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"Telling it in our own way": Doing music-enhanced interviews with people displaced by violence in Colombia

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Abstract

In Colombia, five decades of violent conflict have displaced millions of people, many of whom now face severe risks from flooding, landslides and other environmental hazards in the places they have found to resettle. In our research, one of our main objectives was to better understand the experiences, vulnerabilities and survival strategies of conflict-displaced people living in hazard-prone locations in Soacha, an urban working-class district of Cundinamarca in the centre of Colombia, and in urban and peri-urban areas in or near Pereira and Manizales, both of which are cities in Colombia's main coffee-growing region. We wanted to create spaces within which such people could tell their life stories with dignity and agency. For socially and politically marginalised people who have suffered enormous loss and trauma, and the disempowering effects of violence, conventional social science interviews may re-open wounds and cause extreme distress. Furthermore, interviewees may feel that there are 'good', 'bad' or otherwise 'preferred' answers to the questions they are asked. In our research, we instead invited participants to share a piece of music or a song they valued with us, via mp3 players, before opening a conversation about their life stories. In this way, we intended for participants to 'territorialise' the research encounter by creating comfortable spaces where their taste and habits were central (Dos Santos and Wagner, 2018), and where they exercised greater control and agency to decide the topics discussed (Levell, 2019). We wanted the songs people shared with us to act as *their* chosen entry points into their life stories. This article offers some reflections on how talking about music, a cultural form linked closely with emotions, memory and identity, can provide a resource for better understanding the lives and experiences of others.

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Introduction

"The minute you ask people about their music, they start remembering things and go back into their past," said broadcaster Sue Lawley in March 1988 (Barber, 2012). At that time, Lawley had recently taken over as presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, a programme that uses interviewees' own personal musical choices as the context for discussion around their life experiences. Originally created by Roy Plomley in 1942, *Desert Island Discs* is now Britain's longest-running radio programme (McLaughlin, 2017), and was recently judged by a panel of industry experts to be the greatest radio show of all time (Chilton, 2019). But, in Lawley's view, it is not the music that makes the programme so attractive for its audiences; it is, rather, the guests' "thoughts and observations" about their musical choices (Lawley, cited in Donovan, 2006). According to its long-time producer Cathy Drysdale, the programme's success is due to a format that 'gets to the heart of people—what moves them and motivates them, what inspires them and enthuses them, who and what they care about" (Trendell, 2019).

Of course, the music in *Desert Island Discs*, a programme that features prominent guests and has an on-air audience of some 2.8 million (BBC, 2019), might instead elicit what Hendy (2017: 156) calls "a self-conscious 'performance' of interviewees' 'true' selves." Nevertheless, the programme's premise—that people's stories about their musical choices are also stories about who they are and what they care about—is one to which many can relate. Music and songs are closely linked to personal memory; they can bring to mind people, places and events, and revive the emotions associated with them (Belfi et al., 2016; Blais-Rochette and Miranda, 2016; Keightley and Pickering, 2006; van Dijck, 2006). Through music, the past is implicated in the present in powerful ways (Anderson, 2004: 4). As such, music is a cultural resource that can afford Area Studies scholars rich insights into the priorities, values, feelings and knowledge of others.

Area Studies in the twenty-first century seeks not merely to describe other peoples and places, but to foreground marginalised people's own interpretations of their experiences, environments and emotions, and empower individuals and communities to actively shape the research process and its outcomes (Hodgett, 2019). Moreover, Area Studies seeks to involve local people in the generation of knowledge about places, processes and experiences (Hodgett, 2019). Through incorporating talk about music (and its deeply personal meanings) into their methodologies, Area Studies scholars might successfully access not only knowledge about how marginalised people perceive their lives and experiences, but also how those people feel about the research process and its impact on their lives and communities. Talk about music can help Area Studies scholars to tune into and recognise local knowledge that might otherwise be overlooked in conventional social science interviews.

This article is not about music itself, but about music's potential to provide a tool for better understanding the lives and experiences of others, in this case people who have been displaced by violence in Colombia. It draws on data collected in 81 *conversaciones desde la música* (music-based conversations) carried out across four case study sites in Colombia between 2017 and 2018. After a discussion of music and its capacity to access autobiographical memory, the article offers a brief overview of the Colombian context of our research. Our method and data from the *conversaciones desde la música* are then discussed. The article concludes with some critical reflections on our use of music-enhanced interviews to create spaces for socially and politically marginalised people in Colombia to narrate their life stories with dignity and agency.

