

## Engaging with Arts-Based Research: A Story in Three Parts

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## Abstract

Qualitative psychology researchers of today face numerous practical, ethical, political and theoretical challenges. We have often asked ourselves how we might respond to these multiple and complex challenges. On our evolving research journeys, we have found that arts-based methodologies offer one effective response. We explore here our experiences of doing arts-based research in psychological contexts, by sharing and reflecting on three short stories. The stories illustrate how each arts-based project has required of us three distinct waves of engagement: interdependent engagement with people and place, aesthetic engagement with sense making processes, and emotional engagement with – and of – audiences. We use the story form to evoke each wave of engagement because it allows us to communicate the qualities of that engagement without finalising, foreclosing or restricting the variety of ways arts-based research might be conducted.

**Keywords:** arts-based research, creativity, critical psychology, filmmaking, qualitative research methods, music, narrative, performative research, songwriting

September, 2005

Empty plates pushed roughly aside, they sat round the small table in a Cornish beach chalet. In different ways and at different life points, all four of them had entered Cornwall by crossing the River Tamar, to be here today in this place, as far west as you can go in England without taking to the seas.

“Can we share some of our new research with you?” he asked, refilling their glasses. “We’re just finishing up a study here in Cornwall.”

“OK, if you like,” nodded Liz, a health sciences professor.

“Its poems, stories and songs,” he said mischievously, “and we’d like to start with a song.”

“Great!” said Sonja, the professor’s friend who’d tagged along for the evening.

He began to play. On the two lowest strings, a pacey bass line was laid down, given time to embed. Then came a skipping melody picked out on the higher strings. It sounded like folk, but with much of the tradition abandoned and with a heightened sense of urgency. He started to sing:

We left the city winter ‘72

I headed west to start a new life with you

It was you frail heart

that told us what to do

*We crossed the Tamar*

*which is more than the news would ever do*

An old stone house on the side of the hill

riddled with damp and holes the snow blew through  
The bowling club, the birds  
a garden and a view

*We crossed the Tamar*

*which is more than the news could ever do*

I stepped out of the mill to spend my days with you  
take afternoon walks – no jobs to do  
It was a dream life  
too good to be true

Three years later and your time's all gone  
life proved harder than your heart was strong  
children up country and overseas  
me dreaming of people I so rarely see  
But I call this home...

*We crossed the Tamar*

*which is more than the news will ever do*

Thunder split the sky as the last note faded. An ache erupted, an unexpected shockwave, a surge of raw emotion no longer contained. Except it wasn't electricity in the heavens it was Sonja banging both hands on the table, unable to hold back a guttural sob. "That's exactly what it's like!" She collected herself, waited for her tears to subside, to finish what she was determined to say: "That is exactly what it's like and no-one understands."

They sat stunned, the singer unsure what to do next, whether to put his arm round the woman or perhaps take her hand as a show of empathy. *What have I done?* He thought to himself recognising that it was his song that caused this fracture, this pain. *I'm so sorry!* He thought, as frown lines appeared on his face. Of course there was no rule book for a situation like this, so they sat in uncomfortable silence. But only for a moment.

Sonja dabbed her eyes, straightened her sleeves, regained her composure and began to provide her back-story. She told them – the two qualitative researchers and her friend Liz – about her life. About moving to Cornwall, about her husband's death, about loneliness, isolation, about choosing to stay. She told them how this song – *We Crossed The Tamar*<sup>i</sup> – was the first time she'd heard her own life voiced, the first time she had not felt alone with her experience. *There are other women living all this too ... I am not alone ... somebody understands.* Two fledgling arts-based researchers were humbled by her response, but galvanized too.

“Yes, very nice,” the professor said, looking across the table towards her friend. She paused, then turned her eyes towards the two researchers. “But its not research.”

