

Using life histories with sound postcards to investigate a music programme for social reconstruction in Colombia

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This article outlines the development of an appropriate research approach, including methods from diverse disciplines, for researching the Colombian state-funded social music programme Music for Reconciliation (Música para la Reconciliación). After outlining the Colombian context and the literature, a pilot with ten participants is discussed. Findings show the contributions of sound postcards as part of life histories for capturing the experiences of displaced people in a country recovering from war. Their evocative capacity enriched the interviewees' narrative, illustrating diverse sonorous landscapes throughout their lives that evidenced the changes generated by both the violence and programme participation. The conclusions offer suggestions for readers based in the arts, health, social sciences and beyond, interested in the uses of music and music education for other-than-musical purposes.

Introduction: The Colombian context

For more than 60 years, Colombia has been suffering an armed conflict with an increasing number of agents and interests; together these have led to a long-standing scenario of violence, in which civil society has been most affected¹. In the last twenty years, 90% of victims have been mostly children, youth and women from peasant, indigenous and Afro-descendant groups (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). There are various actors involved in the Colombian armed conflict, including those with political interests (guerrilla groups) and those with economic interests (paramilitaries and drug-traffickers). All these actors seek territorial control by means of armed violence and have been perpetrators of grave violations of the human rights of the civilian population (Rincón & Rodríguez, 2015; Sánchez, 2009; Uprimny, 2001).

It is in this context that a number of state-funded social music programmes in Colombia can be found. They were introduced in 1991 at the initiative of the national government, and are run by the Batuta National Foundation (*Fundación Nacional Batuta*). The programmes aim to attend to children and young people in poverty, or who have been victims of the armed conflict. Their underpinnings are based on the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela (*El Sistema*), where musical and social objectives are combined (Booth, 2009; Creech et al., 2014; Uy, 2012; Welch et al., 2014). The Batuta National Foundation is an organisation that works with public and private funding. The foundation has developed a solid administrative and academic structure in order to run 44 symphony orchestras, 187 choirs and 644 music initiation ensembles, reaching about

36,000 beneficiaries (children and youth), 28,780 (65%) of whom have been victims of the armed conflict (Fundación Nacional Batuta, 2015).

This article is aimed at discussing the development of an appropriate research approach, including methods from diverse disciplinary traditions, for researching Batuta National Foundation's social music programme Music for Reconciliation (*Música para la Reconciliación*). In line with disclosing the nature of research collaborations advocated elsewhere (Odena, 2004) this paper is part of the doctorate by the first author, mentored and supervised by the second and third authors respectively². Music for Reconciliation is financed in its entirety through public resources disbursed as a result of Law 1448 of 2011, or the Victims' and Land Restitution Law, which defines the measure of assistance and integral reparation for the victims of the internal armed conflict in Colombia since 1985. The programme applies an integral model of musical-psychosocial attention both to individuals and to groups and includes the participation of a wide range of the population (children, young people, parents/guardians and adults). As observed in an earlier study of the programme's foundations, the psychosocial approach and the focus on children and parents/guardians affected by armed conflict is new to this kind of programme compared with *El Sistema* (Rodríguez, 2013a). The following three sections consider the literature on social music programs, the development of an appropriate methodology for studying them, with examples of original data from a pilot investigation in Bogotá, and some findings on the relevance of the methods to collect the data required. The article concludes by discussing the usefulness of such methods for similar research in music and music education programmes for social reconstruction.

Literature review

The study of music programmes for reconciliation draws on a number of areas including peace studies (Cabedo, 2015), social psychology and inter-group theory (Pettigrew, 1998), community music and sonic hospitality (Phelan, 2012), and music education as a tool for inclusion (Odena, 2014; 2016; 2018). Specifically, some scholars in these fields explore ways to help create a positive understanding of peace that goes beyond a ceasefire, or agreements being signed by the parties to an armed conflict. In this respect, Lederach (1997) and Smith (2009) observe that in order for peace to be sustainable, as well as focusing on structural questions, it is necessary to develop processes centred on social restoration and reconstruction, on aspects of relationships which support reconciliation, because 'without social bonds that extend beyond the familial sphere, and which have greater binding power than those generated by the mutual recognition of persons under law, the social cohesion of highly individuated, modern societies is at risk' (Smith, 2009, p. 56).