Music Matters

Technological developments in the twentieth century changed the ways music was encountered and engaged with in daily life, rendering the consumption or avoidance

of it a much more personal experience (Frith, 2004). Portable devices enabled recorded music to permeate routine work, travel and leisure activities, and whether we deliberately seek it out or not, the music we encounter has the potential to become intricately linked with people, places, events and emotions, and thus form part of a 'lifetime soundtrack' (Istvandity, 2019). While books might be re-read once or twice over a lifespan, and films re-watched somewhat more frequently, songs are often heard or listened to over and over again, on numerous occasions (Janssen et al., 2007), and are more likely to become deeply and intimately intertwined with self-defining memories of time and place (Blais-Rochette and Miranda, 2016).

The sounds and kinds of behaviour different societies conceive of as musical undoubtedly vary (Blacking, 1976: 5), and music's emotional, cognitive and social functions are emphasised differently according to the cultural context in which that music is consumed (Saarikallio, 2012). But across both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, music is found to trigger autobiographical memories (Boer and Fischer, 2010). Autobiographical memory is defined by Cady et al. (2008: 157) as "knowledge about events or experiences in one's life", which is recalled "when a portion of the knowledge of their lives becomes temporarily activated". Music's relation to autobiographical memory has predominantly been studied from the perspective of music psychology. El Haj et al. (2015) found that Alzheimer's disease patients in retirement homes demonstrate better autobiographical recall and produce more self-defining memories when listening to music chosen by themselves rather than by the researcher or during silence. Hays and Minichiello (2005) have shown that older people living in the community use music to enhance wellbeing and self-esteem, by sustaining memories of personal history and life experiences. In a study of emotional self-regulation, Saarikallio (2010) found that her interviewees (aged 21-70) repeatedly described how music brought back memories of their past and life

history, and actively harnessed this aspect of music in order to manage and modulate their emotions in daily life.

Jakubowski and Ghosh (2009) studied the frequency of music-evoked autobiographical memories in participants' everyday lives over the course of a week. They found that adults experienced musically-evoked autobiographical memories on average once a day, and rated these memories as highly vivid, involuntary, and often accompanied by positive or mixed emotions such as happiness and nostalgia, and by social themes. In their investigation into social motives for listening to music in comparison to reading or watching TV, Schäfer and Eerola (2020) conclude that the elicitation of nostalgia appears to be unique to music. Music that listeners perceive as sad can act as a resource to reminisce and regulate unpleasant feelings such as grief and longing. Van den Tol and Edwards (2011) found that voluntarily listening to self-identified sad music can provide people with an effective coping mechanism after experiencing negative psychological circumstances. Taruffi and Koelsch (2014) showed that participants were motivated to listen to music they perceived as sad in order to retrieve memories of personally significant past events, and that this led to beneficial effects including consolation and regulation of mood and negative emotion. Similarly, Peltola and Eerola (2016) found that adults sought out self-identified sad music in order to seek connection with valued people and places, retrieve memories, and re-experience affects.

Music can connect people in direct ways to their own past, accessing not only cognitive information but also affective knowledge, or what Keightley and Pickering (2006: 153) refer to as "the texture of a specific experience". Re-heard or recalled, music reorients consciousness and shifts awareness to previous times and experiences when the music was heard (DeNora, 2003: 62), providing "a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the

apparently continuous tale of who one is" (DeNora, 2009: 63). Approached in this way, music acts as a "mediator or translator of lived experiences that are difficult or impossible to talk about' in everyday life" (Volgsten and Pripp, 2016: 155). Discussion about music can provide insights into "how people directly experience their own, often marginalized, subject positions" (Cinque and Redmond, 2016: 8).

In qualitative interviews, elicitation methods can be used to "uncover previously untold stories, contextualise research talk, and give respondents another means to express themselves" (Allett, 2011: 26). Materials used for elicitation vary, but tend to be predominantly visual. In their study of memory, the body and identity amongst women, Weber and Mitchell (2004) used participants' chosen dresses as elicitation devices, and found that memories evoked by personal clothing "provide useful scaffolding for structuring a person's life history or memoir, and actual clothing items (as well as photographs of clothes) serve as excellent memory prompts" (Weber and Mitchell, 2004: 256). Through the use of visual prompts in the form of photographs taken by research participants, Edmondson et al. (2018) and Patricia et al. (2017) have explored how subjects that may be difficult to discuss (self-harm and eating disorders respectively) are experienced and thought about by people who engage in these behaviours. Music, however, remains a much under-used elicitation device within the social sciences (dos Santos and Wagner, 2018: 2).

