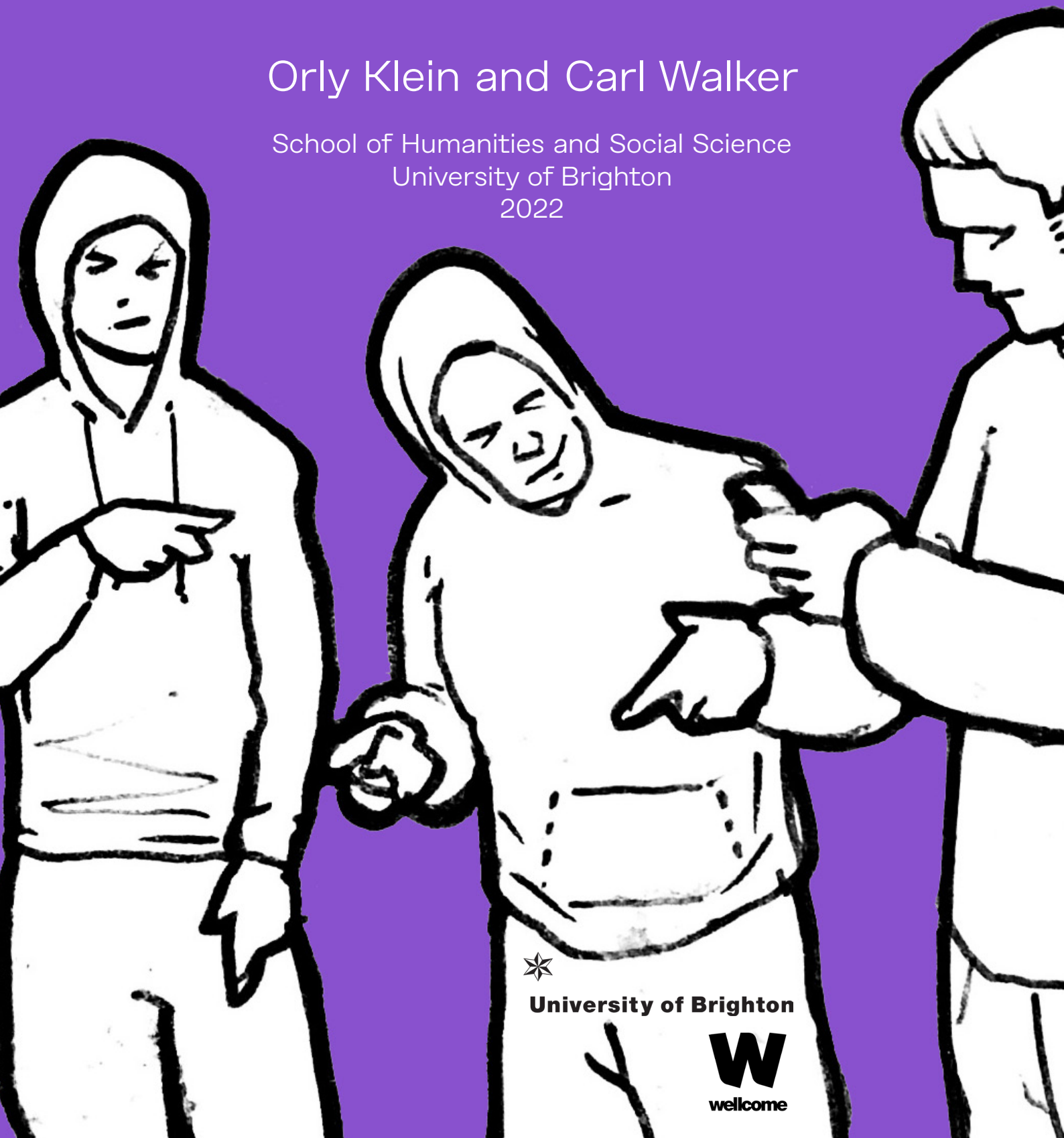


AUDIOACTIVE

AN EVALUATION OF ROOM TO RANT

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2022



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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Based on the considerable success of the highly specialist support provided by Room to Rant, it is recommended that Audioactive be funded by local commissioners seeking to support 'hard to reach' groups of young people.
2. Given that Room to Rant yields very effective outcomes for groups of young people that statutory services traditionally struggle to support, Young People's Mental Health Service commissioners should consider Audioactive not only as a creative community enterprise, but as a community-based mental health intervention, providing a vital service.
3. It is recommended that future attempts to evaluate the impact of preventative and ameliorative community mental health interventions for young people adopt a similar participatory, palette-based methodological framework. This particular creative mixed methods approach allows researchers and commissioners to accommodate the huge diversity of preferences, motivations, and abilities amongst the target group. In so doing it allows a more effective way of capturing the lived experience of young people.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