In this sense, reconstructing the 'social fabric' of the person's life consists of recreating the internal dynamic of communities that have been victims of armed conflict. In particular, the community members' relationships, re-organising their roles and renewing their commitment towards community-building, both for pleasure and for developing alternative ways of resolving collective problems (Galindo, 2010). We refer to 'social fabric' of the person's life as a metaphor of how well community members or 'threads' interact with each other, thus weaving the threads together: the more positively the members interact with each other the stronger the fabric is. When referring to 'the capacity to recover', we

imply all processes that generate social cohesion, confidence and norms that allow people to act in a collective fashion (Scribner & Herzer, 2011). Beristain (2011) suggests that the aim of reconstructing the social fabric of the person's life should be to reactivate everyday dynamics, as well as promoting the presence of positive community rituals and restoring social organisations destroyed by the conflict.

As different studies have suggested, the collective musical spaces developed in communities that have been subject to violence, reveal characteristics that support individuals and communities in their recovery (Cabedo, 2015; Bergh & Sloboda, 2010). Thus, these spaces can engender a series of experiences giving new meaning to spaces and previous situations, and thereby produce the conditions to begin to connect with others again, as exemplified in investigations in Northern Ireland (Pruitt, 2011) and Timor Leste (Siapno, 2013). Collective musical spaces promote a community approach (Pérez-Sales, 2004) and offer a good way of dealing with the process of psychosocial support that people need, which do not necessarily have to focus on the trauma.

Additionally, collective musical programmes allow for the emergence of an environment favourable to developing community skills, which are important in peacebuilding (Grant, 2010; Urbain, 2008). Indeed, regular collective musical practice destabilises identities related to the conflict, introducing an alternative interpretation to one's own identity and that of others, thereby generating a favourable way of building confidence and solidarity, which itself permits friendships beyond those musical spaces (Pruitt, 2011). Over time, a new, shared group identity is created (Odena, 2010; 2013).

Spaces for collective musical programmes developed with victims of violence provide support for communities both during and after conflict. Based on active expression through creation and dialogue, the programmes create spaces to resist destruction during the conflict. Various experiences discussed in the literature show that these settings facilitate the preservation of human qualities in both individual and collective victim populations; they allow hope to prevail, the ability to respond to disaster, help avoid emotional paralysis, and enable victims to have some control over their own lives even in the midst of violence (Siapno, 2013; Zelizer, 2003).

In the aftermath of conflict, collective music programs mitigate psychological trauma from violence and, through reconfiguring both personal and group identity, reconstruct social ties (Robertson, 2010; Pruitt, 2011). Such programmes generate non-artificial meeting places for activities related to music and are naturally attractive, enhancing motivation and genuine interest. The literature also explains that community arts can be an efficient tool in bringing communities affected by the conflict closer together, creating within them a bridge between the present, past, and future. In this sense DeNora (2000) outlines that collective musical spaces favour evocation, that is, the memory of peaceful past experiences, from which emanates the possibility of a peaceful future based on the evidence of memory.

Developing an appropriate methodology

The main study of the Music for Reconciliation programme comprised four music centres in four cities in Colombia: Bogotá (pilot), Cali, Tierralta and Florencia. Before entering into the core data collection, a number of methods and research strategies were piloted

in Bogotá. These are discussed below, with an indication of how they helped address the research objectives. The main research objectives of the study included:

- To identify the contributions of the programme, where implemented, in rebuilding the social fabric in the lives of victims affected by the armed conflict.
- To generate a theoretical framework for the investigation of collective musical programmes aimed at contributing to the reconstruction of the social fabric of the person's life, as part of peace-building processes.

From an ethical viewpoint, in planning the study we took into account two elements: developing research with children (Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007) and studying children who have lived through war (Bello & Chaparro, 2011). With respect to the inclusion of children, Greig et al. (2007) observe qualitative approaches are particularly suitable, explaining that these types of methods are closer to the children's daily lives. Euwema et al. (2008) claim that long term effects of lived violence on children as well as how they are addressed in different cultures have not been well researched. These authors explain that the absence of specific tools to assess harm has generated a lack of knowledge in this area. According to Bello and Chaparro (2011), three main aspects characterise the experience undergone by Colombian children and young people who are victims of conflict: they have seen and experienced war, have been socialised to survive war, and have suffered sudden and meaningful losses. Ethical considerations in relation to the objectives, sampling and methods were informed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University Jaume I of Castellón, Spain.