In her research into attachments to extreme metal music in the UK, Allet (2010: 1) found that music offers "a route to our feelings and memories" and therefore provides a "particularly successful elicitation tool" within interviews. Allett (2011: 23) asked respondents to bring two pieces of recorded music to group meetings, one that they "loved" and one that "drew out certain feelings or emotions". By introducing recorded music to the interview, Allet (2011: 25) was able to "access rich data about music attachments that might not emerge in a conventional group interview". Using music

elicitation with adolescents in South Africa who had been referred to group music therapy for aggression, dos Santos and Wagner (2018: 7) found that playing music that was familiar to or produced by the participants put them at ease and "de/reterritorialized" the research encounter. Popular songs acted as catalysts for discussion, rendering the research space one that was familiar for the participants and where their taste and habits had a place (dos Santos and Wagner, 2018: 7). In her narrative interviews with men in the UK who had experienced domestic violence and abuse in childhood, and had become gang members in adulthood, Levell (2019) asked participants to share three music tracks/videos that would help them tell their life stories. Levell (2019: 2) found that many participants talked about using music as a coping mechanism in childhood and said that listening to the music again during the research process helped them to access memories of listening to it in the past. Selected music videos and lyrics acted as metaphors or as illustrations of participants' past experiences, and with time to plan music for the interview and think about their answers in advance, participants exercised greater control over the research space, using their music choices to pace and structure the interviews (Levell, 2019: 2).

Allett (2010, 2011), dos Santos and Wagner (2018) and Levell (2019) have all found that music elicitation enhances the research interaction for participants and researchers. They argue that music can be an effective tool for discussing sensitive issues, but also caution that care should be taken to ensure that the research encounter is a positive one for participants whose voices may be seldom heard in policy and practice (Levell, 2018: 2). Allet (2011: 28) notes that music may elicit "unwanted feelings or negative/unwelcome memories that could cause upset to the respondent", and stresses that the method needs to be practised with great sensitivity and that those conducting the interviews should receive appropriate training to deal with any associated distress. These observations correspond to findings in music psychology, which show that the response to music can be unpredictable. Peltola and Eerola

(2016) found that adults may listen to self-identified sad music to seek connection, retrieve memories and re-experience affects, but that responses to music may on some occasions involve undesired negative reactions, dependent on life situation, listening context, the type of music heard, and the listener's current mood (Peltola and Eerola, 2016: 99). Skewes McFerran and Saarikallio (2014), in their study of young Australians aged 13-40, found that participants held strong beliefs about music's positive properties. However, the possibility of negative responses to music was higher for young people with mental health issues such as depression, for whom music could increase isolation and exacerbate rumination (Skewes McFerran and Saarikallio, 2014: 95).

The Colombian Context

For more than five decades, Colombia has experienced violent conflict rooted in factors relating to poverty, political exclusion, access to land, corruption, international market dynamics, and political reactions against attempts to change the situation (Luna, 2019). The conflict has displaced millions of people from rural to urban areas; as of February 2020, the national agency responsible for assisting those affected by conflict, Unidad para la Atención y la Reparación a las Víctimas (UARIV), had recorded almost 8 million people internally displaced by violence or the threat of violence, 16% of the country's current population (www.unidadvictimas.gov.co). In spite of this immense impact on so many people, the lived experiences of displacement are little understood, and the capacities and skills of those who have experienced it rarely acknowledged. The popular imaginary of the conflict is predominantly shaped by film and TV representations which privilege the viewpoint of guerrillas, paramilitaries, organised crime, and the armed forces (Rincón and Rodríguez, 2015: 172). Those who have been forced from their homes by violence are often represented as a homogenous group, with conflict the only reference point in their lives (Celestina, 2018: 18).

The first law to address displacement was Law 387 of 1997, which was replaced in 2011 by the *Ley de Víctmas*, the Victims' Law, through which the Colombian state undertook to provide "measures of attention, assistance and comprehensive reparations for the victims of the armed conflict" (Jimeno, 2018: viii). But categories such as 'displaced' and 'victim' are constructs that, within "a very unruly set of circumstances", define "legitimate" causes of displacement and, therefore, who is deserving, or not deserving, of state reparations (Cárdenas, 2018: 75). Widely treated by state officials as "potential liars" when they seek to formally declare their displacement (Celestina, 2018: 78), and perceived within civil society as "intruders, different and dangerous", most internally displaced people feel "unaccepted, lonely, abandoned and powerless because the circumstances that caused their displacement are not socially recognised" (Ángel, 2019: 8). Thus, following the loss and dislocation of displacement, internally displaced people endure ongoing stigmatisation and discrimination in their places of resettlement (Campo-Arias and Herazo, 2014).

