s words, movements, sounds, environment, gestures, silences, and expressed emotions. With this creative approach I was able to utilize transcribed voices to create dialogues, monologues, narratives, poetic designs, and a wholly unanticipated form, that of music. Portraiture served as a flexible medium within which music could be explored as a qualitative data analysis and representation tool. One song was created based solely on the participant’s words. A poem was created which was based upon a story shared yet re-told by myself in a way that captured the sensation of a cold night and heated emotion.

It might be most helpful to illustrate this process with an actual portrait of one participant, that of Aylene. Excerpts from interview transcripts will be presented, an example of how I used photographs to elicit information given, and a story shared. Finally, all of the information was gathered by myself and then synthesized into a piece of music I improvised that, according to her, resonated with who she was. To bring Aylene further into this sphere of shared understanding, the portrait is written in the present tense and a link to the music provided. When listening to this piece as well as the second one in this article, I recommend you do listen on a system that has a good quality sound reproduction. Keep an open mind, and note any reactions within yourself.

Aylene

*Sharp mind, gentle soul. Fierce lover of God, graceful executioner of an
ancient Japanese art. Confident and aggressive administrator,
compassionate friend, rooted to the ground
(reflective break during transcription of Aylene’s second interview)*

Aylene is a study of contrasts. She presents as a petite woman and carries herself with a quiet dignity. Her movements are measured, deliberate, and her smile is filled with joy and light. Yet from our talks I know she is a practitioner of karate, holding physical strength in her hands and body. This also gives her a capacity for fierce mental concentration. An image of a deep lake comes to mind when I think of her: the surface is visible to anyone near it, yet

its depths are hidden from view. She has a strong and abiding faith. All of these elements whirled about in my mind and became expression in the above poetic turn.

In our first interview I ask Aylene what her definition of spirituality is, and she responds that being respectful of people, constantly feeling gratitude for the life she has been given, and engagement in prayer sum up her spirituality. Being mindful of how she begins and ends a project, striving to learn from each lesson and event, and approaching life with a clear mind are how she enacts her spirituality. She shares, “Those things are little practices that I think are helpful, and again it keeps my mind focused on what is important to me. And that is spirituality”.

I find irony in the fact that while Aylene is the most overtly religious person I have spoken with, she has one of the shortest definitions of spirituality. I think this is in alignment with who she is, for she tells many stories during our time together and seems to prefer to let her actions and reactions illustrate her beliefs. At one point she describes how she prefers to let her actions speak for her beliefs. My sense is that merely spouting definitions and ideas on what she thinks spirituality is will somehow diminish the sense of awe and veneration she has for God and for the mysteries of life.

Grandma. A picture Aylene shows me in our first meeting is of her grandma (on her father’s side). I follow Rose’s (2001) visuality guidelines for viewing images, and look at its composition, tone, background, and also consider my reaction. The following is my perception-- perhaps my interpretation--of this photograph, yet it was spontaneously created in a moment when I clearly envisioned Aylene as a multi-dimensional person:

The picture is startling in its contrasts and intensity. Her grandma is standing, body completely relaxed and her face turned up to receive the blessing the priest is giving her. His hand is on her forehead, her eyes are closed, and the look on her face is one of yielding, submission, and grace. The background is very dark and shadows cover the back part of her body, but her shoulders and face are brilliant with light. It is as if she is coming out of the darkness and into the light, being blessed by the Father. Her face exudes peace, serenity. She stands strong though diminutive in stature. The two words that came into my mind upon seeing the photograph were strength and submission. The strength to live this life, birth and raise eight children, work the fields, and endure the unimaginable grief of watching some of her children die. And the ability to submit to God’s power, compassion, and will. She leans into the priest’s hand, the hand which covers her forehead. He towers over her, yet she is as strong as he. She yields to his touch, to his blessing, fully and without reserve.

Aylene has her grandmother’s jaw. She looks so much like her, and this is a good thing. Her family does not understand much of what she has done; she is the only one to have gone to college. But they love and accept her unconditionally, because she is part of their tribe and fiercely valued. That she has a family of her own now makes them all rest easier; Grandma says her husband keeps her in line! This picture of her grandmother symbolizes faith, family, and love. It is who she is. (data collecting journal, July 31, 2011)

My sense of the photograph capturing an essential identity was also confirmed by Aylene during our member-checking process.

