BRIDGING CULTURE THROUGH SONG: MUSICAL EXCHANGE IN TORTURE SURVIVOR BEFRIENDING

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ABSTRACT

Torture fundamentally disrupts survivors' ability to communicate and form trusting relationships, creating challenges for befriending programs. This study examines how song-sharing enhances relationships between torture survivors and volunteers through a collaborative workshop involving befriending pairs from Spirasi, Ireland's torture rehabilitation service, and Tess Leak and Sharon Whooley who created the 'Museum of Song' initiative in Ireland. Data from participant observation, song-sharing activities and participant feedback were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five interconnected themes were constructed: musical homelands as anchors to identity and place; temporal bridges connecting time and loss; gentle vulnerability enabling trust-building; collective witnessing providing shared emotional support, and cultural co-creation fostering mutual enrichment. Findings demonstrate that song sharing addresses the impact of torture through communication facilitation, identity preservation, grief processing, and cross-cultural connections. This study contributes to a new understanding of how creative musical practices can enhance psychosocial support frameworks in torture rehabilitation.

Keywords: *torture survivors, song sharing, befriending programmes, cultural identity, psychosocial rehabilitation, trusting relationships*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Song sharing offers a culturally sensitive, neurobiologically grounded approach to building trust and cultural understanding in torture survivor befriending relationships. Through a collaborative workshop between the Spirasi befriending programme and the 'Museum of Song' initiative, a cultural archive project created by Tess Leak and Sharon Whooley to address social isolation, this research demonstrates how musical exchange can address the specific communication and relationship challenges created by torture while facilitating identity preservation, grief processing and cultural co-creation.

The need for torture survivor rehabilitation in Ireland has increased dramatically in recent years where applications for international protection have risen from 3,673 in 2018 to 18,561 in 2024 (IPO 2025). Research shows that at least 35% of individuals seeking sanctuary are torture survivors (Abu Suhaiban, Grasser, & Javanbakht, 2019), suggesting that more than 6,500 torture survivors sought refuge in Ireland during 2024 alone - a significant cohort requiring specialised support within the country's population of approximately 5.2 million.

Recognising these complex rehabilitation needs, Spirasi, Ireland's National Centre for the Rehabilitation of Torture Survivors, has developed a multidisciplinary approach providing therapeutic interventions, psychosocial support, medico-legal reporting, language support, and a befriending programme that pairs torture survivors with trained volunteers (Hearns, 2023; Hoare, 2023). While these services work together to address survivors' multifaceted needs, this study focuses specifically on the befriending programme which facilitates meaningful connections between survivors and volunteers.

Torture survivors face distinct challenges in befriending relationships due to experiences of intentional systematic harm designed to break down psychological and physical integrity, specifically targeting survivors' abilities to communicate and form trusting relationships (Schippert, Grov, & Bjornnes, 2025). These neurobiologically-rooted impairments disrupt functional connectivity between brain regions that integrate external communication with internal emotional processes (Liddell et al., 2022), creating complications for conventional befriending approaches which typically rely on verbal exchange. While evidence-based interventions such as narrative exposure therapy and trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy show positive outcomes for refugees who have experienced trauma (Crumlish and O'Rourke, 2010), the impact of torture requires holistic approaches that address broader dimensions of healing, including identity preservation, grief processing, and the development of meaningful social connections (McFarlane & Kaplan, 2012; Hamid, et al., 2019).

In addition to demonstrating the effectiveness of befriending in fostering interpersonal bonds within this context, research has also identified opportunities to deepen these relationships through creative processes (Hoare, 2023; Tse, et al., 2021). Musical engagement offers a promising approach, with studies demonstrating its important role for refugees in developing coping strategies and establishing community relationships (Adcock, Boyles, Murphy, & Yogolelo, 2023). This study makes a distinctive

contribution by demonstrating how culturally sensitive song sharing can systematically overcome verbal communication barriers that limit conventional befriending approaches with torture survivors. It provides evidence-based insights for integrating creative musical practices into psychosocial support frameworks while enriching the Museum of Song archive with diverse musical traditions.

This article begins by examining Spirasi's rehabilitation framework and the specific communication and trust barriers facing torture survivors in befriending relationships, followed by an exploration of creative approaches and musical interventions. The collaborative workshop methodology is then presented, followed by five key themes that demonstrate the effectiveness of song sharing. The conclusion synthesises these findings to demonstrate three key theoretical advances in refugee studies, outlines specific practice and policy implications for torture rehabilitation services, and identifies future research directions for integrating creative musical practices into psychosocial support frameworks.

2.0 SPIRASI'S MULTIDISCIPLINARY REHABILITATION FRAMEWORK

Ireland's legal obligations to provide rehabilitation services were established under Article 14 of the UNCAT[1], which Ireland ratified in 2002 (IHREC, 2025), alongside EU legal frameworks that mandate responsive policies addressing torture survivors' distinct vulnerabilities (ICCL, 2010). In response to these legal obligations and increasing demands, Spirasi has developed its rehabilitation approach according to the global best practices established by the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT). The organisation's rehabilitation model adapts Herman's (1992) non-linear three-phase trauma recovery framework: safety and stabilisation (establishing physical and emotional security), remembrance and mourning (processing traumatic memories and associated grief), and reconnection (integrating trauma experiences while rebuilding meaningful relationships, purpose, and identity).