1. Young men can experience high levels of complex needs, reflecting troubled backgrounds, difficult circumstances and mental distress. Young men make up 75% of all suicides in the UK, with suicide the single biggest killer of men aged under 35. In addition, young men are denoted as a 'hard to reach' population, and are the least likely of all demographics to access and engage with talking therapies or seek help and support from statutory services. All of this indicates a vital need for innovative approaches which overcome barriers to help-seeking and engage young men in projects which provide an alternative to traditional talking therapies.
2. Room to Rant is one such project. Run by Audioactive - a Sussex-based youth music charity - 16-25 year olds who identify as male, engage in rap workshops facilitated by professional artist practitioners and a counsellor. In weekly workshops, the young men are guided and mentored through their artistic development while being offered numerous opportunities and avenues to share their fears, feelings and difficulties.
3. The project was evaluated using a methodological framework designed in consultation with previous members of Room to Rant (R2R). The framework was characterised by a particular form of mixed methods approach, which offers a palette of methods for participants to engage with as they wish. This was designed to accommodate the huge diversity of preferences, motivations, and abilities amongst the target group. In so doing, it served to increase accessibility, minimise exclusionary practices, and allowed people to engage with the research on their own terms.
4. The evaluation revealed that young men were mainly drawn to R2R because of their passion for rap and their wish to improve their MC skills. Rather than being put off by the therapeutic element, the provision of this within the context of a rap workshop, piqued their curiosity. The underpinning of trust in Audioactive as a respected provider overcame the barriers to engagement and brought them into the workshops.
5. Once in, the young men found sessions which were fun, unorthodox and unshackled by the usual strictures of ground rules and contracts. Instead, the group operates as a shared and fundamentally inclusive space, skilfully guided by two facilitators who act as role models for what's expected and what's possible. The facilitators allow the rules of engagement to emerge organically from within the room and become established through shared understandings and relationships, rather than being imposed as an explicit set of pre-ordained rules and regulations which must be adhered to.
6. The usual format for the two-hour sessions begins with a freestyle session and chance to share any songs they have been working on during the week; followed by a checking-in with each individual around the room; a shared pizza which everyone eats together; followed by a writing challenge and a performance of what's been written. The writing challenges are designed by the two facilitators, in discussion with the counsellor, and adapted to meet the needs and interests of the people who attend, as well as being responsive to anything that emerges during the session.
7. The workshops promote a strong ethic of truth and authenticity with respect to the lyric-writing, using rap as a vehicle for accessing and expressing thoughts and difficulties. This also works to help members gain clarity and cohesion through narrating their experiences, and strengthens their sense of self. By modelling and encouraging a sense of strength through vulnerability, the facilitators create a space to explore non-toxic, inclusive forms of masculinity and challenge negative beliefs.



8. R2R is uniquely structured to offer multiple avenues for sharing difficult thoughts and experiences, whether it be through the check-ins, the rapping and/or in private with the counsellor. By actively building relationship and establishing trust, R2R is able to break down the usual barriers to disclosure and so provides a vital safety valve. R2R facilitators and counsellor are therefore able to pick up on safeguarding issues and trigger emergency referrals that can be life-saving.
9. The check-ins are a key part of the session and what makes R2R stand out from other similar groups. It is a round-table exercise, whereby each individual has the chance to talk about how they are and what's going on for them. Most members relish the opportunity to share their thoughts and difficulties, and receive advice, support and feedback. While for those listening, it's a powerful tool for fostering empathy, connection and kindness.
10. The sessions generate a strong sense of connectedness and community through the various relational practices, such as the shared pizza and the check-ins, as well as the vulnerable, exposing practice of sharing what they've written and performing in front of each other. These create a sense of brotherhood which serves to reduce isolation, build confidence and strengthen resilience; profoundly altering their aspirations and sense of themselves in the world.
11. In conclusion, Room to Rant successfully creates a vibrant, dynamic and nurturing space in which young men engage in activities which are fun, creative and therapeutic. Using rap as a culturally credible vehicle for openness and honesty, the young men encounter a variety of opportunities to share their fears and difficulties, and in return receive support, guidance and validation. Working with experienced, respected artists, the young men gain a sense of progress and accomplishment in an activity they love, which serves to bolster their view of themselves and their abilities. The sessions are skilfully built around relational practices which encourage empathy, understanding and kindness, and foster a strong sense of community and connectedness. This unique combination of factors successfully overcomes the usual obstacles to engaging with therapeutic services and has a powerful, transformative impact. Young men who engage with the project develop positive strategies for dealing with difficulty, improve their connections with others and strengthen their belief in their self-worth and ability.
12. Room to Rant offers vital work which succeeds where other services fail. It successfully engages young men with complex and multiple needs in unique, innovative ways which improve their wellbeing and help replace damaging and dangerous behavioural strategies with positive, constructive ones. R2R successfully disrupts their current and expected pathways, opening up new possibilities for ways of being; and enables young men who are struggling with multiple difficulties, to thrive.

" BRAIN STATE TO FLUCTUATE
FDWN INTO OUTER SPACE
MY BODY REMAINS AWAKE
HATE REVERSE THROUGH THE DAY TO DAY
WITH MY HEART PUMPING
JUST KEEP AWAKE
R2R KEEPS ME SAFE
MAKES MY LIFELESS BODY
RISE AGAIN
JUMP AROUND LIKE HOUSE OF PAIN
SAY WHAT I SAY WITH A FORCE OF A TIDAL WAVE
MAKES MY BRAIN INTERNALLY RAVE
BLOOD RUSHING ROUND MY FACE
COS I'M BACK FROM THE GRAVE
PUSHED INTO MY TODAY
COS THEY MAKE EVERYTHING OK



INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND



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Young men comprise a highly vulnerable group, often experiencing high levels of complex needs which can both reflect and mask troubled backgrounds, difficult circumstances and mental distress (Conrad and White 2010). In addition, suicide is the single biggest killer of men aged under 35 in the UK and 75% of all suicides in the UK are of young men (ONS 2019).

Compounding the problem is the fact that young men are denoted as a 'hard to reach' population (Curtis et al 2004), less likely to access and engage with talking therapies or seek help and support from statutory services (Rice et al 2017). Indeed young men experiencing mental ill health report the lowest rates of professional help-seeking of any demographic group across the lifespan (Rickwood, 2012).

All of this indicates a vital need for innovative, gender-specific approaches to overcoming barriers to help-seeking and engaging young men in projects which provide an alternative to traditional talking therapies. These must offer a safe way to explore difficult feelings and challenge unhealthy attitudes and self-jeopardising behaviours (Zlotowitz et al 2016), and seek to improve wellbeing in holistic and non-prescriptive ways.