In our research in Colombia, one of our main objectives was to better understand the experiences, vulnerabilities and survival strategies of conflict-displaced people living in hazard-prone locations, in order to strengthen community and institutional capacity to mitigate environmental risk. The research took place in four case study sites: the city of Manizales in Caldas; the settlements of Caimalito and Esperanza Galicia near the city of Pereira in Risaralda, and; Cazucá, also known as Comuna 4, in the municipality of Soacha, Cundinamarca, just south of Bogotá. Recognising that most internally displaced people feel distrust, anger and powerlessness, and that their identities are publically "demoted" (Zapata and Hargreaves, 2018: 541 and 544), we wanted to create opportunities for such people to tell their stories with dignity and agency. We hoped that by starting conversations around music of their choice, we

could open spaces for participants to exercise greater control over their life narratives than they might do in conventional interviews.

Colombia has a particularly rich musical environment shaped by cultural heterogeneity and hybridisation (Wade, 2000). For internally displaced people whose memories may be difficult to express in words, music and songs can offer a starting point to reconnect with aspects of the past and to reconstruct the narrative of identity (Morello, 2012) in new locations. We used music-enhanced interviews with our participants with the intention of creating spaces in which their musical choices acted as *their* chosen entry points into their life stories.

Method

For socially and politically marginalised people who have suffered enormous loss and trauma and the disempowering effects of violence, we were concerned that conventional interviews may re-open wounds and re-traumatise. We were also aware that, in order to seek legal reparations, people displaced by violence are obliged to narrate their experiences to state authorities in ways that fit into pre-determined and externally imposed categories of 'deservingness' and 'victimhood'. We were highly conscious, in working with people whose rights had been violated by armed groups, conditions of exclusion and poverty, and by state institutions, of our ethical responsibility to design research methods that would provide our participants with positive experiences. We wanted our research not only to yield insights into the variety of experiences of displacement, but also to benefit participants by empowering them to tell their life stories in new ways, and with greater control over their narratives.

We therefore held initial community meetings in each of our case study sites. At these meetings, we shared our research objectives and explained that we wanted to learn

about people's experiences, capacities and knowledge of the environment, in order to collaborate with them and with state institutions in the co-creation of risk mitigation policies and practice. Having discussed the relevance of the proposed project in each site, we invited community members who wanted to participate to meet researchers at a future date for a conversation. To prepare for this conversation, participants were asked to choose a song or piece of music that held special personal significance, and to talk to us about how that song/music acquired meaning and how it relates to their past or present. Our decision to use the word 'conversation' was deliberate and reflected our intention to render the research encounter a more participatory process that started from a point chosen by the participants, and not one determined by the researchers. Having been asked approximately one week in advance of the scheduled conversation to think of the song or piece of music that they wanted to share, participants had time to plan and think about what they would say. We also offered participants the option of choosing a visual stimulus to start the conversation, such as a photograph or treasured object, if they preferred.

The research team members included sociologists, social workers and psychologists with expertise in psychosocial support. Researchers carried out the conversations in pairs and were provided with counselling throughout the research process in order to minimise any negative impact that listening to displaced people's life stories might cause to their own wellbeing. In total, 99 conversations with individuals or family groups were carried out using an elicitation device. Of these, in 18 households the conversation was held with a visual stimulus, or without a stimulus. In several of the conversations without elicitation devices, the participants had begun talking about their lives as soon as the researchers arrived and, when asked about their chosen music, indicated that they did not want to interrupt the conversation to listen to a song. On two occasions the Wi-Fi connection failed, making it impossible to play the chosen music. On one occasion, no music was played but the participant started the

conversation by reflecting at length on the significance of music in his life and how he loved singing, before turning the topic to how he was not brought up for life in the city and could not adapt

In the 81 conversations that featured music, each interaction started with participants and researchers searching for the chosen music in a digital format, using either a researcher's or a participant's mp3 device, computer or mobile phone. Researchers then shared the experience of listening to the participants' music and songs in the same time and space, which was intended to build trust, empathy and intimacy within the research encounter. The participants were subsequently invited to reflect on why that music was important for them. Participants began the conversations at their chosen point, and researchers continued the conversation with questions about participants' past migrations, their previous and current social networks and engagement with government and civic institutions, and their own conceptions of risk and wellbeing. The focus of the questions was not on negative experiences, but on the capacities, resources and skills that participants drew on to re-establish themselves in new locations.

Listening to music

During the conversations, participants covered several topics relating to their (often multiple) displacements and resettlements, which are discussed in depth in Few et al. (under review). The *conversaciones desde la música* were the second stage in a sequence of interlinked arts-based research and impact activities carried out over three years (2017-2019), which are analysed in Armijos et al. (2019). Here, the focus is exclusively on the participants' personal musical choices as their chosen entry points into discussions of their life histories. In this section, we do not seek to analyse the content of the conversations but to explore how participants connected to a point in

their life stories through music. In the discussion that follows, all research participants' words are anonymised using pseudonyms.