## Introduction

Researching human behaviour has never been an easy endeavour. The number of books, journal articles, online resources and research methods courses produced each year provide testament to just how challenging *doing* qualitative research can be. Feminist (e.g., Etherington, 2000; Ritchie & Barker, 2005), indigenous (e.g., Kovach, 2015; Nikora, Hodgetts, Groot, Stolte, & Chamberlain, 2016) and performative (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 2012; Denzin, 2003) scholars call us to work in ethical ways towards social justice and emancipation. These writers, and others, provoke us towards greater awareness of voice, visibility and representation of minority, disadvantaged and oppressed people. We are

challenged to incorporate within our studies what might go unsaid, those aspects of human experience that may be at the borders of what can be said (e.g., Butler, 1997) and to avoid excluding felt or spiritual experience (e.g., Dewey, 1934; Glendlin, 1992; Freeman, 2014). We are asked to ensure our research is accessible, so it may be communicated to wider audiences in engaging ways (e.g., Research Councils UK, 2017). But *how* might we – as qualitative researchers in psychology – respond to these multiple and complex challenges? Arts-based methodologies offer one possibility.

Although a substantial literature on art-based research now exists (e.g., Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Belliveau & Westwood, 2016; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2007; Foster, 2016; Haywood Rolling, 2013; Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009, 2018; Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008; McNiff, 2008), little had been published when we began our research journeys in the early 2000's. Within our fields – psychology/sport and exercise science – we were no more aware of emerging arts-based literature than were our advisors and teachers. Instead, our lessons have primarily come from the process of *doing* research. Our methods have developed through exploration, as we creatively responded to challenges faced by participants who live with severe and enduring mental health issues (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2014), the revolving door of homelessness (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2015a), or are women over 60 living within an ageist and sexist culture (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2005, 2013). We are probably not alone when we say learning through working *with* participants has affected how we live our lives, and changed in fundamental ways how we go about doing research. One important change has been to galvanize us to pursue arts-based research in the face of a wider academic community – within psychology and beyond – that can be hostile to or dismissive of these ways of researching, such as the professor's response in the preceding story. Sonja's words – “That is exactly what it's like and no-one understands” – perhaps encapsulate why we continue:

because arts-based methods can faithfully represent marginalized lives in ways that challenge misunderstanding and ignorance.

Reflecting on our research over the past two decades, we can see how each arts-based project has required of us three distinct waves of engagement. Our purpose here is to explore these by sharing three stories from our own practice which illustrate, evoke and reveal the forms and qualities of each wave. Representing these moments in story form allows us to preserve the context, complexity, emotion, and visceral, embodied nature of these practice-based experiences. Perhaps these stories resonate with (or perhaps they challenge) your ways of doing qualitative research? We do not wish to *state* that this is the only way that arts-based research happens, either for ourselves or others. Instead, we use story form because it allows us to *voice* the particular qualities of the engagement we have experienced, without finalising, foreclosing or restricting how arts-based research might be done. We begin with the story *Morrison's* which tells of events at the start of our first commissioned research project, a study of the physical activity and health experiences of women over 60 in Cornwall.

### *Morrison's*

There was nothing glamorous about the wooden seat 100 yards from the entrance to Morrison's supermarket. It was just an old oak bench six-foot in length and encased at each end with an iron frame. So, when Kitrina slumped down on the seat to wait for David to park the car she wasn't expecting any revelations about the life of women in Cornwall. Their research was physical *activity* so *a seat* wasn't really on her radar. As she waited, of course, like you do, she watched the 'goings-on' of this small Cornish town, perched on the river Camel, five miles away from the coastline and the slate and granite cliffs and with a mere 6,222 inhabitants – outside holiday season that is.

It was nearly 11am, and the weather was warm, it was spring, so there was lots of comings and goings to watch. People in and out of shops, people waiting at the bus stops, cars up and down the road, beeps, laughs, exhaust fumes, smells from the pasty shop on one side of the road countering the smell of chip fat firing up on the other.

If you were watching Kitrina you'd have thought she was watching a tennis match her head turning first one way, following one woman walk past and then turn in the other direction, as her eyes were drawn to women who seemed to 'fit their cohort' of over 60 years-of-age. She wasn't taking notes and she wasn't speaking into a Dictaphone. Nor was she recruiting participants. She was just sat, doing nothing really, other than waiting for David who said he would park the car, post some letters, and get some cash. Then they would get on with their work.