Room to Rant steps into this gap. Run by Audioactive - a Sussex-based youth music charity - in collaboration with YMCA Downslink - the biggest third sector provider of young people's mental health provision in Sussex - Room to Rant (R2R) works with those who identify as male, aged 16-25, offering rap workshops facilitated by professional artist practitioners and a counsellor. In weekly workshops, the young men are guided and mentored through their artistic development while being offered numerous opportunities and avenues for sharing their fears, feelings and difficulties. Billed as a space to 'get things off your chest', the focus is on rapping, rather than on any pressure to disclose and share for therapeutic purposes. Rap gives the young men an authentic voice and a unique vehicle for self-exploration and self-expression, thereby offering greater appeal and opportunity for engagement.

A pilot run of workshops found that most of the participants had experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse in childhood and a higher than average percentage had been in the care system. Many were or had recently been homeless or in insecure housing, and had extensive debts and financial stresses. Almost all had adopted coping strategies which impacted negatively on themselves and those around them, including drug and alcohol addictions arising out of their trauma. Many were facing extensive barriers to social inclusion, such as mental health issues, poor communication skills and illiteracy, all of which had a significant impact on their wellbeing and ability to thrive.

Room to Rant workshops are facilitated by two professional rap artists who are trained in dealing with mental health, safeguarding issues etc. Also in the room each week is a qualified counsellor provided by YMCA Downslink, who offers individual counselling sessions and signposts to relevant agencies.

The workshops are 2 hours long and typically structured around the following format:

- a. Most weeks kick off with a **freestyling** session in which participants freestyle to a beat often chosen by one of the participants. People also have a chance to share any songs that they have been working on during the week and get some feedback or advice from the facilitators and other participants.
- b. This is followed by a **check-in** around the room, where each person is asked how they are and how their week has been. This offers a unique opportunity to talk about any struggles or difficulties the young men have been grappling with and a chance for the others to give advice or feedback.
- c. **Pizza.** Every week, a facilitator brings large pizzas from a local pizzeria for everyone to share.
- d. a **writing challenge**, in which everyone is given a specific task or topic, a beat chosen by one of the members and a set amount of time (usually 20-30 minutes) to write a rap.
- e. a **performance**, where everyone raps what they have written to the whole group.

METHOD

"

SEE I WAS AN ADDICT
IT WAS MADNESS
I WOULD BOUNCE WITH EMOTIONS
BRAIN EROSIONS
SOUNDS OF OCEANS EXPLODING
I'M IN THE MOMENT
MOVEMENT OF THE CHOSEN
IM CLOSER TO A PURPOSE THAN TURNING OVER
IM BURNING CLOVERS TO KEEP THE
VAMPIRE DEMONS FROM SEEKING
FOR MAKING ME GRIEVING HERE I'M SEEKING
I HEAR YOU BLEEDING

A) THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Everyone involved with Room to Rant had a keen sense of the extensive positive impacts upon the lives and wellbeing of the young men who attend. However, quantitative tools such as the Warwick-Edinburgh scale, though useful and highly favoured are limited in gathering rich data (Walker 2017), and are unable to capture the complex and turbulent trajectories of the lives of these young men, and the depth and breadth of the impacts on their overall wellbeing. The aim of the research was therefore to develop an evaluative framework which was sufficiently nuanced and sensitive as to capture the breadth and complexity of impacts of the project. Within this framework, the study sought answers to two key questions:

1. In what ways does Room to Rant impact on the lives and wellbeing of its members?
2. What aspects of its structure and operation are key in terms of its impact?

B) DESIGN AND METHOD

The project evaluation was designed in consultation with previous members of Room to Rant in order to align with the project's aims and approaches, and ensure a more 'culturally credible' form of research (Wilkinson 2016). A focus group was carried out with 8 previous members of Room to Rant and the two workshop facilitators in order to generate ideas for the evaluative framework. This process highlighted a huge diversity with regards to preferences, skills, motivations, and abilities. Out of this came a design for a particular form of mixed methods approach, which offers a palette of methods for participants to engage with as they wish (Mason 2006). This approach is particularly suitable for a number of reasons. Firstly that as a highly diverse and differentiated group, a 'one size fits all' approach to research is exclusionary and unethical (Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2018). Secondly, as a 'hard to reach' population, enabling members to participate on their own terms can help to increase engagement (Leyshon et al 2013). Thirdly, offering a suite of methods gives young people a greater opportunity to communicate the complexities of their lives, thereby enhancing the richness and usefulness of the information that is gleaned (Langevang 2007).

One requisite which emerged from the collaborative design process, was that the researcher should not simply sit and observe the sessions, but instead should participate alongside everyone else. This participant observation approach is well established in the social sciences, and served to enrich the researcher's understanding of the processes and effects of engaging with the workshops.