Out of the 81 interactions in which music was played, 12 conversations started with the participants initiating discussion without reflecting on that music's significance, in most cases because of external interruptions to the conversation. In the remaining 69 conversations, participants made the following connections between their chosen music and their lives:

Person	32
Experience/activity	17
Place	7
Lyrics	5
Religion	4
Conflict/displacement	4

Nearly all the musical choices were popular Colombian songs or musical pieces composed in national or Latin American styles, such as: *cumbia*, from Colombia's Atlantic coastal region; *vallenato*, a Colombian folk genre traditionally featuring accordion, *guacharaca* stick rasp and *caja* (box) percussion, originally popularised by travelling troubadours and singers employed by ranch owners; *champeta* from the Colombian Caribbean coast and extremely popular with Afro-descendent communities; romantic *baladas* (ballads); and Mexican *ranchera*, closely linked with *mariachi* groups and *conjunto* ensembles (Manuel, 1988; Müller, 2018). Four participants chose advent hymns or Christian songs with which they were familiar from church, and started the conversations by talking about the importance of their faith in their daily lives and the comfort and strength it brought them. One participant, Yvonne, Manizales, chose an English-language synth-pop song which she said she 'loved' dancing to while she did household chores such as sweeping, mopping

and washing in the early morning. She used the song to create an enjoyable atmosphere for work, and spoke humorously about not understanding the lyrics:

> My sister-in-law arrives and whenever she comes she says … "What does the song say, I don't understand?", and I don't know what it says but I love it … and, well, I don't know the words … but I change them, it's not about knowing what they mean in Spanish … there's another [song] that goes "yumaja yumaje", and the guys always tease me … saying "What, yumaja yumaje?" … and what the music says is [she speaks in English] "You are my heart, you are my soul" (all translations by Marsh).

Laughter, humour and jokes about musical choices featured prominently in many of the conversations. On some occasions, the participants had forgotten the title of the song they wanted to share, and sang or recited fragments of lyrics that they remembered, generating affectionate teasing between household members and encouragement to sing more. The act of trying to remember enough lyrics to identify and play the song gave rise to quips ("I've forgotten it [the song], I like it so much that I've forgotten it! [laughs]" Sara, Cazucá). Generational differences in musical taste produced humorous exchanges between parents and adult children in this conversation which turned to Maluma, a popular young Colombian Reggaeton/salsa artist:

> Mother: Well, I like the old artists, not today's, because I don't like today's music, it gives me a headache.
>
> Daughter: Not Maluma…
>
> Mother: Oh no … these days they put that music on and start dancing and they look like snakes having a fight!

On one occasion, the participant (Rafael, Esperanza Galicia) gave a song title, and when the researcher searched for the song and failed to find it, she asked who the

artist was. Keeping a straight face, Rafael said "I don't know who sings it, it might be Luis Alberto Posada" (a popular Colombian singer), but then burst out laughing and confessed that he had invented the title: "No, no, no, I'm just playing around, that song doesn't exist!"

Using music in the conversations often brought out the participants' wit, jocularity and sense of fun, qualities which are rarely thought of in association with 'victims' of armed conflict and forced displacement. It is significant that of all the conversations using music, only four participants chose the conflict or their displacement as the immediate entry point to their life stories. The vast majority of participants chose to start the conversations with music that reminded them of significant people, places, or experiences and activities.

Person

The most common choice of music for the conversations was a song that reminded participants of someone else. This was usually a family member, a romantic partner, or a friend. On two occasions, participants spoke about the artist whose recording they had chosen, admiring the quality of the artist's voice and their talent and personality. Participants linked their chosen song to a particular person in diverse ways. Liliana (Cazucá) chose music that evoked pleasant memories of her parents: "Yes, my mum and dad would sit down and have a drink with the neighbours, listening to that music, always with their little radio next to them, and so I used to hear their *rancheras*." Similarly, Ana (Esperanza Galicia) chose a song that she remembered her mother loved and listened to "all the time" on her tape recorder as she worked, and went on to reminisce about her happy childhood on the family's small plot of agricultural land. Others chose a song that reminded them of falling in love; Enrique (Esperanza Galicia) chose a song that he said was "very important" for him, "because I used to dance a lot to that song, and [that's how] I met my wife."

Some chose a song that reminded them of a partner they loved or had loved, but who left them and broke their heart; Carlos (Caimalito) said "things happen, and you're just left with the memory, you can love a person so much and then they break up the relationship … and you're just left with the memory." Alicia, Esperanza Galicia) chose a song about jealousy, and said this was because she regretted having been so jealous throughout her long marriage, but that her husband's beautiful blue eyes attracted so many women that "even men were jealous of him!"