Operating primarily within the safety, stabilisation, and reconnection phases, the befriending programme establishes therapeutic partnerships that provide emotional support and social connections. The gradual development of these relationships is essential for enabling any deeper trauma work with a clinician that survivors may choose to pursue. However, these relationships face significant barriers because torture systematically targets survivors' communication and trust capacities.

3.0 COMMUNICATION AND TRUST BARRIERS AMONG TORTURE SURVIVORS

Befriending programs have demonstrated significant benefits for refugees, including improvements in quality of life (Askins, 2016), emotional support (Askins, 2014), and loneliness reduction (Vescan, Van Keer, Politi, Roblain, & Phalet, 2023). However, torture survivors encounter distinct challenges that complicate conventional befriending approaches. Their experiences of intentional and systematic harm are

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[1] United Nations Convention Against Torture

designed to break down psychological and physical integrity, specifically targeting victims' abilities to communicate and form trusting relationships (Schippert, Grov, & Bjornnes, 2025).

Liddell et al. (2022) found that torture exposure created specific neurobiological changes that affected the brain networks responsible for information processing and emotional regulation. These changes disrupt functional connectivity between brain regions that integrate external communication with internal emotional processes, impairing survivors' capacity for articulation and sustained verbal interactions. The cognitive demands of expressing oneself in a non-native language may compound these neurobiologically rooted challenges (Bailey, McIntyre, Arreola, & Venta, 2020). Additionally, cultural differences in communication styles, relationship expectations, and expressions of distress present further barriers that can complicate relationship development between survivors and volunteers from the host culture (Behnia, 2007).

4.0 CREATIVE APPROACHES TO TRAUMA RECOVERY: WORKING BEYOND VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Creative approaches provide alternative pathways for addressing these established communication barriers while building authentic relationships with survivors (Dutton, 2017). Research has predominantly focused on individual psychological interventions relying primarily on verbal communication, often within frameworks that may not fully address diverse cultural contexts and healing traditions of survivors (Patel & Williams, 2022). In response, there has been growing interest in creative practices that foster relationships through shared experiences.

Alves et al.'s (2021) meta-study on arts-based interventions for refugees identified three key mechanisms through which creative interventions consistently promote social inclusion: providing safe spaces for free expression that increase confidence; facilitating personal transformation as participants moved beyond one-dimensional refugee identities to express their full identities as artists, parents, and community members; and creating neutral, informal environments that promote dialogue between refugees and host communities.

In the context of torture rehabilitation, Hoare's (2023) collaborative portrait project with Spirasi befriending pairs demonstrated how visual arts could facilitate relationship building across cultures. Through mutual creative processes, participants deepened existing relationships while creating moments of shared joy and respite from daily challenges. The act of seeing and being seen through collaborative art-making created profound connections that transcended verbal limitations, establishing the foundations for understanding how creative approaches can address torture's specific impact on interpersonal capacities.

5.0 MUSIC AS THERAPEUTIC MEDIUM: EVIDENCE AND MECHANISMS

Among creative approaches, music demonstrates particular effectiveness for refugee populations through its capacity to address both individual therapeutic needs and community integration simultaneously. Music programmes with refugees show consistent benefits across three key domains:

Cultural preservation and community building

Cultural identity maintenance through music is evident in Syrian refugees' use of traditional 'dabke' dancing to maintain cultural identity and build community solidarity in Greek refugee camps (Christidis, 2016). Similarly, collaborative music-making programmes such as the 'Oasis World Choir' in Wales demonstrate how musical participation enhances communication and community integration between refugees and local residents through weekly collaborative sessions (Vougioukalou, Dow, Bradshaw, & Pallant, 2019). These programmes show that musical engagement preserves cultural heritage whilst facilitating integration into host communities.

Individual therapeutic benefits

The capacity of music to address trauma-related symptoms is documented across clinical and community settings. Freedom from Torture's UK's music therapy initiative demonstrates direct therapeutic impact, with participants reporting feeling 'calmer and safer' after sessions (Sijercic, 2024). This aligns with broader research showing the effectiveness of music in providing psychological distance that enables engagement with difficult emotional material whilst maintaining emotional safety (Kölbl, 2021).

Broader well-being impacts

Multi-context programmes demonstrate music's scalability across diverse settings and populations. Music Action International's 'Harmonise' programme, operating across multiple countries, documented strong positive impacts on participant well-being (Fort, 2023), showing that musical interventions can be effectively adapted to different cultural and geographical contexts whilst maintaining therapeutic benefits,

These diverse contexts demonstrate music's effectiveness across both therapeutic and community integration frameworks. Song sharing offers a particularly accessible approach for bridging cultural and linguistic divides in befriending relationships through the reciprocal exchange of musical traditions, creating opportunities for cultural dialogue and mutual understanding. While lyrics may be shared in original languages or through translation, Laukka et al. (2016) found that listeners could recognise emotions in music from unfamiliar cultures, demonstrating that musical emotion transcends cultural boundaries.