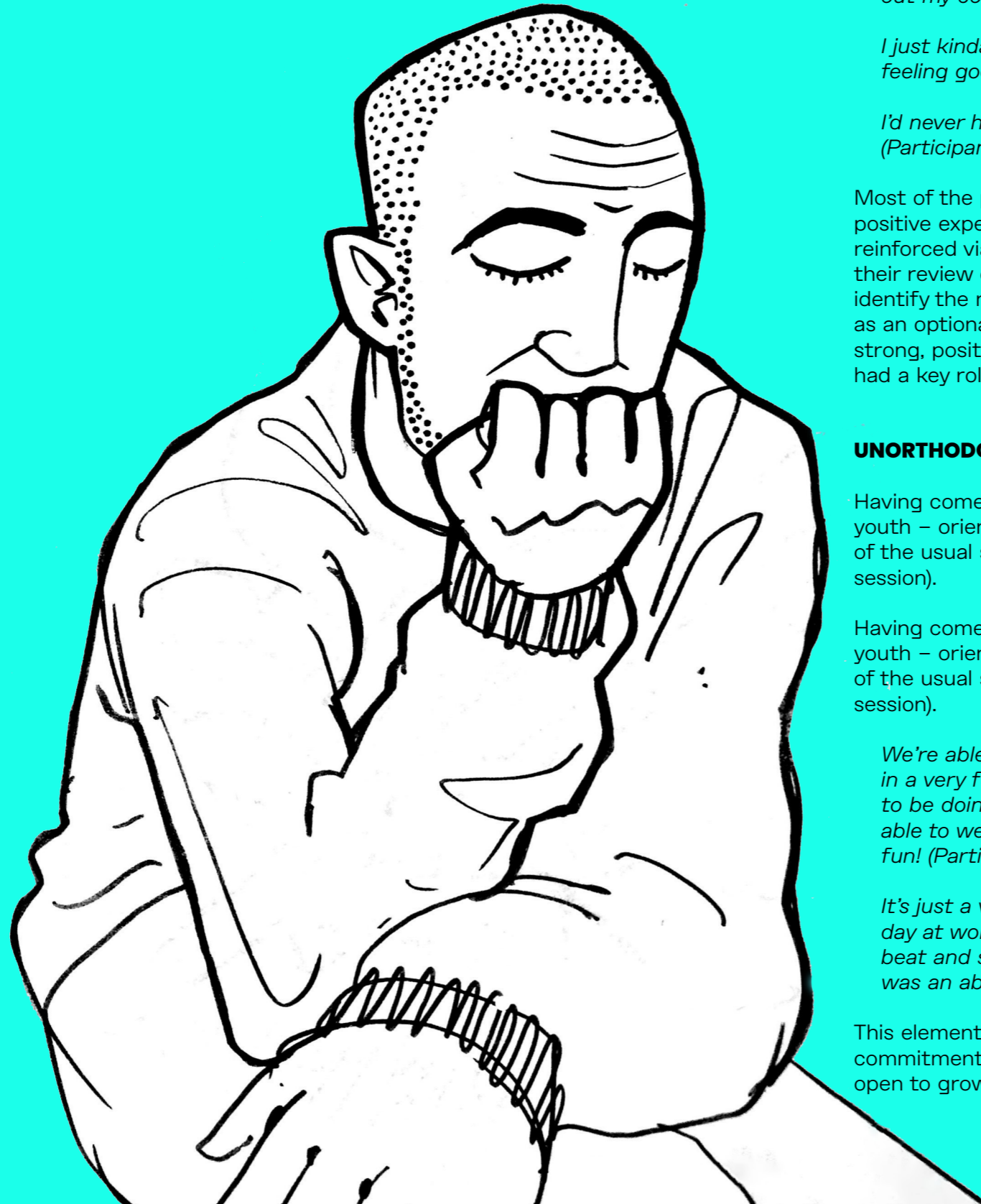
The final data pool comprised of: 4 semi-structured interviews, 4 unstructured interviews, 1 qualitative questionnaire, 1 group discussion, 1 audio-recorded response to questions sent by text, 14 sets of lyrics on the topic of Room to Rant, and 15 participant observations.

C) DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the range of different data. This is a pragmatically and theoretically flexible analytic paradigm (Braun and Clarke 2006) that allows researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns within qualitative data. It was therefore ideal for working with the various sources of information, identifying similarities and differences, and pulling out the key themes from the data. All names have been changed in order to protect anonymity.



FINDINGS



PASSION, CURIOSITY AND TRUST

As this is a demographic that is typically seen as hard to reach and reluctant to engage with any form of therapeutic work, it is important to identify the routes and reasons for joining the workshops. It was clear from the responses that the main draw was the rap, as this was something that they loved and wanted to be good at. However, the addition of the therapeutic element made these stand out from other rap workshops already on offer and interestingly, rather than being off-putting, piqued their curiosity:

I don't really trust no counsellor and I lost trust in a lot of people. But I was kind of intrigued to how counselling would come into an AudioActive session, I was a bit curious. So I thought I'd go out my comfort zone, just this once and go check it out. (Participant 4)

I just kinda liked the sound of it, because I really like rapping. And the idea of it being about feeling good and about rapping, sounded really good. (Participant 1)

I'd never heard of counselling and music like that before, so that definitely intrigued me. (Participant 5)

Most of the participants were already involved with other AudioActive projects which created positive expectations of what R2R would be like, and importantly, secured their trust. This was reinforced via R2R recommendations from trusted AudioActive members they already knew. In their review of the research on 'hard to reach' communities Boag-Munroe and Evangelou (2012) identify the need to build trust prior to any attempt to secure engagement, rather than viewing it as an optional extra which may develop after engagement has been established. To this end, the strong, positive reputation of AudioActive and the building of relationships with Audioactive staff had a key role in bringing the young men into the workshops.

UNORTHODOX AND UNSHACKLED

Having come through the door, participants found workshops that differed from many of the other youth – oriented groups they had previously been involved with. Many were struck by the absence of the usual standardised format of such groups (sit quietly, do introductions, outline plans for the session).

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We're able to kick it with the freestyle right off the top and literally just settle ourselves into it in a very fun way. Instead of 'hi guys, we're going to be doing this today, and then we're going to be doing that.' I like how unconventional and unorthodox it is in terms of its approach. Being able to welcome everyone to the table, even if they don't wanna rap, they just wanna vent, it's fun! (Participant 5)

It's just a very good place to harness and hone new skill, and have a good time. If I have a bad day at work for example, I'll be happy to know that I can go along and rap over some ridiculous beat and say whatever and go home and go to bed feeling like today is a win, even though it was an absolute loss. It's just great fun. (Participant 3)

This element of having fun isn't incidental, but borne out of a shared love of the music, and a commitment to creating a space where people can relax and enjoy themselves; making them more open to growth and learning.