With her focus on a woman speeding down the pavement in a mobility scooter, Kitrina didn't notice from another direction a large woman with two plastic bags full of shopping sit down at the other end of the seat. But she did feel the Yorkshire Terrier jump onto the bench, closely followed by the arrival of a very well dressed woman, wearing polished black shoes, and carrying a black walking stick and black handbag.

'There you are!' the large woman with the shopping said as the terrier leapt in to her arms. She nuzzled her face into the dog's, saying 'Oooh! I'm so pleased to see you!'

'I might be a while,' said the woman with the black shoes, handbag and stick, handing over the lead, 'Agnes asked me to pick up her prescription.' Now Kitrina was eavesdropping, listening in on their conversation, watching their actions, aware now of the local accents, and the exchange of the dog.

'Did you hear that?' the large woman said to the dog, as the woman with the black shoes, bag and stick walked off. 'Mummy's going to the chemist's!' The woman pulled a biscuit out of her shopping for the dog who responded by licking her hand and then settling

down on her lap. Kitrina smiled from the other end of the seat as another woman, carrying an empty basket, approached.

‘Fran! I’m so glad you are here! Can you have the boys?’ Two very well behaved white West Highland Terriers stood with their tails wagging. The large woman smiled and picked out two more biscuits from her bag.

‘I’ll be back d’rectly,’ said the second woman, handing over the leads, and off she went towards Morrison’s.

Ten or so minutes passed and the large woman leaned towards Kitrina, catching her eye. ‘M’luv,’ she said in a thick Cornish accent that reminded Kitrina of a pirate, ‘I wonder if you can do me a favour?’ She paused, taking her eyes off Kitrina and turning them towards a small building behind Kitrina the other side of the road with a sign saying *Public Toilets*. ‘I need to pop over – would you look after the dogs and m’bags? I’ll only be a minute.’

‘Of course,’ Kitrina said, becoming a willing accomplice or participant in the daily routines, and compliantly sliding down the bench nearer the shopping. She felt a little conspicuous with the large woman’s two full bags of shopping on one side of her and the woman in black’s Yorkshire Terrier sitting on the bench, and the woman with the empty baskets’ two white West Highland Terriers sitting quietly at her feet. And the thought did cross her mind: *what if no one comes back?* The West Highland Terriers didn’t seem at all concerned. Neither did the Yorkshire Terrier who seemed sure Kitrina must have something edible in her pocket and began burrowing. As the large woman disappeared into the public conveniences, a boarder collie arrived and did what boarder collies do, a good amount of sniffing, looking, panting, and walking in circles around the other dogs, but they all seemed to be friends.

The boarder collie’s owner looked at Kitrina and asked, ‘Isn’t that Winston and Churchill?’ Jess was about to say ‘I haven’t a clue’ when another woman arrived with a

wheelie shopper, and took the collie's lead and sat down at the other end of the bench, releasing the collie owner who promptly left too.

In amongst all this David arrived to hear the seated woman tell the boarder collie to 'Sit!' Which is what David decided he should do too. The woman laughed at David squeezing himself on to the seat between bursting bags of shopping, Kitrina, and the Yorkshire Terrier and the woman holding the collie. 'I meant the dog!' she said laughing and nudging him in a friendly way. David smiled and stroked the collie's head then turned to Kitrina.

'Glad you're having a nice rest while I've been doing all the work! Shall we go?' he said.

'I can't go anywhere yet,' she replied, ignoring his barbed remark. 'I've got to wait until...' Kitrina leaned forward to make eye contact with the woman the other side of David, now looking after the collie. 'Excuse me? Do you know that woman's name?' she asked, pointing towards the large woman whose carrier bags sat beside her who was now exiting the toilets.