Research demonstrates that informal, dyadic musical activities (such as sharing music, singing together casually and talking about music) are most effective for relationship building, whilst structured musical activities can have negative effects on relationship quality (Harwood and Wallace, 2022). This supports song-sharing as an optimal approach, emphasising personal, informal exchange that builds connections rather than formal performance contexts that may create anxiety.

6.0 NEUROBIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The neurochemical foundations of making and listening to music help explain their effectiveness in building relationships, particularly relevant for torture survivors whose capacity for trust has been systematically damaged. Good and Russo (2021) demonstrate that singing together for just 30 minutes significantly raises oxytocin levels, the 'bonding hormone' directly linked to increased trust, empathy and prosocial behaviour. The synchrony involved in musical activities creates interpersonal neural synchrony through mirror neuron activation, which naturally increases connections and emotional attunement (Tarr, et al., 2014). This neurological blurring between self and other enhances the bonding effects of shared oxytocin release.

Harwood and Wallace (2022) identify two key mechanisms through which shared musical activities enhance relationships:

- Interpersonal coordination, where music's temporal organisation facilitates synchronised behaviour that increases feelings of being 'in sync' with others;

- Shared values perception, where musical engagement communicates cultural meaning and identity, creating perceptions of similarity.

These biological mechanisms explain why music sharing can deepen connections within befriending relationships whilst building new bonds across cultural differences.

Music offers distinct advantages in addressing communication challenges through what researchers call 'floating intentionality'. This is the ability to share emotional content and create mutual understanding without requiring explicit verbal articulation (Cross, 2014). This quality makes song sharing particularly valuable for participants who may struggle with verbal expression. However, effectiveness depends on culturally sensitive approaches that honour participants' cultural heritage whilst creating opportunities for mutual learning.

Through personal selection of meaningful songs, song-sharing serves as self-expression whilst communicating identity and personal values across cultural boundaries (Park, et al., 2022). This creates cultural co-creation rather than one-way cultural transmission. The social functions of music establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and strengthening inter-individual attachments manifest through shared practices that create emotional resonance despite language differences (Boer and Abubakar, 2014). These connections are particularly valuable for torture survivors, who face unique challenges in establishing secure relationships despite recovery depending fundamentally on rebuilding interpersonal bonds.

7.0 THE MUSEUM OF SONG INITIATIVE: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Given these advantages and the need for culturally sensitive approaches that enable mutual cultural learning and respectful exchange, this study examines how song sharing can foster meaningful connections among torture survivors by collaborating with the 'Museum of Song' initiative. Initially targeting loneliness among older residents in community hospitals, it expanded to employ postal exchanges and digital platforms to collect and preserve diverse musical traditions while creating interpersonal bonds.

Originally part of the 'Arts for Health' partnership programme in West Cork, the initiative demonstrated effectiveness in creating meaningful engagement through shared musical experiences, with participants reporting enhanced feelings of connection and belonging despite physical separation (Arts for Health Partnership Programme, 2025). After the pandemic, the Museum of Song broadened its reach to underserved communities across Ireland, including asylum-seeking and refugee populations. This expansion led to a partnership with Spirasi, as both organisations sought innovative approaches to rebuild connections.

The Museum of Song demonstrated success in creating bonds through collective musical participation despite barriers of isolation, making it uniquely suited for adaptation to torture survivors' rehabilitation, where similar challenges of social separation, linguistic barriers, and cultural dislocation require innovative relationship-building strategies.

8.0 METHODOLOGY

Research design

This qualitative study explored how song sharing enhances befriending relationships among survivors of torture. The participatory design incorporated extended consent processes and collaborative workshop design to ensure cultural sensitivity and alignment with Spirasi's therapeutic framework. Three complementary methods were used: participant observation during the workshop, analysis of the shared song lyrical content and performance, and participant feedback.

Participants and recruitment

Seven befriending pairs were recruited using purposive sampling. The programme welcomed 109 befriendees and 82 active befrienders at the time of recruitment (April 2024). Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years old and currently participating in the programme. The Spirasi Befriending Officer served as a gatekeeper for recruitment by distributing invitations via email to potential participants. The participating pairs included individuals from diverse age groups, countries of origin, and varying lengths of involvement in the programme.

While detailed demographic backgrounds are not provided to protect participant anonymity in this small sample, the workshop included representation across gender, age, and cultural backgrounds. Participants represented diverse linguistic traditions including Arabic, Luba, German, Irish and English, with countries of origin spanning multiple continents. Befriending programme involvement ranged from recent participants (under 6 months) to established relationships (over 2 years), providing perspectives across different stages of the befriending process.

Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Trinity College Dublin (ref: 3292). Interested pairs received printed information leaflets and consent

forms, followed by an online information session two weeks before the workshop. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

Ongoing consent was maintained throughout, and participants able to withdraw, decline questions, or request observations were excluded from the analysis. This approach acknowledges the sensitive nature of sharing personal music preferences while respecting participant autonomy. Safeguards included a Protocol for Stressed Participants with the author (an expressive art psychotherapist) present throughout, Availability of the Spirasi Clinical Lead during and after the workshop, anonymisation of all data with pseudonyms, and secure storage of data. The workshop honoured diverse cultural expressions, ensuring that no single cultural perspective was privileged.

Pre-workshop preparation

Following confirmation of involvement, participants received a personalised letter from the Museum of Song project coordinators inviting them to reflect on a 'Love Song' meaningful to them. The letter specified that this could include songs about love for a person, a place, a time, 'or the love that you might feel for anything at all.' This 'love song' framing was intentionally broad to accommodate diverse cultural expressions of attachment and meaning, avoiding narrow romantic interpretations that might not translate across cultures. This inclusive definition successfully generated diverse responses, including religious worship, homeland connection, family bonds and cultural identity expressions, demonstrating the framework's cultural adaptability whilst acknowledging that future research might benefit from even more culturally neutral terminology such as 'personally meaningful music'.

To establish a welcoming atmosphere and provide inspiration, the letter included two creative works: Mary Oliver's poem 'What is the Greatest Gift' and the lyrics of the Irish/Scottish folk song 'Will Ye Go Lassie Go' (see Appendix 1). The letter also offered space for participants to note their preliminary thoughts about their chosen songs.

Workshop structure

The one day workshop in May 2024 followed a four-part structure: (1) Opening performance of 'Will Ye Go Lassie Go' by facilitating artists; (2) Pair reflection on expectations and hopes; (3) Individual song-sharing where each participant sang their chosen song live to the group, explaining personal significance and cultural context; (4) Group singing of 'Will Ye Go Lassie Go' to conclude.

The live performance element created embodied vulnerability and collective presence rather than mere discussion of musical preferences, grounded in research showing that active musical participation generates stronger neurochemical bonding effects than verbal descriptions alone.

Data collection

Three qualitative methods were used for data collection. First, documentation of songs involved recording detailed notes on titles, cultural origins, and personal narratives shared during live performances, including cultural context, personal significance, and

performance style. Participants' explanations and lyrical content were analysed to understand how musical performance communicates identity, emotion, and cultural meaning.

Second, participant observation involved the author taking a participant-as-observer role, making brief notes about interactions, reactions, and performance dynamics. Observations documented responses to live song-sharing, interaction patterns, and moments of engagement during performances, which were expanded into a detailed reflective journal immediately after the workshop.

Third, same-day participant feedback captured immediate written and verbal reflections on the performance experience, including thoughts about valuable aspects of live song sharing, perceived impacts on befriending relationships, and suggestions for future interactions.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019), selected for its flexibility in understanding participants' meaning-making processes while remaining grounded in the researcher's reflexivity. The analysis constructed themes as coherent interpretive stories from an experiential realist position, with the researcher's background as an expressive arts psychotherapist informing the interpretive lens.

Data triangulation compared patterns across the three sources: observational notes captured real-time interactions, participant feedback provided reflective insights, and song analysis revealed personal and cultural significance. NVivo supported data organisation while ensuring that the analytical process remained researcher-driven.

The analysis followed six recursive phases: familiarisation through multiple readings, systematic inductive coding, organising codes into potential themes, refining themes against the dataset, defining final theme names, and developing coherent analytical arguments connecting findings to literature while maintaining data grounding.

Themes were actively constructed through interpretive engagement rather than 'discovered,' centring participant experiences while acknowledging researcher positioning. The author maintained reflexivity throughout, recognising her dual participant-researcher role in developing meaning-based interpretive stories.

Songs were analysed through both textual dimensions (lyrical content, cultural origins, personal significance) and performative dimensions (vocal delivery, embodied cultural presence, audience responses, physical engagement). This dual approach was essential as performance elements often convey cultural meaning beyond textual analysis alone. The analysis was conducted by a single researcher following reflexive thematic analysis methodology and credibility was enhanced through data triangulation and member checking.

Researcher positionality

The author's background as an expressive arts psychotherapist informed both the interpretive lens and the workshop design. However, this positioning also created potential bias toward creative interventions whilst providing essential therapeutic safeguarding. Reflexive journaling throughout the research process documented how this dual role influenced data collection and interpretation. The therapeutic background was disclosed to all participants and proved crucial for ensuring emotional safety requirements in torture survivor research.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The small sample size (seven pairs) limits generalisability and restricts representation of diverse torture experiences and cultural backgrounds, though it was appropriate for exploratory research with a vulnerable population and provided sufficient data for thematic saturation. The single workshop format, whilst minimising participant burden, prevents understanding of whether benefits sustain over time or require ongoing interventions.

