Distant Voices: Coming Home

Information Pack

Introduction

Distant Voices is an established partnership project between the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) and Vox Liminis, stimulating deeper deliberation on issues of punishment and reintegration through art-based (principally songs) collaborative dialogue. It is an innovative project, bringing some of Scotland's best contemporary songwriters together with groups of prisoners, former prisoners, prison officers, criminal justice staff, victims of crime, academics and families affected by imprisonment, to write and record songs.

We are already running monthly Vox Sessions (song-writing projects) across Scottish prisons and community justice settings and regular public events, in partnership (financially and practically) with Scottish Prison Service, Glasgow Community Justice Authority and Creative Scotland. In November 2015, the second pilot phase of Distant Voices culminated in the release of a studio EP called Silent Seconds and in a festival in Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts. We attracted significant national radio and printed press coverage, inviting a creative conversation on a crucial public issue. In a system often reduced to black and white positions and roles, Distant Voices explores what happens when we make and share human stories, ideas, emotions and community.

Distant Voices has now evolved into a pioneering research project funded for the next 3 years (from April 2017) by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant Ref. ES/P002536/1). We aim to bring together (and challenge the boundaries between) creative practice, research and knowledge exchange, working with a widening academic team encompassing musicology and public politics as well as criminology, and we are recruiting two new team members at this exciting juncture.

Research Summary

Distant Voices responds to pressing public policy and political challenges created by huge rises in the numbers of people subject to penal sanctions and by high levels of reoffending. Turning conventional understandings of 'offender rehabilitation' on their head, the project is concerned not with 'correcting offenders' but rather with exploring and changing how they are received when 'coming home' after punishment. The project aims (1) to improve academic and public understandings of social re/integration[1] after punishment; (2) to develop innovative practices to better support re/integration; and (3) to better engage a range of citizens, communities and civil society institutions in re/integration. As a collaborative action research project drawing on criminology, popular music, politics and other disciplines, Distant Voices combines

[1] We use the form throughout 're/integration' in recognition of the fact that many of those facing challenges of reintegration after punishment may not have been well integrated in the first place.

creative practices (principally songwriting and sharing), research and knowledge exchange to enable dialogue and learning about re/integration -- and to practice and experience it. Its participatory methods draw together a wide range of differently situated citizens, organisations and associations to form a 'community of enquiry' *and* of creative practice. By so doing Distant Voices aspires to develop theories and concepts of reintegration and rehabilitation, to influence related behaviours, to inform interventions and, more broadly, to encourage the development of a fairer and more vibrant society.