'Oh, that'd be Sandra,' the wheelie-shopper woman said. As Sandra arrived back, so too did the woman with the black coat, shoes, handbag and stick, who took possession of the Yorkshire Terrier which released Sandra from looking after *him* but not the two West Highland Terriers.

The collie, who by now had been passed over to the woman with the wheelie-shopper, was then handed on to the woman in black who took her place on the seat. 'I'll just be a minute,' wheelie-shopper woman said, passing the collie's lead over before walking off to Morrison's as the large woman walked off with the Yorkshire terrier. David smiled, watching women and dogs appear and disappear all over the place. He didn't have a clue what was going on.

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Reflecting on *Morrison's* reveals a number of qualities or characteristics of engagement. There is a clear sense of two researchers 'being there' (see Wolcott, 2002) in an *embodied* fashion at a particular place, a particular time, and with these particular people. They are physically, mentally and emotionally present (see Leggo, 2011). They listen, watch, notice, and attend to the events unfolding around them – events which are not planned by them, or even expected. They *witness* and begin to *participate in* the events of everyday life as they unfold. There is a sense of the researchers not knowing (see Gergen & Jones, 2012): they remain open and responsive to events, willing to *relinquish control* (see Chadwick, 2001). Chance and synchronicity seem to affect what happens (including what the researchers say and do) more than any pre-existing plan, procedure or protocol. It is not the researchers who decide the course of the events the story portrays. Instead what happens seems to arise as a consequence of dialogue, interaction and negotiation between the different characters (see Clough, 2002). As events unfold, there is a growing sense of *interdependent* action between the characters as the researchers show a willingness to *enter into relationship* with others (see Gergen & Gergen, 2012). Several events portray *reciprocity* between the characters, researchers included (see Freeman, 2014). This is evident in small acts of generosity peppered through the story. By the end of the story, it has become apparent that *it* (the research) has started before *we* (the researchers) were aware we had started work.

Wolcott (2002) notes how, 'Fieldwork consists of more than collecting data, something that catapults it beyond simply being there. And whatever constitutes that elusive "more" makes all the difference' (p. 210). We share Wolcott's view and *Morrison's* is an effort to portray an example of this 'more.' While several qualities are evident, the defining characteristic for us is an *interdependent engagement with people and place* (where people are the participants and place is the research setting or context). In this kind of engagement,

researchers are drawn into day-to-day life not only *with* but also *for* participants. They are in reciprocal relationship with *these* people in *this* place. Participant/s and researcher/s each (at different times) help, guide, learn from or inform each other – through actions as well as words. We find engagement of this kind to be a desirable – perhaps even necessary – aspect of our arts-based practice.

During this wave of engagement, as important as it undoubtedly is to listen, there is more to it than this. It is not just the words captured by our digital recorders that tell the tale. Alongside documenting what people say, our priority during fieldwork for arts-based research is to become a ‘sensing body’ – recognising that our bodies can support and hold the kinds of insights that words cannot readily communicate or encapsulate. We aspire to become a container for the other’s story (Josselson, 2008). Trauma research (e.g., van der Kolk, 2014) has shown how our bodies (in particular the nervous system) ‘remember’ certain experiences (such as psychological trauma) that the conscious mind does not recall. ‘Memories’ of these experiences, while remaining unconscious or subconscious, can be held within the body until they can expressed or communicated in a number of ways (see Etherington, 2003). If experiences of trauma can be remembered and later communicated, might this be possible for other less challenging experiences? More obvious examples of this kind of embodied sensory process include absorbing expressions, gestures and interpersonal behaviours. More subtle examples might include an implicit understanding of something intangible, a personal connection with an aspect of an individual’s history, or becoming aware of alienation within a particular environment. All recognise ‘the body as a site for knowledge’ (Pelias, 2008, p. 186). It is to these memories – embedded within our bodies (see Spry, 2011) – that we find ourselves drawing upon as a project progresses.

‘Honey used to creep into my bedroom,’ David said, halfway through a conversation about dogs and field notes. ‘I remember one night I woke up and couldn’t feel my legs. I couldn’t move them. I was terrified! Then I realised it was her – she’d climbed onto my bed and fallen asleep lying on my legs!’