The researcher's dual role as participant-observer and expressive arts psychotherapist created potential bias, yet this therapeutic background proved essential for maintaining participant safety during vulnerable sharing. While this positioning was reflexively acknowledged and mitigated through data triangulation, future studies might benefit from separate therapeutic support and research roles. Similarly, the single-researcher analytical approach could have been strengthened through peer review of coding.

Ethical constraints around participant anonymisation in small samples with vulnerable populations limited demographic reporting. Additionally, whilst the 'love song' framing proved culturally adaptable through broad definition, future research should consider more explicitly neutral terminology to avoid any potential cultural assumptions about emotional expression. Finally, the Irish cultural context and specific Museum of Song framework may limit transferability to other rehabilitation settings.

9.0 RESULTS

The thematic analysis of data comprising music choices and accompanying explanations, the author's reflective journal, and workshop feedback, led to the construction of the following five interconnected themes that illuminate how song-sharing functions within torture survivor befriending relationships: (1) musical homelands: songs as anchors to identity and place; (2) temporal bridges: music as connection across time and loss; (3) safe emotional sharing through music; (4) collective witnessing: shared emotional holding through song; and (5) cultural co-creation: from musical translation to mutual enrichment.

These themes demonstrate how song-sharing navigates distinct communication challenges while fostering authentic connections across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Each theme captures different dimensions of how participants used song sharing to navigate the complex processes of identity preservation, grief processing,

trust-building, and cultural exchange within their befriending relationships, creating pathways for healing that complement traditional therapeutic approaches. Theme development varied based on data richness, with some requiring more extensive illustration due to their foundational role in understanding the song-sharing phenomenon.

Thematic Analysis: Bridging Culture through Song

(All participants' names used in this analysis were pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Any identifying details have been removed or altered)

Theme 1: Musical Homelands: Songs as Anchors to Identity and Place

This theme revealed how participants used song sharing to maintain and communicate cultural identity, exemplifying the communicative power Cross (2014) attributed to musical expression. The live performance element is essential for creating an embodied cultural presence. When participants sang in their native languages or shared culturally significant songs in front of the entire group, this vocal expression carried a cultural meaning beyond what verbal description could convey. Producing familiar sounds, rhythms, and melodies created what might be understood as a lived cultural presence within the group.

Through this embodied cultural identity, songs functioned as portable homelands that preserved cultural identity and connection to the place. This enabled participants to share essential aspects of themselves while maintaining rootedness, despite their distance from home. Cormac, a befriender, selected 'The Cliffs of Dooneen, ' which illustrated this capacity:

> *I chose The Cliffs of Dooneen because it reminded me of home when I was away and could easily be about anywhere in the world for people in similar circumstances.*

The author's reflective journal documented that Cormac was visibly moved when discussing this selection, appearing close to tears. The song's repeated declaration resonates powerfully:

> *There's none to compare to the cliffs of Dooneen*

This phrase seemed to anchor his emotional geography, asserting the irreplaceable nature of home, despite physical distance. His recognition that the song could represent similar experiences of separation demonstrates the music's capacity to communicate universal themes of longing and belonging across cultural boundaries.

Samira, a befriendee, demonstrated engagement with the musical traditions of both the Arab world and Ireland. Through her performances of 'Mawtini' and 'The Buncrana Train,' she illustrated the complex navigation of multiple cultural identities. The author's reflective journal captured that her performance of 'Mawtini' was deeply poignant, reflecting the pain of forced displacement, while her rhythmic engagement with 'The

Buncrana Train' demonstrated that engaging with Irish musical traditions did not compromise her cultural background. She moved in time with the song's distinctive train-like rhythm and verbally acknowledged this musical characteristic, showing both an embodied and conscious appreciation of the Irish musical tradition. This musical engagement aligns with Boer and Abubakar's (2014) finding that music builds cross-cultural relationships while preserving distinct cultural heritage.

The preservation of linguistic heritage through songs has emerged as particularly important. Nafula (a befriendee), performed 'Ukuatishe' in her native Luba language in front of the entire group, demonstrating how song maintains connection to linguistic identity in forced migration contexts:

> *This song was written in Luba, my native language. The song speaks to me of the pain of being separated from my husband and children. I cry out to God to help me and in expressing my feeling I get relief from my pain.*

The author's reflective journal documented how Nafula's live vocal expression created immediate collective resonance, despite linguistic differences. This was something that could not have been achieved by simply discussing the song. This aligns with Kölbl's (2021) argument that songs can communicate complex emotional experiences without requiring extensive linguistic fluency in the host country language, while simultaneously preserving vital linguistic connections.

Noura, a befriendee, shared her experience performing 'Fi Ahua' in Arabic, exemplifying Alves Moreira and Jakobi's (2021) findings about creative interventions promoting cross-cultural dialogue:

> *When I moved to Ireland from (a country in the Middle East), I joined a group of survivors (of a medical condition) and we went to a singing festival for a weekend and I sang this Arabic song.*

Her courage in asserting cultural identity through music in unfamiliar contexts demonstrates how musical expressions can claim cultural spaces within host societies (Western, 2020). Building on this foundation of musical identity, the temporal dimension of song-sharing revealed another crucial function.