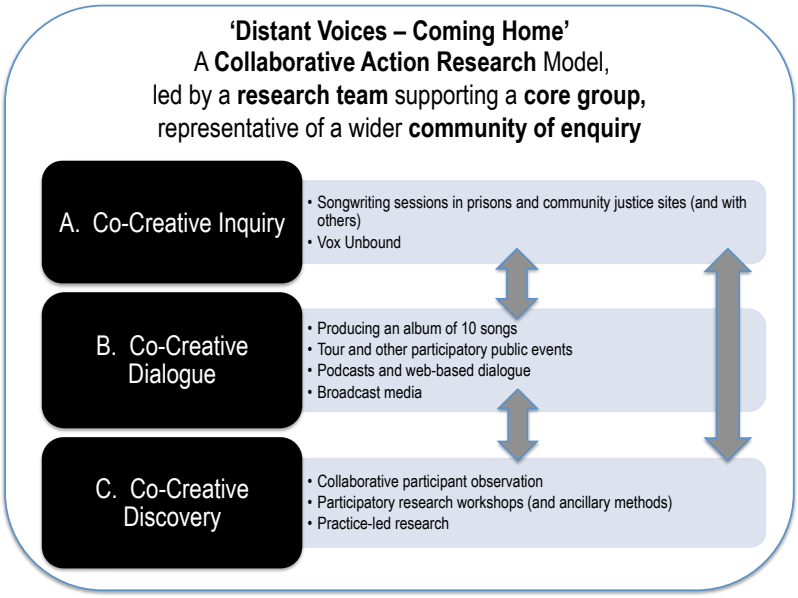
Research Design

The Distant Voices **research team** draws on Fergus McNeill's (University of Glasgow) criminological expertise on the project's central substantive topic (re/integration) and in qualitative social science; on Jo Collinson Scott's (University of the West of Scotland) expertise in popular musicology and songwriting studies, which informs its creative practices and research methods; and on Oliver Escobar's (University of Edinburgh) expertise in collaborative social research exploring participatory politics. The Director of Vox Liminis, Alison Urie (Vox Liminis), will also act as a Co-Investigator, bringing expertise in youth and community work, theology and social entrepreneurship.

Vox Liminis is a new Scottish charity (est. 2013) conceived in part as a social science 'spin out' inspired by its founder Alison Urie's engagement with the Desistance Knowledge Exchange project. Vox aims to bring creative practice to criminal justice and its reform. Distant Voices takes seriously criminological research suggesting that efforts to reform punishment and reintegration must take account of the emotive and visceral aspects of our responses to crime (Maruna and King, 2008). It seeks a deeper and more affective, collective engagement with these issues by bringing people with lived experience of punishment and re/integration together with their families/supporters, criminal justice managers and practitioners, academics, artists and musicians in a range of creative activities. Primarily through making music, the participants explore issues and make connections. Songs (and sometimes other artworks) are then shared in public and professional forums and through print and broadcast media, as a way of inviting more people to engage seriously with the challenges of re/integration.

We are recruiting both a full-time Research Associate and a Project Coordinator to work with these investigators in facilitating the development of a **community of enquiry** including Vox Liminis' board, staff, volunteers and supporters, musicians, people with lived experience of re/integration (and their families), criminal justice managers and practitioners and other civil society actors (community groups, businesses, media and faith communities). From this community of enquiry, a representative **core group** of 12-15 will be formed. This group will include and be facilitated by the **research team** to address the following **research questions**:

1. How do individual citizens and civil society institutions experience, make sense of and engage in re/integration after punishment -- whether as citizens 'coming home' or as those receiving them?
2. How and with what effects does making and sharing art (principally songs) (a) represent and (b) support re/integration? How can we best understand the social, political, ethical and aesthetic nature and potential of these encounters and what they reveal about re/integration?
3. To what extent and in what ways can culturally mediated public dialogue about re/integration enable the development of social relations and social capital, supporting citizen and civil society engagement in re/integration?
4. To what extent and in what ways does participation in co-creative enquiry and public dialogue stimulate wider individual and community participation in *other* aspects of social and political life *beyond* the question of reintegration (e.g. policy processes, elections, community action)?



To best explore these questions, our methodological approach is that of **collaborative action research** (Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Platteel et al., 2010), combining creative practice, social science-based and arts-based research methods, and knowledge exchange. Our experience from the two pilot phases of Distant Voices confirms that co-creative practices generate particularly strong research relationships and exceptionally rich data through which experiences, thoughts and feelings are revealed and represented in interesting and challenging ways. Approaching re/integration obliquely (through co-creative activities) rather than directly (for example, through interviewing) has already allowed us to better elicit and explore

some of the complexities and ambiguities that it involves (see Anderson, 2015; McNeill, 2015). Moreover, our experience suggests that these co-creative processes themselves generate social relationships, social capital and thus community. We want to explore how, to what extent and under what conditions this happens -- not just among participants making art in 'sessions' but also through wider community and public participation in events where co-created art is shared. Crucially, we also want to explore the potential contribution of these culturally mediated processes of dialogue to developing the participatory politics necessary for a more just and vibrant society.