As per these recommendations, the methodological approach chosen for this research focussed on life histories (e.g. Goodson, 2001) that incorporate sound postcards for individual interviews (Cambrón, 2011). To generate comparable data, half of the interviewees belonged to the programme, and the other half had similar conflict experiences but did not belong to the programme. A focus group with children in the programme and, to a lesser extent, participant observation and field notes were also utilised in the pilot, all of them understood through an interpretive paradigm (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Greig et al., 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Life history was selected as the principal methodology for the research, given the need to identify changes in the social fabric of the interviewees' lives. This required coming to an appreciation of the everyday routines of participants, their communal spaces, and the institutions on which they had counted all their lives for their development, and finding out if participating in the programme had facilitated the reconstruction of this fabric. Life history methodology, understood as a pedagogical space where mutual encounters and exchanges can take place, generates a dynamic that can be transformative (Goodson, 2011). The interviewee selection criteria for both participating and non-participating children and their relatives were:

- Individuals belonging to a community that was a victim of armed conflict,
- Beneficiaries of the Music for Reconciliation Programme for a year or more (this criterion applied only to half of the interviewees),
- More than ten years old,
- Had the time to take part and gave consent to the use of data for academic purposes.

Regarding the number of participants, Goodson (2011) suggests that for this type of approach a small sample should be chosen and studied in-depth. Thus, four life histories were collected for the pilot investigation: one child and an adult relative who participated in the programme and one child and an adult relative who did not. Coincidentally, both relatives with such availability were mothers. The fieldwork was carried out in a music centre where the programme had been in progress for three years. Access was obtained through the Batuta National Foundation who suggested the centre. Psychosocial support professionals in the centre suggested the families to interview, and the researcher's daily work was coordinated with them. Access and fieldwork were assisted by the previous involvement in Colombian music programmes by the first author, as a facilitator for over four years and as a researcher in a number of previous projects (Rodríguez, 2010; 2013b). Participants had the emotional stability required to undergo interviews, and in no cases did we work with individuals who were receiving psychological help for their experiences of armed conflict. Participants were met by the researcher at initial meetings aimed at gaining trust and obtaining informed consent.

The Music for Reconciliation Programme offered group singing led by trained music educators to children twice a week, in a safe venue in which they could meet other displaced people. Psychosocial support for parents was available monthly or bi-monthly, as required by users, and activities including all children and their relatives were offered at the end of the year. Regarding the frequency of interviews, Cornejo, Mendoza and Rojas (2008) emphasise that the narrator is more than just an informant. To Goodson (2011) the narrator is a teller and the researcher is a listener. The teller is being questioned about his/her history, and this generates a need for trust and the necessary time for this trust to develop, both with the listener and within the narrative itself. Therefore, during fieldwork we had three interviews, one each week, each interview lasting one hour or more, totalling 12 interviews (three for each of the four life histories). Interviews took place at three different moments, with the aim of identifying each of the following life phases: before the violent events, during the violent events, and at the current time. Table 1 below outlines the exploratory topics for the interviews over three life phases. Exploratory topics were developed taking into account previous investigations with displaced people in Colombia (Perea, 2014; Rodríguez, 2013b).

Only in the third interview were additional questions about their vision of and aspirations for the future included. As Barrett (2009, p.7) suggests, narrative methodology allows for 'interpretations of our past and our present worlds', and through narrative participants are able to speculate about their future.

We used a modified version of the 'sound postcard' method, originally developed by geographers and anthropologists in other contexts – that is, with adults and not victims of armed conflict (e.g. Cambrón, 2011). The technique rests on Cambrón's (2005) idea that sound can be a source of information. Cambrón further argues that all sound events are inseparable from the conditions in which they occur. Changes in normality can be recorded through memory and serve to introduce and evoke the contextual conditions of each moment in the lives of interviewees. Communicating directly with Cambrón, we clarified some aspects of the sound postcard technique (Cambrón, 2015) and decided to ask two questions to participants:

Table 1. *Topics for the three interviews over three life phases*

Life phases	Everyday life	Social and community environment
Before violent events (<i>First interview</i>)	- Family life - Personal relationships	- Collective activities - Beliefs, rituals
After violent events (<i>Second interview</i>)	- Friendship network - Life routines, studies, work - Celebrations - Free time - Welfare conditions (<i>First, second and third interview</i>)	- Social organisations - Conflict resolution strategies - Display of solidarity - Display of mutual trust (<i>First, second and third interview</i>)
Current time (<i>Third interview</i>)	Vision of and aspirations for the future (<i>Third interview</i>)	Vision of and aspirations for the future (<i>Third interview</i>)

1. *If you had to send one sound to someone you know who has never been to the place of research, what sound or sounds would you choose that would be representative of the space in question?*
2. *If you had the intention to send a postcard to someone you know, who has never been to your neighbourhood but, instead of choosing an image, had to choose a sound, what sound or sounds would you choose?*

The individual interviews with the mothers and children were transcribed verbatim, and each participant was invited to create sound postcards at various times during the interviews. We chose to use sound postcards to facilitate obtaining relevant memories and to allow the creation of sound histories of the subject's life to the present. In this way, the transformations in the lives of the interviewees would be revealed through changes in their sound environments.