Other musical choices were significant as a means to articulate frustration about family discord experienced by the participants. Mercedes (Esperanza Galicia) chose to share a music video about a wayward son who abandons his parents, because 'something very similar happened to us with one brother'. Barbara (Cazucá) chose a song about vain, rich people thinking they are better than everyone else, because the song reminded her of a 'posh' sister she had quarrelled with. Anger and disappointment with unfaithful and unreliable romantic partners also featured in the conversations. Adriana (Manizales) chose a song that reminded her of her oldest daughter's father and how she struggled to get by after he abandoned her:

> When I got pregnant by my daughter's father, my oldest daughter, he cleared off, when he realised I was pregnant he went off … and I felt very lonely, he turned his back on me, well he never told me not to have [the baby], but well he was never by my side … he said he'd help but no, he never gave me anything and I had to work.

Thus music sometimes stimulated conversations about painful and difficult family issues and dynamics that the participants had experienced in their own lives and wanted to talk about. Anabel (Cazucá) shared a song about a man who gets drunk and beats his wife, before begging for forgiveness and then subsequently repeating the behaviour. Anabel explained that she first heard the song just a few months after

her own mother's death at the hands of a physically abusive partner. She said that she does not listen to the song often, but that when she does it "really gets to me", reminding her of what happened to her own mother and "to many women, because it happens in this country, sadly, but not just here, in many places, I think … this is the song that moves me most."

Several participants chose a song that reminded them of people they were grieving for. Juan (Caimalito) chose a song on the theme of close friendship, and said "it makes me sad, thinking about so many friends who've died." Sofia (Caimalito) chose a song that reminded her of a cousin who was killed, saying that the cousin "was crazy for that song." The songs appeared to enable participants to keep the memories of people alive, and to express and manage their sadness and grief; "remembering is living", commented Sofia's partner. One conversation was stopped by the researchers when the participant (Alba, Caimalito), after choosing a song that reminded her of a brother she had lost two years previously, became too overwhelmed with emotion to speak. In this instance, the researchers put an end to the conversation and stayed with the participant to chat about cooking and other interests, until she was calm. This experience highlighted the unpredictability of music-evoked responses; although Alba had chosen the song that was shared in the conversation, and listened to it voluntarily, the sound of the music produced an emotional response so strong that she was unable to speak about it. This also highlights the enormous sensitivity and care needed from researchers, and underlines the need to ensure that psychosocial support is available to deal with negative emotional responses to stimuli, even of the participants' choice.

Experience/activity

The second most common musical choice was one that reminded participants of significant experiences or activities that they enjoyed or were proud of. Many of these choices related to socialising, dancing or listening to favourite music styles, usually

with reference to the past. Laura (Esperanza Galicia) chose a piece of folkloric music that reminded her of being named queen of the local festival when she was seven years old: "I wore a tiara of flowers … I was the queen of the festival and my mum was so happy." Juana (Cazucá) chose traditional music which she showed the researchers how to dance to, and talked about how she never danced in her childhood (her grandparents did not allow it), but that she learned as an adult and now often enjoyed dancing. Francisca (Esperanza Galicia) chose a song that reminded her of listening to music in her youth: "I was very young, really young, and I always used to listen to a radio station called…oh! I can't remember what it's called, one that plays romantic music, well I used to listen to all that music." Virginia (Manizales) talked about listening to LPs that she played on her record player, and Lucía (Caimalito) chose a song that she said she had liked since she was 17; "it was my music, I listened to it day and night." Thus music linked participants with current and previous occasions in their lives when they enjoyed listening or dancing to it, and reminded them of who they were or had been.

Others chose music that reminded them of drinking with friends, singing at school, or previous livelihoods. Rogelio (Caimalito) requested a song about a corner shop, explaining "that song reminds me of a lot, so much. I was about 14, and since that age I've liked [the idea of having] a shop, my dad did and so did I." Tina (Esperanza Galicia) spoke about two songs (although she could only remember the name of the second, and that is the song that was shared in the conversation), and spoke at length about the significance of them both. The first, she said, was linked to a pivotal moment in her life:

> There are two songs that I like a lot, well, I mean with the first it isn't that I like it but that it reminds me of, of the day when I released everything, everything that was hurting me and I was able to go through a process, really, of [achieving] a new way of thinking, of thinking that

> I wasn't going to suffer because of things in the past any more, but I was going to be happy again, so this is a song, even though it's sad, well it was the one that helped me to carry out this process … And the other song … I like a lot because it reminds me of my childhood … it's a song that, I don't know, I've identified a lot with all my life … I'm not religious but I do believe in God, so I think that every step I've made has been calculated, because God had it planned that way, thought out for me, so now … [this song] … is like a hymn for me, I love this song and really, I don't know, I identify with it.