Maximising our learning depends on the academic contributors respecting (and developing) our collaborators and participants as co-researchers, just as they respect (and develop) us as co-creators and co-participants. Therefore the **research team** and **core group** must facilitate a **community of enquiry** that learns in and through three sets of activities (which we label inquiry, dialogue and discovery). The relationships between these sets of activities are not sequential; they are iterative -- with each influencing and shaping the development of the other:

Co-Creative Inquiry: Over 3 years, we will run at least twenty 2-3 day songwriting 'sessions' in open and closed prisons and in two community justice settings, as well as with victims and community groups, reaching about **200 participants**. These sessions will involve people in prison or under supervision and their families or supporters, criminal justice staff, victims and their families or supporters, academics, artists and representatives of community groups and civil society. The sessions will be the main locus of our attempts to address questions 1 and 2 through discussing, representing and experiencing re/integration principally in and through the creative practice of songwriting. Existing weekly open sessions (called 'Vox Unbound') will provide continuity of contact for members of the community of enquiry in general and in particular for the core group and the research team. The Project Coordinator will play a lead role in organising and facilitating these activities, supporting access and building community with a diverse group of people.

Co-Creative Dialogue: We will design and run a series of public events and produce online outputs capitalising on Oliver Escobar's experience in facilitating and researching participatory political dialogue, thus providing the main means of addressing questions 3 and 4. Specifically, we will work with leading Scottish musicians to studio record an album of 10 songs from Distant Voices song-writing sessions for release in autumn 2018 (the mid-point of the project). Coinciding with that release, we will run a festival where attendees will have opportunities to respond creatively to the songs and to our other emerging research findings, thus supplementing the data collected and its analysis. We will also run: an 8-event tour of the album including 4 gigs in mainstream music venues and 4 in prisons; 4 further participatory events in two community justice areas, focusing on the work and findings generated locally; and 8 'house-gigs' hosted by people directly involved in the community of enquiry – bringing songs into engagement with their social networks. All

of these events will be studied as processes and sites of dialogue about re/integration. More broadly, a website that shares the work and invites public responses will be developed. Audio recordings of songwriting sessions (as well as representing data) will allow production of 24 podcasts published during the project on the website, with 3 made into documentaries suitable to pitch to mainstream broadcasters. Songs from the album will realise national radio play, and we will seek out broadcast interviews and further opportunities for public sharing of the songs and the research. In month 30 we will host a second participatory festival, summarising the learning and inviting deliberative dialogue about our findings. This wide range of outputs and events will allow exceptionally wide public engagement. We expect over 3,000 people to attend events and at least as many again to be engaged online. Again, the Project Coordinator will play a key role on coordinating these activities.

Co-Creative Discovery: Activities A and B provide the locus for our learning about re/integration but capturing the learning relies on three further research methods. The first two are social science-based and the third is arts-based.

(i) Collaborative participant observation: The full-time Research Associate, Co-Is and the core group members will undertake extensive participant observation for the life of the project; engaging in, recording and reflecting on the full range of activities described above. To facilitate this, the Research Associate will be based principally within Vox Liminis. We aim to allow a form of **collaborative participant observation** involving differently situated actors in our **core group** (for somewhat similar approaches to penal ethnographies, see Bosworth et al., 2005 and Piche et al, 2014). We will train the core group in this approach and in its 'adductive' logic of inquiry (Blaikie 2009: 89–92) in which a 'circle-spiral pattern' of sense-making begins with identifying 'a puzzle, a surprise, or a tension, and then seeks to explicate it by identifying the conditions that would make it less perplexing' (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2012: Loc 792). This iterative process will involve our core group in 'alternating periods of immersion in the relevant social world, and periods of withdrawal for reflection and analysis' (Blaikie 2009: 156). In adductive strategies, theory and research are intimately intertwined, co-evolving in dialogue with one another.

(ii) Participatory research workshops: Research workshops will be convened quarterly for the life of the project. The Research Associate will play a particularly important role in these workshops. During these 'withdrawals' from the field, the core

group will reflect critically upon their observations and determine what additional data is required to fully address the research questions. To help generate that data, the workshops will also be sites of training for core group members in social science and arts-based research methods. Though the principles of collaborative action research require us to leave further questions of method somewhat open to development within the core group, supplementary data collection is very likely to include collection and curation of songs and lyrics from sessions; interviews with a wide range of participants in Distant Voices events (both those events focused on making and those focused on sharing); repeated interviews with a sample of session participants with experience of homecoming, exploring their experiences of re/integration and how participation in Distant Voices has affected these experiences; telephone or face-to-face interviews and online surveys with event attendees, podcast listeners and website users; and key informant interviews with senior civil servants, managers in prisons and community justice organisations, and with civil society leaders (media, business, faith groups, etc.)