‘She sounds a lovely dog,’ Kitrina said laughing. ‘I wish we had been allowed a dog.’

‘She was a rescue dog,’ David said carrying on, ‘and she was a real gannet, so funny, she’d eat anything she could get. She’d even try to peel chewing gum off the pavement with her teeth if you’d let her! We used to let her lick the empty peanut butter jars, it was so funny to watch, she’d totally clean out every last bit with her tongue.’

David finished his story and they finished chatting about themes. Then, after the phone call, David returned to their thematic analysis, looking again at the words spoken by Nell and how her story fitted with the themes or challenged what they thought they showed. Then he looked through all the extracts that related to one of their themes and chose a couple of extracts as illustrations. Then he went on to write a little more about what they’d learned. But when he read back what he’d written he wasn’t pleased. In fact, it was somehow devoid of the life he’d experienced while he was talking with the women – in their homes, the coffee shops, standing in a queue at the post office. *Where was the energy? The humour? The spirit of resistance?* he asked himself. And where was *the feeling?* He’d lost it. He thought back to the phone conversation a few moments earlier and the spirit of what he felt when he’d talked about his dog, Honey, and how she would clean the peanut butter pot and how it made him *feel* – laughter, connection, love, joy. In a similar way, when he looked at what he’d written about the women and their lives, friendships, dogs, activity, he’d somehow lost something he’d known and felt when talking to the women in Cornwall.

Blaming this failure on tiredness, he stopped work for the day, had dinner, watched a movie, and then aimlessly picked up his guitar. He’d re-tuned it the day before and now all he had to do was bar a fret with one finger and a harmonious chord would ring. He fingerpicked

the strings, then let his hands skip down the neck to pick higher notes. It brought a feeling of lightness and connection. He suddenly saw, in his head, Honey bounding towards him at full speed and unable to stop, bowling him over. His body remembered the feeling of her softness, her bulk, her muscles in tension. His hand swept down to the other end of the guitar neck where he plucked other chords, and other scenes emerged from his body, fragments.

He thought back to Nell again and her talking about her ‘well-meaning’ friends who wanted her to get married again after she’d lost her husband, not wanting her to live out in the country alone, nor paint her ceiling, nor, in fact, do anything outside the narrow ‘norm’ expected of an 83-year-old. He suddenly had the urge to write so, putting the guitar down, he scribbled a few lines, driven by emotional fragments still in his head, the music still ringing, forming a stream of awareness, bubbling, dancing over rocks, a different telling about her life than the one he wrote earlier. He was aware too that they both shared this sense of people wanting to get them ‘married off’ – her because she’d lost her husband and him because parents like their kids to ‘settle down’ and ‘start a family’. As Nell had said: *‘First they try to get you remarried,’* she’d told them. *‘When they realise you don’t want that they start on...’* David stopped. What had she said? He looked at his notes: *‘Poor old soul up there on her own! But I like being on my own, I don’t want company for company’s sake!’* He turned the page of his notebook and selected words and phrases for an emerging poem:

*First they try to get you remarried*

*When they realise you don’t want that*

*they start on ‘Poor old soul up there on her own’*

*But I like being on my own*

*There’s always a dog*

*Dogs always turn up when you need them*

David smiled, lay back and closed his eyes, allowing his arm to loll off the sofa. His hand relaxed.

Honey's nose nuzzled into the open hand. It was damp, rubbery and had a slightly rough texture. Next it was her tongue, with millions of soft micro bumps, warm, licking his hand, finding the gaps between his fingers, tracing their edges. It tickled, made him laugh. He stroked her head, soft, warm, and she put her head in his lap. Did they both feel secure? Was this love? Was it unconditional acceptance? Why was this moment so peaceful? So uneventful? Was it more than company? David looked down at Honey and, as he did, her eyebrows lifted and she turned her eyes towards his. Was it trust he saw in her eyes? What was she not telling him in those big dark windows? She licked her mouth and yawned revealing a dark pink flash of colour and white sharp teeth. Then she swallowed and put her head down again in the warm spot she'd created on his lap.