It's that feeling of easy-goingness where everything isn't so threatening and brittle. Where there's room for exploring and considering possibilities. And when someone is laughing, they are suspending their disbelief for a second, they're confident and content enough to consider other possibilities. (Facilitator)

Another aspect that makes this group stand out is through an absence, rather than a presence; of there being no ground rules, contracts or hierarchical sanctioning. Instead, the group operates in a shared, communal way, skilfully guided by two facilitators who allow the members to shape the norms and expectations, whilst themselves acting as models of what is possible and desirable.

People come because of their passions, they're not coming for their mental health, they're coming cos they rap, they're coming to get better at something that they already love. And the people who are running the sessions are very much into rap and it's their passion as well. So it allows a point of meeting, a level playing field rather than a top-down thing where we're the facilitators and they're the service users. (Facilitator)

This means that the rules of engagement emerge organically from within the room, and are established implicitly through shared understandings and maintained through relationship, rather than being imposed as an explicit set of pre-ordained regulations which must be adhered to.

There are some lines you cannot cross and nobody does cross them. It's such a super safe place and there's just no judgement and everyone's just happy with what you're saying. If you put something down they'll just pick it up and look at it instead of just picking it up and casting it aside, or casting you aside. (Participant 3)

Challenges come within the context of it being a rap workshop and improving your artistry, rather than punishment or exclusionary practices.

(field notes) One guy performs a song he's written about heartache. It's powerful and moving, but he names a list of women/girls who have hurt him, which makes me wince. The whole group gives very generous positive feedback about the song and he's beaming, but a facilitator picks up the point about the naming. This leads to a discussion around the room about respecting women and also how naming specific individuals makes it harder for an audience to connect with the song. I can see that really hitting home with him.

This approach is further reinforced by the fundamentally inclusive ethic of the group. As the main facilitator says, 'If you can rap, you can come'. Members who have been barred from other groups and organisations can find a space within the group which allows for individual needs and ways of being, while still holding a strong sense of communality and shared experience. One facilitator describes how R2R was able to keep working with a member who had been excluded elsewhere, by enabling him to express his thoughts via rap, which then helped to make sense of his behaviour:

We had this thing where we would ask each other questions in freestyle, and so I would say things like 'What's the best thing that's ever happened to you?' and he would rap the answer back to me. So on one occasion I asked 'Why do you always turn the paintings upside down when you come into a room?' And his answer - in freestyle - was that the whole system was upside down. And this room and this building was a representation of the system, so he was just showing it how it was. (Facilitator)

The weekly sessions are designed by the two facilitators, in discussion with the counsellor, and adapted to meet the needs and interests of the people who attend, as well as being responsive to anything that emerges during the session.

We tailor what we're going to do each time dependent on who's there and what comes up. It's not a blanket thing - we always have the check-in, the freestyle and the writing, but it's very much tailored to whoever's, whatever's there and I think that's really important. (Counsellor 1)

(field notes) 'Participant 6 included strong anti-vax lyrics in a song he'd been working on. Got loads of positive feedback. During the break, the facilitator casually went over to him and asked him about it. Said it seemed to be a big shift from stuff he's said in the past, and asked what had changed his mind. All very sensitively and respectfully handled. After the break, there was a group discussion about truth, fake news, how hard it is to sift through all the messages and videos on social media. Then the writing challenge was on the topic of Truth.

So rather than challenging the belief, the facilitator is firstly drawing upon his knowledge of the member to notice a change, and then querying where the change is coming from, getting the member to consider this for themselves. This then becomes an opportunity for a group discussion about truth and information and shapes the writing task for that week. This form of gentle challenge, guidance and incidental learning is particularly valuable given the age demographic of the group, and serves to shore up individual confidence and dignity.

TRUTH AND AUTHENTICITY

One of the striking things that came up frequently, was a strong commitment to truth, honesty and staying true to who you are within the lyric-writing. This was so passionately expressed as to almost be a vow, a pledge.

Rap is about being truthful. You could hook me up to a lie detector and ask me all the questions about my music and it would all be true. (Participant 4)

In this way, the workshops become an avenue for opening up about what's really going on, how they are really feeling. And that ethic of truth is constantly reinforced throughout the sessions, both implicitly and explicitly via the feedback.

I think the groups really good at saying 'yeah we've heard that a million times, but bring us something from within you.' That's when you get the more genuine, emotional stuff. (counsellor 1)
Rap music is therefore co-opted as a vehicle for accessing and expressing the truth. And rather than undermining or emasculating their sense of selves as young men, being open and vulnerable becomes a statement of strength and courage.



Rap is a great way for me to get stuck into saying what I want to say in musical form. It's given me the confidence to be vulnerable and own it, as opposed to saying stuff for the sake of saying it. It's normalised the notion of not having to be a hard man and be emotionally numb. A lot of what I do is based on honesty. No matter what I've gone through in the day, I'm gonna get it out in rap and it's literally better for my wellbeing. Just be honest and tell the truth. (Participant 5)

McGrane et al (2020) talk of a need for a 'masculine gateway' to engage young men who would otherwise find it hard to talk about their feelings to access and communicate what's going on in their heads, and it's clear that R2R's rap workshop does exactly this. I think in general the R2R take on things is almost the definition of hip hop's main doctrine, which is for things to be real, for it to be truthful. R2R is people expressing their pain and their doubts and their questions. To have 12 different people all speaking their truth and their own version of going deep like that together, that's a real statement. (Facilitator)

They're writing lyrics and they're encouraged to write those lyrics about things that are meaningful to them, important to them in their life. Which inevitably brings them to relationships, you know, pain, loss, emotions, stuff like that. (Counsellor 2)

Another powerful impact is through the narration of struggles and experiences, which helps to deepen their understanding of what's going on for them and integrate these into a coherent sense of self.