Aylene story: Returning. Who we are is shaped by what has happened to us. But, perhaps even more than what has happened to us, how we react to the events in our lives

shapes our identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This story fictionalizes a memory Aylen has of her childhood and brings in a recent action on her part. I include it here as concrete example of who Aylen is, and to create an expanded context for the piece of music to come.

When Aylen was just a girl of seven her mother left her father. Her little sister was three and doesn't remember much about their mother, but Aylen remembers almost everything. How her mother smelled, her voice when she was happy, her tears when frustrated. There were a lot of tears there near the end, before she went out the front door and didn't come back. She gave no reason for leaving, only saying "I don't want to be married anymore".

As a little girl Aylen took this to mean mommy didn't want to be a mommy anymore, she didn't want to love her anymore.

Over the months after her mother left Aylen slowly realized she wasn't coming back. Mommy never called, never stopped by, never cared. Aylen started to become angry, because so many of her friends had mommies that hadn't left. Some daddies were gone but that didn't matter nearly as much.

"How dare she leave! I didn't want her anyway!" floated through her mind more and more.

But something happened to change this and make her less angry: Her daddy started spending all of his time with her and her sister, playing with them, talking to them, bringing them to her grandma's for dinner every Tuesday and Saturday night. She loved going to grandma's—the food was always so good and she got lots of hugs and kisses.

As she grew up Aylen thought about her mom less and less. It hurt less and less. Some of her friends got into drugs, and a few joined a gang. They wanted her to become like them—teasing, cajoling, even once threatening her. She went home and told her dad about it.

He sat on the couch, listened to her, and said "Aylen, you have a life ahead of you. God has a plan for you. If you go down that road, you will never know what that plan is".

She did not follow her friends' path but concentrated on school, doing so well it became clear that, if she wanted to, she could go to college. She asked her dad about this.

He again sat on the couch, listened patiently to her, then said, "I don't really get this education thing, but if it is what you want to do, I will help you in any way I can".

So she went to college, went on to get her Master's degree, and finally got hooded as part of her doctoral graduation. The whole way, her dad listened to her, gave advice, and encouraged her to follow those dreams. She went on to become a well-respected and influential higher education administrator.

One day, Aylen went into the city to attend a presentation. She noticed the talk was being held in the neighborhood where her mom's mother, her grandmother, lived. As she walked to and from the presentation she pictured the house as she remembered it. She hadn't seen this grandma for 28 years, but knew from the occasional card she still lived there. And almost without thinking about it she drove over to the house, parked, got out of the car, walked up the sidewalk, and knocked on the door. It was time. She was ready. And she had forgiveness in her heart.

Her grandma answered the door—she looked so different, so old—and said "yes?"

Aylen wasn't surprised she didn't recognize her. Then she saw a woman standing behind her grandma, and she wondered which aunt this was.

Aylen simply said, "Hi, Grandma".

Her grandma drew her into the house, hugged her, and said "and here is your Mom".

There were many tears that day, many questions, some answers. When Aylen went home she went to see her dad.

He sat on the couch, listened to her, and said, "I'm glad you found her".

A door in her heart had opened and closed all at the same time. And that was enough.

Music portrait: “Yield”. Music is an important force in Aylen’s life. Until our meeting I had no idea she was a musician. When I asked her about music she said,

Music? Huge. I have to play it. To keep me calm, you know, to keep me relaxed. It depends on what kind of music it is, but [for me] it is mostly classical music I listen to, always keeping that ambiance and environment. If I could have water fountains all through the office, and the scent of spearmint, I probably would! *[she laughs heartily here!]*

After our second interview I thought about the words, intonations, and underlying messages of our conversations. For two weeks after this meeting I heard a certain musical interval in my mind and a melody playing over it. I decided to find out what this really sounded like and so picked up my violin and played what I heard. The interval was a perfect 5th, which is open-sounding and does not indicate whether the music is in a major or minor key; it is neutral and full of possibilities. The melody was slow and measured; it was always contained within the perfect 5th interval. When I listened to this piece, I felt it embodied the safe containment of love and family, the mystery and pain of her mother’s absence, and the movement out of this pain as heard in the clear melody of the second section.