David woke from his dream, aware suddenly of how many of the women had talked about *not being touched anymore*, because when you are old, they said, no one wants to touch you, caress, hold you. Feeling heavy and saddened by this thought, he picked up his guitar again...

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*Honey* portrays a researcher trying to make sense of interview data, field notes, memories and personal responses. We witness him frustrated, disappointed or disheartened by his inability to communicate important matters through scientific or realist forms of analysis and representation. He experiences the limitations of these ways of knowing and communicating (see Eisner, 2008). We see him become distracted from his thematic analysis, and watch his process shift away from the kinds of analytical procedures typically described in qualitative research methods texts. He begins to relinquish control of his thoughts, which

increasingly meander freely, following unknown currents, before – sometimes – making a return (see Janesick, 2015). Rather than consciously directing and maintaining his attention on a particular analytical task or outcome, he instead indulges subconscious processes through dreams and daydreams (see Cole & Knowles, 2008). His thoughts slip toward what seem to be unrelated memories of places, happenings, people, even his old dog (see Neilsen, 2008). He remembers and imagines. He *feels* these imaginings and memories in physical, emotional, and sensual ways (see Pelias, 2004). There is a connection to other beings, even perhaps a blurring of self and other. He feels empathy (see Barone & Eisner, 2012). Rather than thinking or talking, he plays and explores more through *doing* (see Gergen & Jones, 2012), engaging in a variety of aesthetic acts, moving between genres as particular fragments (of experience, from fieldwork, an interview) come to mind. He gives himself permission to express, explore and evoke – through words, through music – half-formed insights, observations and responses.

These diverse qualities are all apparent as the researcher attempts to make sense of ‘the data,’ to understand what he has witnessed and experienced. For us though, the defining characteristic is serious engagement with *aesthetic* processes. Taking the Greek definition of *aisthētikós* (pertaining to sense perception, perceptible, sensitive), aesthetic inquiry privileges ‘felt sense’ (somatic, pre-linguistic, sensory experience) over logical, rational, scientific ways of knowing (Dewey, 1989 [1934], cited in Siegesmund, 2013). This might be through writing a song following the stimulus of an interview with a particular participant, imaging a fictional story, or composing a poem on the basis of field notes generated through participant observation. These kinds of creative act are ways of understanding (making sense of) lived experience characterised by *aesthetic engagement with sense making processes*.

Through our arts-based projects we have experimented with alternative ways of understanding participants, their experiences, and the research questions. Invariably, these departures led us into aesthetic territory where we utilised skills and sensibilities either honed

in other areas of life (such as songwriting) or that we improvised (such as poetic representations) as we tried to communicate something that was missing from our scientific/realist analyses. We didn't know if what we were doing would lead anywhere, but it felt instinctively right to try. Over time, others' responses have convinced us that something important is lost when we exclude these ways of working.

Aesthetic processes, like those portrayed in *Honey*, require a researcher-artist to attend to multiple levels of sensory experience. In Pelias and Stephenson Shaffer's (2007) words, they lead to language that is, 'sensuous, figurative, rhythmic, and reflexive' (p. 18). For these authors:

Aesthetic acts heighten (our) senses, stir (our) emotions, and question (our) knowledge. To be in the presence of the aesthetic is to be transported – carried into another world. One's sense of self is paradoxically both suspended and enlivened. One surrenders oneself in order to be captivated. (p. 19)

Similarly, Jørgensen (2013) argued that aesthetic experience supports a free and harmonious interplay between understanding and imagination. This mirrors our experience: aesthetic processes allow the inclusion of imagination in ways that expand, enrich and extend our findings. Sometimes, this might allow us to access insights that originate in our felt bodies. Other times, it might enable us to become conscious of what we already knew, but were not aware of knowing. And at other times, it brings home to us the emotional gravity of a particular event. Through working aesthetically (whether it be creating poems, stories, artworks, songs, films or scripts), the wisdom of the body, mind and soul can, it seems, be awakened and revealed. These forms of understanding – or ways of knowing – are rendered absent if we *only* employ traditional forms of analysis (such as a thematic analysis).