Theme 2: Temporal Bridges: Music as Connection across Time and Loss

This theme illuminates how musical sharing facilitates grief processing, while maintaining emotionally safe bonds with people who have died or been separated by distance. A vocal expression is fundamental for activating these temporal connections. When participants sang familiar melodies to the group, this appeared to create somatic (bodily) memory, where producing remembered sounds brought past relationships into the present reality within the group setting.

This bridging of past and present through songs was powerfully demonstrated when participants chose music connected to deceased loved ones. Paula, a befriender, chose 'How Great Thou Art,' which exemplified this process:

> *I chose this song because it makes me think of my brother. His choir sang it at his funeral last year.*

When Paula performed this hymn for the group, its repeated refrain 'How great thou art!' provided a rhythmic framework for processing grief. Each repetition of this refrain enabled her to honour both her brother's memory and his faith tradition within a supportive community context. This aligns with Malchiodi's (2020) understanding of how expressive arts approaches enable individuals to process grief while maintaining meaningful connections with deceased loved ones.

Katy, a befriender, shared childhood memories through her performance of 'Die Fogel Hogtech' (The Wedding of the Birds), which shows how songs preserve the entire world of memories and feelings:

> *When I was a child in Germany, me and my grandmother would sing this song together*.

The author's reflective journal documented that Katy became tearful during her group performance. The workshop re-created intimate intergenerational moments within the befriending context, illustrating the music's capacity to carry loving relationships across time and into new communities.

Brenda (befriender), sang 'I'll Take you Home again Kathleen,' which revealed the active, ongoing nature of these connections through inherited musical identity:

> *I chose this song because it reminds me of my mother who was also called Kathleen. She had a beautiful voice.*

The song's movement between past joy tinged with loss *'The smiles that once you gave to me/I scarcely ever see them now'* - and future hope - *'I'll take you to your home again'* - mirrored Brenda's own navigation between cherishing maternal memory and maintaining connection across time. The temporal structure of the lyrics embodied the bridging function created by her performance within the group. The author's reflective journal documented that, during her performance, the group demonstrated support for Brenda through nods, gentle sounds of recognition, and attentive listening. These responses illustrate that sharing personal memories fosters group empathy and mutual support.

Mariam, a befriendee, demonstrated this temporal bridging through her performance of 'Al Hubohcluo' (All My Love) which connected her to maternal comfort across time and distance:

> *I love this song because my Mom always sang it to me. When I was smaller, I would say to her, 'I'm going to leave my bedroom door open. Listening to your voice will help me sleep.'*

The author's reflective journal noted that these comments on the song's childhood impact, shared as she performed for the group, were particularly moving, revealing how musical memories serve as enduring sources of comfort and connection across

time and distance, creating bridges to relationships that remain vital despite physical separation. While temporal connections through songs provided emotional continuity, the workshop also demonstrated how musical sharing could facilitate trust building in the present moment.

Theme 3: Gentle vulnerability: trust-building through song

This theme captured how participants used musical sharing as a pathway to genuine emotional expressions. For many, this approach enabled emotional connections that would have been difficult to achieve through direct verbal communication, supporting Dutton's (2017) argument for creative approaches in trauma contexts. The performative element is vital for manageable emotional sharing. Rather than talking about feelings alone, singing to the entire group required the participants to engage both physically and emotionally (Szczepek Reed, 2021). This allowed for gradual emotional opening, where participants could control their level of vulnerability through their choice of song and how they performed it. This careful balance helped build connections rather than overwhelming relationships. Hassan, a befriendee, exemplified this approach through his performance of OneRepublic's 'Apologize':

> *I love this song because it's the first song I ever heard in English*

The author's reflective journal documented that this performance was particularly uplifting for the group, with participants spontaneously joining when they recognised the melody. Hassan's choice was based on personal, rather than lyrical, content. While the song actually deals with relationship betrayal ('Its too late to apologize'), his joyful connection to its emotional intensity as '*the first song I heard in Ireland*' demonstrated how participants naturally adjusted their level of emotional sharing to what felt manageable. The group's enthusiastic participation showed how his genuine emotion invited others to share his joy, creating a collective connection around his personal story rather than the song's painful content.

Miriam, a befriendee, revealed how vulnerability could coexist with pride and joy through the performance of 'Ngirozi':

> *My nephew is musician in Zimbabwe. Brenda, my befriender, phoned him and asked him to tell her about this love song that he wrote.*

The author's reflective journal noted that when discussing her nephew's song, Miriam was both emotional and proud, challenging the assumption that emotional exposure in trauma contexts must be primarily about suffering, showing how musical sharing enables multifaceted emotional expression.

Sharon, a befriender, demonstrated comfortable vulnerability through her performance of 'The Galway Shawl.'

> *This song reminds me of living in Galway, a great city, full of music and culture.*

The author's reflective journal observed that her performance allowed her to share personal history, while maintaining comfortable emotional boundaries.