In our third interview I played this piece for Aylen, and the following is part of our conversation that immediately followed and is taken directly from the transcript:

Aylen: What was the main chord?

Laura: It was an open 5th, those last notes. It’s in G major.

Aylen: G major. Okay. And what is interesting is there are certain sounds that appeal to an individual. There’s also certain notes that you can, that give you this either upbeat feeling, or calmness, or whatever it may be, and mysterious feelings that I would always have when I would play maybe in D minor, would give that kind of, not eerie, but what’s that kind of feeling of mystery?

Laura: Evocative?

Aylen: Yeah, yeah yeah. And the G major is something that I always just found peaceful. Why did this come about again?

Laura: As I was reflecting on the two conversations we’d had, and letting some of the images move through my mind and my heart, I kept hearing that open 5th chord, the G and D, and I kept hearing the *here I sing the opening melody* And so, I finally thought “I’ve got to play it and hear where this goes”. To me, for some reason, and I’m not sure I could say exactly why, but that just seemed to capture some kind of essence of the themes that came up, and it’s kind of a feeling of peace, but it’s also a movement, and when it moves to the D perfect 5th chord it has a different quality.

Aylen: It’s movement and it’s also, for me, it is unfinished.

Laura: Uh-huh, it does have that quality.

Aylen: That the last note is not the last note of finish, but it's of "more to come". That's what's interesting.

Laura: And I think I heard the "more to come" in today's conversation. Did that have a resonance for you?

Aylen: Oh, yeah. And I'm really sensitive to sounds and music. It is very interesting. "Not finished". *[There is a long pause here]* It's something that is interesting that has come about for me over the past month, and that is the feeling of "am I finished here at MVU?" And Denise [a co-worker and friend] and I talked about this, just this morning, and I said to her, "I don't, I know I'm not finished, but sometimes you don't want to wear yourself out, wear out your welcome either. To be very honest, I'm questioning is my work finished here?" The work is not finished here, but am I finished doing the work here? And I've really been thinking about that, just because of a number of things that are, just challenge after challenge after challenge, and you can either ride through those and defeat them, or come to some sort of solution, or whatever, or is it just time?

I'm fighting that because I don't want it to be. Nor have I gotten any signals, it is just something that is in my mind. Maybe it's just a question mark. You know? So when I said "it's not finished", is that the piece?

Laura: One thing, when I listen back to it, it is very contained, and there is a lot of movement, there is a lot of strength there, but it is also very contained. And so, like you said, the piece may not be finished, and it may also be time for you to move out of this container called MVU. And I heard some of that musically in what you were talking about. In some ways I love this piece, and in some ways it bothers me because it is so limited by that chord.

Aylen: Yes, yes! Uh-huh, uh-huh. That's right.

[We both start laughing softly, kind of amazed at what just happened. The music gave voice to Aylen's unspoken thought that her time at this university might be close to being done]

Aylen: I tell you, we can get deep and deep and deep! You know?

After this third interview I walked away feeling a bit mystified: the piece I had instinctively improvised for Aylen captured not only the essence of what we had talked about previously, but also her feeling constricted at work. I pondered this for quite a while and decided to add another segment to the piece. Aylen had already shared she has a great love for the Native American flute instrument, and so I chose to bring it in as the main instrument for the second part. The link to the final piece is presented here:

Yield

I wanted to make sure Aylene heard the full piece and gave her consent for me to use it as a representation of who she is, before I presented it publically. I gave her a CD copy to listen to then followed up with an email asking if she'd had a chance to listen to it. Her response was, "The music piece 'Yield' is superb. It captures many moments, thoughts, events ... you name it. The native flute brings chills. I love it. In gratitude! Aylene".

Finale

In closing, I want to thank you for taking the time to read and listen to these thoughts on music in qualitative research. When music is introduced into scholarly inquiry deeply subjective responses are triggered. The aim of this article is to point towards incorporating music into qualitative explorations in a creative yet rigorous manner. Music is a sensate world of sound and emotion, concomitantly encompassing and exemplifying humanity in all of its forms. It is able to capture what words cannot, offering the qualitative research world a natural, challenging, and satisfying expressive form for data to sound and be heard within.

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Author Note

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