In the decade that had passed since they'd first performed a research based song they'd both grown somewhat accustomed to receiving polarised responses. There would often be people in the audience who wanted to thank them, almost every time they performed there was warm enthusiastic applause, and often people came forward who wanted to give some explanation for an emotional outpouring or reaction. But then, at the other end of the spectrum, they felt they needed to be ready to have someone attempt to pull the rug sharply from beneath their feet. Not that it happened that often, but they needed to be aware that in academic environments it wasn't unusual for a disinterested or distanced colleague or student to state that 'stats' were better and poetic representations and songs shouldn't have a place in their lectures.

David wasn't thinking about these responses as he picked up the guitar, these thoughts had become sedimentary layers of his history and were laid into his consciousness. He paused to allow all these truths to wash over, and then closed his eyes to remove the audience, the room, the comings and goings of the day and began to strum the first few bars of the song.

The rhythm was slow and that in itself eased the discomfort he felt at being 'on show.' The guitar, too, was a friend on whose support he had depended on for many years. As the chords gave way to the first line – and he sang, 'On the Blue Funnel Line I went to sea' – he was plunged into his first meeting with Oll, a 70 year-old man who lived in an inner city council housing scheme. A man who'd also lived on the streets, been homeless, travelled the world, and lost contact with his children. A man who was born in Liverpool and joined a cargo shipping line when he was 16 years-of-age – 'dossed around' as he called it. Now his travels were restricted to a small patch of Bristol, the local 'watering holes,' and a can of beer in front of the telly.

As he opened his eyes and began to notice the audience one of the faces came into focus. It was Angie, a woman who'd seen him perform two or three times in the past at this

annual conference. Now she sat a mere ten feet from where he was performing. Earlier in the day as she registered she'd asked: 'Are you performing again this year?' After he'd said, 'yes,' her reply was: 'Oh good! I'll bring tissues!'.

She wasn't the only one to make this kind of comment. David didn't think Angie, or any of the others, could understand just how difficult it is to watch someone begin to weep, right in front of you, when you are performing. What made it OK was how often someone like Angie would come up after the performance was over and try to put into words what their tears meant. Most times, it wasn't possible – words were not enough. So he just had to accept their thanks and assurances that although the connections were painful, there was something good in it – he hadn't done anything wrong.

As he tried, too, to let go of the tissues comments, he also tried not to be drawn back to the comments of two sailors from the same shipping line, who had recently found the song on YouTube, and left their responses to the song. Paul, the first, had written: 'A sad story but I would imagine there are probably others who followed a similar track at that time.' Tony reflected on 'their' company going out of business and wrote: 'It was just the greedy ship owners that done it.'

His eyes moved from Angie to other members of the audience, some familiar and some unknown, and there was no way he could tell how *these* people would respond. No way to quell his concerns, again, about 'rightness,' 'representation,' no way to ease the tensions until the performance was over and the audience spoke. Until then, all he had to go on were the foot taps, the head nods, and the beaming smile on one woman's face...

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Inherent in *Tissues* is the sense of the performer stepping outside normative ways of presenting, communicating – even behaving – at an academic social science conference. He