These examples demonstrate how song sharing creates a safe pathway for emotional connections, particularly in contexts where trust has been damaged by trauma. This gentle vulnerability directly addresses what Schippert et al. (2025) identify as torture's impact on communication and trust-building capacities. Song-sharing navigates the paradox that torture creates – shattering survivors' ability to trust– while recovery depends fundamentally on rebuilding trust. Musical expression requires relatively little initial trust, while building deeper trust through the collaborative process itself.

This vulnerable sharing aligns with Good and Russo's (2021) findings on musical activities raising oxytocin levels, supporting gradual trust-building that complements verbal communication within befriending relationships.

Theme 4: Collective witnessing: shared emotional holding through song

While theme 3 examined individual emotional regulation through song sharing, this theme focuses on how group structure created collective safety that enabled such personal risk-taking. This theme illuminates how the workshop structure created what can be described as a therapeutic community through musical participation. The live singing component is fundamental for creating collective emotional support. Whereas verbal sharing allows listeners to remain passive, vocal performance requires all participants to maintain an active presence simultaneously as audience members. This creates a mutual emotional holding, where vulnerability and support are shared within the same moment.

Empathic resonance generated across cultural boundaries was particularly evident in the group's responses to performance in non-English languages. The author's reflective journal documented that when Brenda (befriendee) performed her Luba worship song, participants felt uplifted, showing how genuine emotions could transcend language barriers and create collective connections. This collective witnessing transforms individual vulnerability into shared emotional safety. This supports Moreira and Jakobi's (2021) findings about creative interventions building confidence through community support. It also demonstrates what Savage et al. (2021) described as a shared musical expression creating opportunities for social bonding that complements verbal communication.

The collective nature of this witnessing was evident in how the group responded to the different emotional registers. When Mariam, a befriendee, performed 'Juliet to your Romeo, the author's reflective journal observed how the entire group leaned forward, offering their full attention and showing unified engagement with her contemporary musical choice. Their responses demonstrated the emergence of shared emotional attunement – the capacity to match their responses to the emotional register of each contribution.

Similarly, when Joe, a befriender, performed 'All You Need is Love' by the Beatles, the author's reflective journal documented the group's response to murmurs of recognition and support, showing how shared musical moments created immediate collective support. Joe's visible enthusiasm and interpretation of the song emphasised its collaborative nature.

> *The song relies on harmonies and on building the music together, on everyone doing their bit*

His performance embodied this collaborative spirit, creating space for collective positivity rather than individual vulnerability. The journal noted that, rather than rejecting lighter contributions, the community held space for varying degrees of vulnerability, supporting Harwood and Wallace's (2022) research on how informal musical activities work best when they avoid pressure for forced emotional expression.

This collective emotional intelligence created the safety necessary for participants to risk authentic sharing, supporting Herman's (1992) emphasis on the community context in trauma recovery. Collective witnessing enabled participants to move beyond individual sharing towards genuine cultural exchanges.

Theme 5: Cultural co-creation: from musical translation to mutual enrichment.

This theme captures how musical exchange generates what might be understood as cultural co-creation rather than cultural sharing. Musical performance enabled this process in ways that discussion alone could not achieve. Live singing created an immediate experiential exchange that verbal descriptions could not replicate. Unlike sharing culture through description, singing across traditions in front of the group created direct experiential participation. Participants moved beyond thinking about other cultures to actively engaging with them.

This transformative exchange was exemplified when Brenda (befriender) called Miriam's nephew in Zimbabwe to learn about the song 'Ngirozi'.

> *Brenda, my befriender, phoned my nephew and asked him to tell her about this love song that he wrote.*

The author's reflective journal documented that when Miriam performed this song for the group, she was both emotional and proud, and that Brenda's genuine cultural curiosity demonstrated respect rather than appropriation. This bidirectional engagement demonstrates a respectful cultural curiosity. It created what Park, Lee, and Lee (2022) described as 'effective self-expression while communicating identity and personal values across cultural boundaries.'

The transformative potential of this cultural exchange was evident in how participants responded to each other's musical traditions during the performance. The author's reflective journal observed that participants physically responded to the rhythms of Irish traditional songs while remaining visibly moved by Arabic, Luba, and Palestinian selections, suggesting that musical engagement created appreciation for differences without requiring cultural assimilation. This supports Cross's (2014) concept of music's 'floating intentionality' in cross-cultural communication.

When Samira performed 'The Buncrana Train' for the group, engagement revealed how cultural transformation could operate through physical rather than intellectual understanding.

> *My local choir in Donegal made the song come alive. The singers would go around the room as if they were on the train.*

She embraced the lyrics:

> *Cause this is my homeland, the place I was born in*
>
> *No matter where I roam, it's in my soul*

This rendition directly articulated the portable homeland concept, showing how adopted musical forms could express Arab experiences of displacement while claiming an emotional space within Irish culture. Samira's performance demonstrated the same embodied connection as she moved with the rhythm, actively participating in Irish culture while maintaining her own identity.