Place

After people and experiences, references to place were the most commonly cited reasons given for musical significance and choices. Participants talked about music 'transporting' them to other geographical locations they were displaced from, and used the music as a tool to articulate their attachment to homeland:

> I don't know any songs but when I hear this one it transports me, it takes me to that place because these were the songs you used to hear a lot [there] … it's history … I used to like hearing that record … when I hear [it] I remember all that … the farm (Mateo, Caimalito).

Similarly, Isabel (Caimalito) said that her song 'transports me' and talked about a place she lived in twenty five or so years previously. Emilia (Esperanza Galicia) spoke of the place her song reminded her of, and how "one stays attached to that piece of land there." Music provided a tool for participants to remain emotionally connected to geographical spaces, and to express this emotional attachment.

Lyrics

Some participants identified closely with song lyrics, drawing a parallel between situations and experiences narrated in their chosen songs, and their own lives. For

these participants, song lyrics offered resources for understanding and articulating their own identity. Stefania (Manizales) chose a song that narrates the story of a woman who does not know who her father is, because 'I am 'nobody's daughter' (reference to song's lyrics), I never knew my dad, I never knew who my dad was, so I like this song because it talks about … nobody's daughter, about someone who doesn't have a dad'. Julieta (Manizales) chose a song about a rebellious woman, and used this to articulate her identification with the strong female character portrayed in the lyrics. Josefina (Manizales) chose a song about a hard-working woman struggling to provide for her children, and said "I like that song so much, because it talks about me, about, about what happened to me, I've had to be both mother and father for my children, what I've been through with them, it was just like this [song]." Carmen (Manizales) chose a song about migrants seeking to enter the USA via the US-Mexican border, and spoke at length about her identification with the suffering of the song's subjects, and how the song helped her to modulate her own feelings of sadness:

> That song is great, because it's about … [people] who migrate to another country … [I listen to this song] when I'm sad … when I want to remember … it's like a protective shield … music is a connection ... if you listen to the lyrics and pay attention to what they're saying, you feel that you identify somehow, it's like … yes, the person's suffering is somehow expressed through the music, so you get things off your chest.

Religion

In conversations that started with songs or music from church, participants spoke about the importance of their faith in their daily lives. These participants used music to express and affirm their belief in God, which helped them to endure difficult experiences, and to regulate emotions. Paloma (Cazucá) said "the song, well … I'm fascinated by that Catholic music … because it's something that takes you … that takes you into yourself and … well that song makes me cry, with all the sadness one

lives through." Pilar (Manizales) chose the song that was played when she was baptised at an Adventist church, and said "I always ask for that song because nobody can separate me from the love of God … I first got to know the love of Jesus Christ when I was displaced, before that I did not know God." Eduardo (Esperanza Galicia) spoke of the "strength" that his faith gave him, and his musical choice served as a sign of this faith and strength.

Conflict/displacement

Some participants shared their song, and made immediate reference to personal experiences of Colombia's conflict:

> I was nine years old when a guerrilla grabbed me … and [demanded] "Where does your dad work?" (Ximena, Caimalito).

> [F]ive years ago I came here, displaced … they threatened my husband (Violeta, Cazucá)

> When I lived in the countryside I saw what it was really like because … when we were there … first there were guerrillas … but they kept to themselves because they weren't really visible in the town … and then the paramilitaries came and they were really armed and they were the ones in control and the police couldn't do anything (Cecilia, Manizales).

These participants did not use phrases (such as 'that song reminds me of') to describe how their song choices connected to their memories of conflict, and we did not insist that people explain why their musical choice reminded them of conflict. However, it may be possible that this is a reflection of how they, and others, typically 'represent' their life experience. Since people seeking state reparations in Colombia must fit into specific categories of 'victimhood' to be recognised as 'deserving' of support, they are accustomed to adhering to a certain 'script' in their interactions with officials, which focuses solely on their experiences of violence. While we cannot confirm this, it could

be that some have internalised this official expectation and that they approached the research encounter with this in mind.

Listening to people

In our music-enhanced interviews with internally displaced people in Colombia, recorded songs and music tracks were used as resources for participants to choose the narratives with which they wanted to start their life histories. Accustomed to being treated as "potential liars" during formal meetings with representatives of state institutions (Celestina, 2018: 78), internally displaced people often find that their experiences are not recognised or believed (Ángel, 2019: 8). As a result, many feel high levels of distrust and powerlessness, and their ongoing experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation erode self-esteem and psychosocial wellbeing (Tamayo-Agudelo and Bell, 2018). By choosing music as an elicitation device around which to structure our interviews, we aimed to create spaces of conversation in which participants could share their musical preferences with us and thereby 'territorialise' the research encounter, rendering it a more familiar environment through featuring their own music tastes. Since there are no expected or 'correct' answers to questions of musical preferences, we hoped that participants would feel able to start their life stories at whichever point they chose, and feel greater ownership and control over their narratives than in more conventional interviews.