A focus group was conducted in addition to individual interviews, to collect information from a group of four girls and two boys, who were part of the Batuta centre and responded to the centre's call for participation. The selection criteria were the same as for the children interviewed individually, and the gender balance of the group reflected the overall balance of the programme at the centre. In the focus group, questions were asked around issues such as membership, identity, and social trust (Bahamon, 2014). A sound postcard was also made with the group, and the data is discussed below. Pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

Reflecting on the data from the pilot: From postcards to 'photographs with sounds'

During the fieldwork in Bogota, it was found that the life history methodology enabled participants to run through sufficient information to find elements evidencing

their experience of social fabric: their interpersonal relationships, their belonging (or otherwise) to collective spaces, and their relationship with institutions came out in explanations, as well as changes to these aspects as a result of the impacts from armed conflict.

Regarding the Sound Postcard method, the interviews were enriched with this tool due to their evocative nature, enabling complex memory processes to play out. To explain this tool to participants, we gave it a name which was closer to their everyday experience, given that the word 'postcards' refers to illustrated cards which are sent as a memory of a journey. The practice of sending postcards is not common in Colombia and was unknown to participants, so we settled on the name 'photograph with sounds'.

The postcards enabled transformations in the context of each stage of the narrator's life to be recorded by way of a description of its particular sound environment. In this sense, changes in the 'density' of the social fabric of the interviewee's life to which the narrator belonged could be identified, for example with questions about the most important annual collective celebrations such as New Year. An initial sound postcard, corresponding to life in the countryside (prior to displacement) may illustrate, through its sounds, a community and family space where people gathered to celebrate around a meal, drinks and to the sound of fireworks; the same celebration in the wake of forced displacement became a very private moment in which only the nuclear family took part, with neither the participation of friends, nor music:

Prior to displacement [*soundscape_ Audio file 1*]:

Researcher: So the most important (celebration) is New Year . . . and if you were going to send a postcard with sounds about this, what would you send?

Camilo: The photo would be of burning the old year (rag doll) . . . fireworks and music at full volume . . . *Carranga* (a local peasant dance), only *carranga* . . . so that you could hear your feet on the ground while dancing, that's what I think it would be.

(Interview with Camilo, 17 years old, 4th April 2016)

Following the displacement:

Researcher: And the first Christmas or New Year, what do you remember?

Camilo: Well, the first year after getting here, I don't remember much, but the second one, I know that . . . we celebrated it with my stepdad and my mum at home and well, then I went out with my brother to let off fireworks.

(Interview with Camilo, 7th April 2016)

Equally, the sound postcard served to illustrate the reconstruction of the social fabric of the family, which in some cases occurred after some years in the new place of residence:

Researcher: How would you send or how would you take a sound photo of that day?

Lola: The sounds from that last New Year's Eve are music, people talking happily, sharing, and my husband cutting the meat up to give it to the neighbours, well to everyone (laughter).
(Interview with Lola, Peter's mother, 4th May 2016)

The sound postcard allowed us to observe changes in their context and enabled transformations in space to be seen. For instance, we observed a reduction of the presence of nature in everyday life and the encounter with urban spaces:

Prior to displacement [*soundscape_ Audio file 2*]:

Researcher: So, let's take an example: if you were going to send a postcard to Sebastián, such as a photo with sounds of your home town or region, what sounds would you send him?

Peter: The birds, cows, dogs, what else? My grandma cooking, the soup cooking, the lads playing football down in town. You can hear that nice and clear from the mountain.

Researcher: Ah, really?

Peter: The rain is also lovely, you just stop there, looking at it, concentrating, like a good boy, the firewood once it's alight, everything, it would be lovely.
(Interview with Peter, 16 years old, 8th April 2016)

Following the displacement:

Researcher: And once you reached Bogotá, what sounds?

Peter: The cars, they sound their horns so much that they'll end up damaging them; the movement of people, people moving around (Interview with Peter, 15th April 2016).

In addition, the sound postcard was used to investigate the relationship of interviewees with the music centre:

After the displacement:

Researcher: And if you take a photo with sounds from the first period with Batuta, what does it sound like when you arrived?