(iii) Practice-led research: Arts practice-led researchers tend to follow a 'clew' (or thematic line of inquiry). In this case the theme of homecoming provides the clew. Jo Collinson-Scott will lead the co-creation of practice outputs (at least three EPs of popular music) through 12 reflective songwriting sessions with artists and practitioners involved. These sessions will explore interdisciplinary connections and correspondences between different forms of knowledge created across the project. Their artistic *and* academic outputs will provide a second level of interpretation, working in and through art to reflect upon and represent learning from Distant Voices processes and practices. This approach responds to calls for research that puts the power of research in the hands of those within participatory arts projects and examines and expresses its outcomes from an arts-based perspective, using creativity (Higgins, 2010; Coffman, 2011).

Analysis

In line with the adductive logic referred to above, the project will employ a form of adaptive theory (Layder, 1998) drawing on both existing literature (conceptual and empirical) and on the data itself to generate themes for analysis. The Co-Is and Research Associate will lead this process, in continuous engagement with the core group, involving a wide range of participants in processes of interpretation, analysis and theory-building, shaping and reshaping the Distant Voices project as it evolves, and allowing for 'member checking' of our shared sense-making of the data generated.

Impact

In **academic** terms, Distant Voices will serve to enrich debates about desistance, rehabilitation and reintegration and will produce a rich case study of 'public or civic

criminology' (Loader and Sparks, 2010). In relation to politics, it will enhance understanding of creative approaches to processes of public dialogue, civic engagement and political participation, providing a rich case study of dialogical processes on a hotly contested topic, as well as tracing the impact of such processes on social and political participation. In relation to music, the project will inform current debates about the development of appropriate methods for researching community music, songwriting and participatory arts practice and, more generally, debates about the social or public 'value' of arts and culture (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). More broadly, this project's insistence on creative, collaborative, participatory **practice-as-research-as-knowledge exchange** will influence the broader impact agenda itself; deepening understandings of the processes and relationships through which public social science, in creative collaboration with arts, can support a fair and vibrant society – and of the challenges within and limitations of what can be achieved.

Vox Liminis Overview

Vision

Vox Liminis' vision is of a future where people involved in the criminal justice system can ignite their own creativity to recreate themselves and each other; first imagining, then living a different future, and so building a safer, healthier Scotland with reduced crime and more cohesive communities.

Mission:

To spark positive change by creating spaces for all affected by criminal justice to think, communicate, relate and imagine in new ways, by making creative work together

Strategic Aims:

- With individuals directly affected by the criminal justice system (those who have offended and victims), make creative arts that support expression, generation of ideas, hope and community
- With families affected by imprisonment, create ways for families to come together through arts activity, and with individuals affected by familial imprisonment make sense of their experience
- With institutions concerned with criminal justice (prisons, community justice organisations etc.), create space through the arts to relate and think anew across roles towards positive institutional and systemic culture change
- With communities affected by crime, bring unlikely collaborators together through the arts to strengthen connection and develop solidarity
- Through media, public events, and business/public sector creative consultancy, spark fresh public conversations and insights supporting progress towards a more just Scotland

All of the above we seek to undertake in light of our character statement:

‘Vox Liminis is characterised by our commitment to recognise and celebrate our own humanity and that of all those we work alongside; by our belief in and hope for radical change in society and in individuals; by our insistence on preserving and improving the quality of what we do through thoughtful reflection on our practice; by our enthusiasm for applying our minds and hearts to our work, striving for creativity and innovation; and by our honesty with ourselves and others.’

For more information:

If you would like to know more about Distant Voices, contact Fergus McNeill: Fergus.McNeill@glasgow.ac.uk (mobile 07795 252823). For more information about Vox Liminis (where the Project Coordinator will be based and where the Research Associate will spend much of their time, contact Alison Urie: Alison@voxliminis.co.uk (mobile: 07974 103950).

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