The reciprocal nature of this cultural co-creation is apparent in the group's responses to Samira's performances. The author's reflective journal documented how her enthusiasm for 'The Buncrana Train' created visible delight among Irish participants, who responded by encouraging nods and smiles, clearly pleased to see their cultural tradition embraced so authentically. Conversely, when she performed 'Mawtini,' the same Irish participants leaned forward with respectful attention, their silence and focused listening demonstrating genuine cultural reverence for her musical heritage.

The author's reflective journal noted that this mutual cultural engagement exemplified genuine co-creation, with this dynamic repeatedly occurring throughout the workshop. Irish participants felt celebrated by Samira's embrace of their tradition, while she felt witnessed and respected in sharing her cultural heritage. The live performances created mutual cultural enrichment, where both traditions were celebrated and preserved. Participants alternately served as ambassadors and recipients, creating collaborative exchanges that honoured multiple identities simultaneously.

The workshop itself generated new hybrid cultural forms, as evidenced by the shared singing of 'Will Ye Go Lassie Go,' which opened and closed the session. The song's repeated invitation: Will ye go, lassie go? followed by the collective response 'And we'll all go together' became a literal enactment of invitation and acceptance. When participants from multiple cultural backgrounds joined in singing 'We'll all go together,' the lyrics themselves created the cultural co-creation. Shared singing transformed individual cultural expressions into collective musical diplomacy, which honoured multiple identities simultaneously.

10.0 CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that song sharing offers a culturally sensitive, neurobiologically grounded approach to building trust and cultural understanding in torture survivor–befriending relationships. Through collaborative workshops between

Spirasi's befriending programme and the Museum of Song initiative, musical exchange successfully addressed the specific communication challenges created by torture while facilitating identity preservation, grief processing, and cultural co-creation.

Theoretical contributions

The five interconnected themes reveal three key theoretical advances in refugee and forced migration studies. First, the concept of musical homelands extends portable identity literature by demonstrating how songs function as embodied carriers of cultural presence that transcend geographical displacement. Unlike static cultural artifacts, musical performance creates active cultural resonance, enabling complex identity navigation that honours multiple cultural belongings rather than forcing binary choices between heritage maintenance and integration.

Second, the 'temporal bridging' function adds important nuances to the trauma recovery literature by illustrating how creative approaches facilitate grief processing within community contexts. The capacity of music to activate bodily memory while maintaining connections across time and loss is particularly valuable for torture survivors who have experienced profound relational ruptures.

Third, the study reveals how cultural co-creation through musical exchange challenges conventional one-way adaptation models of refugee integration. Rather than treating cultural exchange as host-to-newcomer learning, song sharing creates new hybrid forms of cultural expression that value multiple traditions, while fostering genuine collaboration.

Practice and policy implications

These findings suggest that torture rehabilitation services should recognise creative musical practices as evidence-based components of comprehensive care programmes. Song sharing helps address the impact of torture on trust building by enabling safe emotional expression through participant-controlled approaches. The collective witnessing function offers a model for creating therapeutic communities that provide mutual emotional support while celebrating diverse cultural expressions.

Policy frameworks should incorporate specific measures including: song sharing or creative expression modules in volunteer training programmes; funding allocation for cultural partnerships between rehabilitation services and local arts organisations; development of standardised protocols for implementing musical interventions whilst maintaining cultural sensitivity and creation of evaluation metrics that capture both individual therapeutic outcomes and community integration benefits. Rehabilitation services should establish formal partnerships with cultural organisations, allocate dedicated funding for creative interventions and train staff in facilitating rather than directing cultural exchange.

Collaborative research and partnership innovation

The participatory approach of this study demonstrates that ethical research with torture survivors can centre their agency and lived experience. The successful collaboration between Spirasi's Befriending Programme and the Museum of Song initiative demonstrates the value of creative partnerships that bring together rehabilitation services and cultural organisations (Arts for Health Partnership Programme, 2025). The Museum of Song's proven track record in creating meaningful musical connections during social isolation provided an ideal framework for adaptation to torture survivor contexts. This partnership model suggests that existing cultural initiatives can be effectively adapted to specialised rehabilitation needs, offering a scalable approach for enhancing support services through creative interventions across different refugee contexts.

Implementation considerations

Implementing song sharing approaches faces practical barriers including staff training requirements, resource allocation, and potential resistance from traditional therapeutic frameworks. Cultural sensitivity training would be essential to prevent appropriation or misrepresentation of participants' musical traditions. Sustainability requires ongoing funding and institutional commitment to creative approaches that may not fit conventional rehabilitation models.

Future directions

Future research should address the methodological limitations identified in this study through: longitudinal studies examining sustained relationship impacts beyond single workshop interventions; larger sample sizes across diverse cultural contexts to enhance generalisability; more detailed demographic reporting with appropriate anonymisation strategies; separation of therapeutic support and research roles to reduce potential bias; and comparative studies examining song sharing effectiveness against other creative interventions. Cross-cultural replication would strengthen understanding of cultural specificity versus universality in musical relationship-building mechanisms.

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