Peter: The laughter, the music, the Pink Panther, my teacher Ms Cony. The concerts, singing that.
(Interview with Peter, 15th April 2016).

We should also point out that, in accordance with Cambrón's (2005) original proposal, postcards were used more than once during the interview, and across the various interviews with the same person, in order to generate information from the realm of sounds which might enable a comparison to be made between the different densities of social fabric present throughout their story; and likewise, to identify their relationship with space and the activities which they were engaged in on a daily basis³.

In the focus group, a group sound card was also made where the participants were asked to name the sounds that they would put in a photograph of Batuta. Some of the sounds they named included: (1) children's voices, (2) a *cumbia* song (a typical Colombian rhythm), (3) piano sounds, (4) soft sounds – 'I could not tell what exactly' [a child's story], (5) joyful songs they had learned in Batuta, (6) classroom instruments, and (7) the song 'I live in a country', which is an emblem of the longing for peace in Colombia composed by a Batuta teacher. The focus groups allowed for greater exploration of the relationship with territory, with neighbours, the groups to which the participants belonged, and the way in which the musical programme had influenced those processes. The focus group conversation permitted a deeper exploration of the elements related to reconstructing the social fabric of the participants' lives that complemented the other techniques applied.

The interviews with programme participants differed from interviews with non-participants just around the questions about the activities in the Batuta music centre. However, we used the same interview parts, which allowed us to have information on the social fabric of the person's life in general. Overall, life histories and postcards in both interviews and focus group enabled the gathering of detailed descriptions of the children's Batuta-related experiences.

Final thoughts and implications

The above discussion outlines an innovative research methodology suitable for identifying changes to the social fabric in the lives of victims of violence, and for investigating the contribution of social musical spaces in reconstructing it.

We found that introducing sound postcards into the life histories became a very useful tool that enriched the chronological narrative description, allowing other types of data to appear by recalling sounds, which in turn, released the tension in the accounts. As some authors argue (Kim, 2014; Odena, 2001; Odena & Welch, 2009), sound contains evocative potential, which helped to recreate different phases in the interviewees' lives, even those parts they scarcely recalled and were engulfed in conflict-related memories.

By way of sound postcards, we sought to achieve a more agreeable way of narrating life histories, especially for children who had experienced the impacts of armed violence. However, it was necessary to apply clear ethical parameters, since the methodology could reinforce negative memories in the narrators, which was neither desirable nor justifiable under any circumstances. Therefore, it was not used to evoke painful memories in the interviewees.

According to Cambrón (2005), sound is indeed a source of information but, going beyond this, we can affirm that used in sound postcards as part of the life history methodology, it becomes an evocative vehicle. This means that it provides new elements for the narrators to interpret their own experiences, strengthening a transformative dynamic

that is produced through the conversations between interviewee and researcher (Goodson, 2011).

Combining life histories and sound postcards evidenced how the sounds around the interviewees changed, highlighting transformations in the density of the social fabric of their lives, how armed conflict weakened it, and how it was strengthened by participation in the music programme. Thus, these tools allowed us to explore the way in which social musical programmes can impact upon the promotion of emotional well-being, the development of bonds between people, and on social cohesion.

Looking forward, we propose that the field of sound ethnography, to which sound postcards belong (Cambrón, 2010), ought to be considered as a way of complementing or enriching traditional qualitative methods, in search of new types of sensory data – in this case, hearing –, which enable participants to better elicit and reflect on their experiences. The evocative capacity of sound postcards could be used by researchers and practitioners based in the arts, health, social science disciplines and beyond, with an interest in the uses of music and music education for other-than-musical purposes.

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Notes

- 1 At the time of writing (August 2017), after voters rejected a peace agreement between government and guerrillas, a revised agreement signed in November 2016 is being slowly implemented.
- 2 The first author collected all data and the paper was written collaboratively between all co-authors. The research design was developed during a three-month research visit by the first author to the University of Glasgow's Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change. During the visit, she also developed the literature review and contributed to music education for integration projects supported by the university Chancellor's Fund and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Odena et al., 2016a; 2016b).
- 3 A few months after data collection in Bogota, the postcards had the sounds added by a professional music technologist colleague of the first author. Sound postcards were displayed and played to participants at an open exhibition. Participants mentioned that, although it was not easy to create 'postcards' with sonorous and abstract material, they thought that postcards were beautiful and enabled them to evoke details of their lives that they had forgotten.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051717000298>

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