is about to *sing* the research. He comes across as doubtful, uncertain. He is fearful even of the impending act of performance – both in terms of possible negative audience responses (to a researcher who sings research findings), but also the potential power of the song to lead audience members towards unexpected emotional reactions. He might be seen as vulnerable amidst this uncertainty (see Saldaña, 2011), cautious about evoking experiences that might be ‘too hot to handle’ for some or, alternatively, be dismissed as irrelevant or ridiculed by others. Yet underneath all this there also lies a sense of, through the song, tapping in to shared stories and experiences (see Douglas, 2012). The sound of the music, before the words begin, evokes in him a sense of the participant who’s life story inspired the song. Perhaps this personal story moves from private, singular, secret to be understood as shared, public, communal through expression in artistic form (see Spry, 2011). We might even surmise that emotional connection – a feeling of community in this particular place and time – arises between artist-performer and (some) audience members (see Pelias & Stephenson Shaffer, 2007). Perhaps, in this story, connection is built on shared experience of pain. Frank (1995) observes how, “Even in postmodern times, even among the various selves that each of us is, a bedrock of the really real remains. Its name is often pain” (p. 72). And what does this artist-performer turn towards to ‘get through’ – negotiate – this charged moment? It is the act of doing – in this case, playing the guitar and singing, immersing himself in the embodied experience of sound – that appears to provide the foothold. In short, a vulnerable artist-performer is able to do what he does, ultimately, through faith in the song itself (see Carless, 2017).

Our arts-based projects have allowed us to explore alternative ways of engaging with audiences of our research. These have included film (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2014), poetry (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2015b), song (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2015a), audio CD (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2005) and live performance (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2015). Perhaps because these approaches are still unusual in psychology, we feel a need to explore audience responses. Soon after creation, we usually seek a response to what we’ve produced, and the

first audience is each other. Our next step is typically to give small-scale performances to trusted confidantes to stimulate dialogue and gain feedback. Sometimes, these dialogues lead to changes in the piece, sometimes they lead to changes in *us*. Hopefully, this sharing gives us the confidence we need to perform or present our work – which often means revealing our vulnerable, emotional selves – in front of public and academic audiences. All of these stages are defined by a reciprocal dynamic that we distil to *emotional engagement with – and of – audiences*.

As the story *Tissues* portrays, emotional engagement is common both for ourselves as researchers, but also for audience members. Through subsequent research (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2010, 2011), we have interrogated audience responses to our arts-based work.

Emotional engagement is a recurring hallmark. One person, for example, wrote how:

‘Through song you feel the person behind the words ... the song about climbing the stairs, I just began to feel what that must feel like’ (2010, p. 380). Another wrote: ‘Some poems struck me because they spoke about situations my own grandparents may be in and so it was moving to hear such personal accounts and also enlightening. Somehow, the point about bringing useful things, like a pint of milk, made sense to me’ (p. 378).

Responses such as these are important for us because they demonstrate the work has successfully engaged audiences with the research and/or the lives of those who inhabit its stories. However, they also demonstrate a further quality. Barone and Eisner (2012) write that, ‘Only the compositions of artists and arts based researchers can redirect conversations about social phenomena by enabling others to *vicariously re-experience the world*’ (p. 20). Here, audiences are not only *witnessing* others’ experiences, but they are potentially *having* a related experience themselves. While other forms of representation can allow readers/audiences to consider or reflect on emotions, supporting audiences to actually *feel* emotions is, we suggest, unique to arts-based/performative methodologies. As Barone and Eisner (2012) observe, vicarious experience can help audiences interrogate more fully the

human condition, opening appreciation of alternative values and meanings across a range of social and psychological issues.

### Conclusion

Faith, it has been said, 'is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1). Good psychology research, in many ways, provides evidence of 'things not seen.' But these illusive aspects of humanity need to be channeled or shaped into more concrete, particular forms in order to prick the wider consciousness and provoke change. If we, as a community of scholars, are committed to creating a world that is more caring, aware, fair and tolerant, then it seems prudent for us to incorporate into our research practices *any* methods that provoke and expand the potential for understanding things that are, too often, not seen. We have found that taking seriously the qualities of our engagement across three waves of our arts-based projects (interdependent engagement with people and place, aesthetic engagement with sense making processes, emotional engagement with – and of – audiences) has increased the chances of that which is resistant to being revealed becoming visible through each research study.

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<sup>i</sup> Lyrics © D. Carless 2005. See Douglas K and Carless D 2017, 'We Crossed The Tamar' accessed 2 August 2017 from [https://youtu.be/R4EGRN\\_bIw8](https://youtu.be/R4EGRN_bIw8)