I would describe my rap as emotional storytelling. Where it will always feel like you can relate to it. Sometimes I like to write about my ex girlfriend, where she killed herself. I feel like if I keep writing, it makes me feel better. Being at the group won't bring her back, but it helps me get some closure, in a way. (Participant 2)

It's about using rapping as a way to connect to yourself. It sits almost like writing a diary about your life and telling people. And just getting in touch with yourself in that way and exploring who you are and reflecting on your life. Using lyric-writing in that way, that's unique and really powerful for these guys. (Counsellor 1)

Erikson (1963) denotes adolescence and early twenties as a period of Identity formation, whereby individuals need to work their way through obstacles and opportunities in order to create a clear sense of self. Armed with the knowledge of who you are and what you need or want, young adults can go into the world and make decisions about their lives, jobs, and relationships that are right for them. This process of identity formation can be hard and dispiriting, but is vital in forging a strong sense of self which helps to build resilience and self confidence in the face of all the challenges that life brings. The work that is done in R2R, and the focus on personal story-telling are therefore valuable tools in preparing for adult life and steering through what Vigh (2009) describes as the turbulent waters of social navigation. Given that many of the young men who come to R2R experience considerable socio-economic disadvantage and marginalisation, this process is a powerful way of enabling the emergence of a different story, the possibility of a move away from circumscribed and expected pathways, to something better (Skeggs 2004).

Being able to control your own narrative by writing it out and looking back at it and saying 'Oh, so this is how I felt about that situation.' And that's what hip hop or young people's music is a lot of. It's about their own narrative, putting their own stamp on the world and saying 'You might think that was what was happening, but this is what was happening for me.' (Facilitator)

EXPRESS TO DECOMPRESS

RR2R is uniquely positioned to offer multiple avenues for talking about struggles and fears. These include the group check-ins, the rap writing and performing, and private sessions with the counsellor. Members can take up as many or as few of these opportunities as they wish in order to examine events, thoughts or feelings they are finding difficult.

If someone were to ask me how I am, it would be incredibly hard for me to literally just say. The only way that I can externalise and explain what I'm going through is music. It makes my emotions, my mental state a lot easier for me to express. (Participant 5)

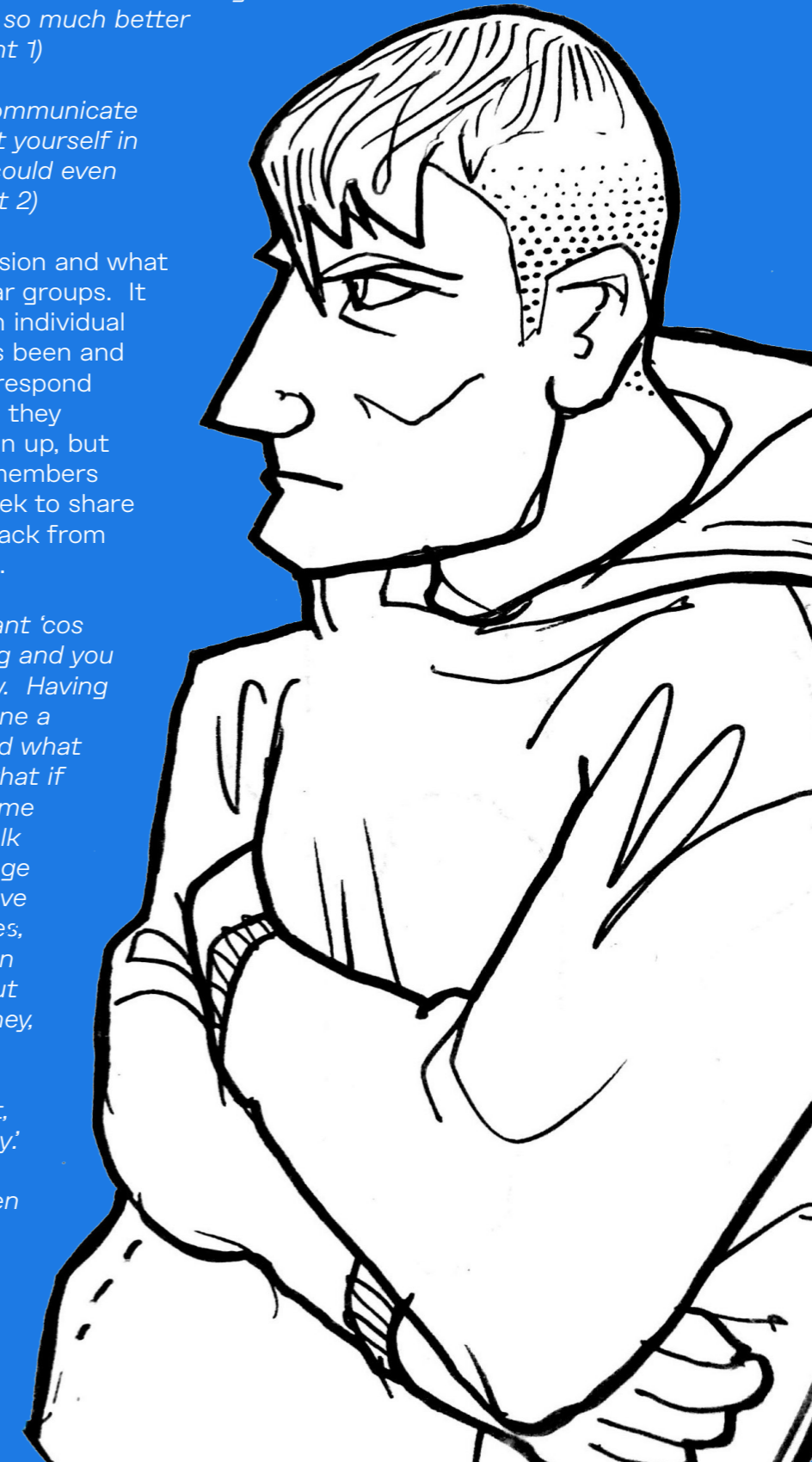
The biggest thing that helps with my head is talking about how I've been and writing about it at the sessions. Being able to talk about my experiences is so much better than just saying 'I'm fine.' (Participant 1)