Feedback from the research participants indicates that, for those who chose to share and talk about a significant song, the experience was generally a positive one that enabled them to talk in ways that they found beneficial for their wellbeing. Rogelio said that he had 'felt good' during the research encounter, and expressed pride in the richness of his regional culture; "salsa, the *chirimía* [pre-Colombian wind instrument], we like it a lot." For internally displaced people in Colombia, there are few public opportunities to articulate pride in aspects of cultural identity, and talk about music

provided such opportunities. Many participants spoke of the conversation about music providing them with an opportunity to 'unburden' themselves:

> The truth is … well, the truth is that it feels good, because I unburdened myself…I mean, there are things that you can't just tell anyone, [but] you let things go when you talk about what happened, because the truth is it's not easy to forget, and it feels supportive to talk to you [the researchers], you see? It's like letting things go, you … you feel lighter (Diego, Manizales).

> Well … it's like a relief … a weight that you feel lifting, because you're being listened to, you're being understood (Ester, Esperanza Galicia).

> Before, I was tormented by my memories, I had never emptied this weight and told my story (Antonio, Caimalito).

Many participants said that the conversations about music had provided them with their first opportunities to talk through their life experiences, or to share their experiences with other members of their household. This was described as a healing and therapeutic process, and on occasion it led the participant to take action to address previously unacknowledged psychosocial problems:

> [The music conversation] helped me a lot, after you came here … I went to the hospital … and asked for an appointment and then spoke to a doctor and he told me, "You have this and that" … I felt a lot better afterwards … if you hadn't come, I don't know, I'd just be here depressed (Sandra, Caimalito).

> Yes, the truth is yes, I'd never even spoken with her [my wife] about these things, the truth is I never talk about them with my friends either because these are things you don't want to remember, but in some way, you feel like you're drowning, you feel like you're holding something

> inside and … it's a weight … carrying this inside you every day without anybody realising is really tough (Mario, Caimalito).

Music appears to have provided participants with a resource to start talking about themselves without fear of judgement:

> Well, it feels pleasant, because you can talk about what happened to you and nobody is criticising, so you feel good, it's like letting go of things, so it's really nice (Lara, Cazucá).

The music-enhanced interviews generated spaces in which a diverse range of human experience was shared, discussed and highlighted. The opportunity to choose music to share brought amusement and humour to the research encounter, allowing the building of trust and rapport between researchers and participants. For the participants, whose experiences of displacement so frequently define them in public life, talking about music and the memories and emotions it evokes provided opportunities to express numerous other aspects of their identities, such as pride in achievements, romantic experiences, and enjoyment of dancing and singing. Music acted as a reference point and catalyst for participants to articulate their values, beliefs, fears, hopes, pleasures, attachments, capacities, skills and forms of knowledge, and to talk about love, loss, family discord, bereavement, longing, pain and other feelings that are often difficult to approach and put into words.

The use of music as an elicitation device can present particular challenges. First, WiFi needs to be reliable or mobile data sufficient, which may be costly depending on the geographical location. Second, the method can be time-consuming to explain to participants, who are accustomed to official categories of 'victimhood' and may find it hard to believe that they are being asked to talk about music. We found that some participants thought they needed to sing or even compose music, or had not thought in advance about what music they wanted to share. Clarifying the methodology before

conversations could begin therefore often required considerable time input from researchers, although these occasions also gave rise to humour and allowed rapport-building. Finally, and most importantly, music can never be approached as a predictable stimulus-response device; it may generate unwanted feelings and emotional distress, and the appropriate psychosocial support should be available if it is to be used to elicit life histories.

Conclusion

To return to *Desert Island Discs*, Hua Hsu wrote in a recent *New Yorker* article (2020) that the guests' musical choices offer "insight into why these people chose the paths that eventually brought them fame". Our music-enhanced interviews in Colombia have also offered valuable insights, into the heterogeneity of experiences of marginalised people whose voices are seldom heard in public spaces, and whose identities are predominantly defined from without in terms of victimhood and conflict. For these people, music created safe and dignified spaces in which to share not only their suffering and loss, but also the skills, knowledge and capacities that they drew on as they sought to rebuild their lives in new places, and the particular difficulties they encountered during these processes.

Hazel Marsh, M. Teresa Armijos and Roger Few, "'Telling it in our own way': Doing music-enhanced interviews with people displaced by violence in Colombia", *New Area Studies* 1:1 (2020), 132-164.

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