The main things are being able to communicate with people. Being able to talk about yourself in ways which you never thought you could even think about. That's a lot. (Participant 2)

The **check-ins** are a key part of the session and what makes R2R stand out from other similar groups. It is a round-table exercise, whereby each individual is asked how they are, how their week's been and what's going on for them. People can respond with as much or as little information as they wish and are gently encouraged to open up, but without any pressure to do so. Most members make good use of this chance each week to share their trials and triumphs and get feedback from the facilitators and the other members.

The check-ins are extremely important 'cos everyone is going through something and you just don't know. You just don't know. Having check-ins in that space gives everyone a clear head as to where they're at and what we can do to help. It's normalising that if you're in a dark place there's no shame in saying it. Hearing other people talk about their stuff gives me the courage to talk. 'Cos if they are being so brave in opening up about their experiences, there's no reason why I can't be open about mine, no matter what it is. But then also having the bravery to go 'hey, me too!' (Participant 5)

Someone will be like 'You know what, I'm not having such a good day today.' And then somebody else will be like 'You know what, me neither' and then it's just nice. (Participant 3)



The check-ins therefore offer a powerful opportunity for generating empathy and kindness – everyone hears everyone else's struggles and everyone has the opportunity to offer advice and support. For the person sharing, it offers a chance to express what's in their head, be heard, be validated, and get some advice and perspective.

There's always somebody who's listening, especially the facilitators. And when you say something you'll always get feedback and they're gonna tell you how things are and give it to you straight. And that's what I respect so much. You could be having the worst day ever, and it's always like 'we're taking on your load and we're going to process it for you' and they always give you a new line of sight. And it's like 'This is so much better than I imagined! Why didn't I see this before?' That's what I really love. (Participant 3)

Talking through things is great and obviously listening to other people. Everyone's got their own shit going on, so hearing other people and feeling empathy for them is really awesome. Or talking through your stuff and other people listening to you is great. (Participant 1)

R2R brings a level of respect that most places don't have. Everyone's quiet when someone's speaking or rapping, people aren't pushy but aren't too much of a pushover. (Participant 4)

The rapping offers two very different opportunities for getting things off your chest. Firstly via written pieces that may be constructed during the writing challenges, or worked on during the week and brought in to share with the group. The lyric writing is an important part of the sessions, and one which many of the respondents denoted as their favourite part. It's a chance to be open and creative, and an important avenue for self-expression. Sometimes members use the raps to vent in ways which they can't do elsewhere, and it becomes a highly cathartic release of emotion. In describing one of the long term members, a facilitator says:

One of the things I've seen with him coming to R2R is he's just exploded with expression and it comes out thick and fast and full of rage and feeling that he's been keeping pent up all this time. You could tell that there was this 20 years of not speaking up suddenly coming out, and he's looking people in the eye and he's becoming who he is. And you can see how the more of that he does, the more confident he's becoming. So that's a success, for it not to putrefy and be stowed away inside, but to come out and get some response to that. And for it to mean something, rather than it just be pain. (Facilitator)

Another valuable way that members can express and communicate is via the freestyle. This is a type of rapping that is off the cuff, unedited, stream of consciousness. But far from passive, it's alert and alive. Freestyling is both a way to be fully present in yourself in the moment and a point of connection and relationship. It can be fun, random, playful, witty, charged and cathartic.

If there's something been on my mind but I can't get at it in words, like I can't write it out, then freestyling is the best thing. If I'm feeling down in the dumps and I just want to not even think about it really, I can just freestyle and get whatever comes out first, and then it just captures the realness of that moment. (Participant 3)

Freestyling offers a form of free association, a way of saying things unedited, un-thought through. In this sense it is closely aligned to Freud's (2013) free association which is seen as a powerful way of bypassing the defences and avoiding any shame and silencing.

Freestyle is really different as you can't think about it, you just have to try to go with it. if you try to over-think it you have nothing! (Participant 1)

Freestyling is like, no filter! Whatever happens, happens. That's so important to me. In my life I'm a bit of a chronic over-thinker, I'm way too bad at over thinking and stuff. But when I go to R2R it's like 'You know what, screw that!' I don't have to think about every single minute detail and worry about the repercussions. I still do it outside, but in there, I can just say something without thinking about it, and it's just so relieving. (Participant 3)

Another way of expressing and exploring any fears and difficulties, is in private with the counsellor. The counselling set up at R2R is another aspect of its uniqueness, whereby the counsellor actively works to build trust and engagement with the members by attending the sessions each week and taking part in the activities.

Participating in the group is really important. I think if you don't interact then, you know, a lot of people in these groups have issues with authority or establishment - teachers, social workers, police - things like that, so it's really important for that human element to be shared with everybody and that you expose yourself as well. Because there's a lot of power in silence and not participating. I think that makes it quite even, we're all starting at the same position. (Counsellor 1)

I suppose it's about the relationship building and that might be particularly important when working with a group that are typically seen as hard to reach and have some misgivings and difficulties engaging with formal services. So this is part of trying to break that narrative and change the way they might relate to you as a counsellor, which doesn't come without you putting that work in, without you being there every week. (Counsellor 2)

By making the commitment to being there every week, the counsellor is also able to identify any particular issues going on with any member, speak to them in private during the session, encourage them into counselling or signpost them to relevant services if necessary. They are also able to raise any issues with the two facilitators, so that they are alert to what's going on and can amend their behaviour accordingly.



When we have our debriefing at the end of each session, we always go through it together - what did we notice, what was challenging, what did we think about what this person said. And then we deal with that. (Counsellor 1)

One of the vital things R2R can offer is a minimal or no waiting list and an above average number of sessions (currently 18). This means that members can be seen as soon as they are ready and there is a real potential for meaningful intervention and progress. This is particularly valuable given that this is a group who are not only seen as 'hard to reach' and reluctant to engage with talking therapies, but it's also a group whose age locates them at the margins of mental-health service provision, often falling through the gap.

There's a gap in mental health for young people between the age of about 17 and 25 where it's difficult to know what support they can access out there. Some of them can access CAMHS and other children and young people services, but as they get to 17+ CAMHS aren't considering them any more as the waiting list is about a year, so there's a gap for support. Or they may be 18+ in which case they are up against adult mental health services which are beyond stretched. (Counsellor 2)

R2R therefore sits in this service gap, filling it with a tailored, culturally credible therapeutic approach which works on many levels and is underpinned by a strong foundation of trust and connection created by the counsellor being there and participating each week.

Furthermore, in providing various avenues for expressing their fears and difficulties, R2R acts as a safety valve for those who typically avoid disclosure to other agencies and services. In doing so, the R2R facilitators and counsellor are able to pick up on safeguarding issues and trigger emergency referrals that can be life-saving.

CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

One of the most powerful things that comes through from observations and from the participants' responses, is the sense of connectedness and community that is fostered by the facilitators and the group as a whole.

I think being ready to talk about things and how you're doing creates a community and the thing that everybody has problems and stuff. Everyone who goes there is there because they need to talk about something or write about it or get stuff off their chest. Everyone's coming there for the same reason, cos their week's shit or they're feeling good and they want to work on something. It just creates a really interesting environment between being really creative and supportive to other people. (Participant 1)

It's all sort of friendly. I think a lot can seem really individual, but I think you'll always get people who come up to you and say 'oh that was sick what you did there' or whatever. Or even just hearing other people's work and stuff, as cos its rap it's such a personal thing as well. It's letting everyone else in the group in, even more so than when people ask 'how your week's been' or whatever. Through rap you can show even more how it makes you feel and let other people in. Since everyone is writing you're really respectful and since that's the main reason why everyone's there. (Participant 3)

The importance of this connection in breaking down social isolation came through strongly:

It's a family. I'd class all the main people in R2R as family. I don't have too many people I trust anymore. I don't go out much, I don't really do anything and so every Wednesday I get to come here and see my family. And that's very precious to me. (Participant 4)



A lot of the time I go there and I don't have much to say, but if something's happened, being able to talk that through there, having people to talk to is great. I think especially for me because I don't do too many social things and don't have many friends, so it's really good being able to talk through things with a lot of people. (Participant 1)

One unique element that helps to strengthen this sense of connection and community is sharing a pizza together.

It's like a family meeting sort of feel. We're eating a dinner, but of course none of us are related. It brings a family vibe, and that's good. (Participant 2)

Having a group of men being able to break bread and actually enjoy a pizza together, being able to remove all the stresses and being able to enjoy a pizza with your fellow brother. There's something very special about that. It provides a really deep sense of brotherhood. It encourages the whole 'we cry together, we eat together, we rap together,' you know. Everything that gets done in that space is done together. (Participant 5)

The pizza kinda unifies us all together and being able to crack jokes and laugh and enjoy that intimate moment of brotherhood. You really don't find that anywhere else. It's very rare that a mentor would go out of their way to literally feed all of us. (Participant 3)

This sense of nurturing and connection – feeding them in body and mind – has a tangible effect in the room. The pizza offers a shared experience, shared need and shared pleasure, enhancing the potential for building cohesive community bonds (Graham et al 2019). It also brings a light-hearted element to the session and is well timed, coming as it does after the check-ins. It therefore offers a balance to any heavy painful material that has been aired at the check-in. In addition, the regular provision of hot food is particularly important for those who are homeless, precariously housed, struggling with addictions or on very low incomes

The notion of brotherhood came up frequently in the responses, reflecting the strong sense of connection and community at R2R.

We build a sense of community in what they love. Hip hop is based around community. It's people-focused, and group focused. Everyone's hunting for a scene, they are looking for camaraderie, for some boys, a brotherhood or sisterhood that will hold them together and it feels like a true community. Some people don't have families and things like that and they are looking for that family. And that's what it is, it's a kind of unjudgmental space, in a way a kind of unconditional love. (Facilitator)

This is central to the workshops and emerges through the various relational practices, such as the shared pizza and the group check-ins, as well as sharing and listening to each other rapping, and knowing how exposing that is.

R2R gives a sense of brotherhood in life. In going out into the world and being able to find those same kind of relationships in their own life, through having established what it feels like. People look for what they know and what they expect, and so we give them a version of that, something that they can use as a model for the rest of the way they engage with the world. (Facilitator)

This sense of brotherhood provides solid ground, a firm foundation in an otherwise unstable and insecure environment (Fredriksen 2013). It can also help to foster a sense of acceptance and connectedness that builds strength and resilience. Our dreams and expectations of our future are largely shaped by family and cultural narratives, childhood experiences, and beliefs about our own abilities (Ray 2006). Those with experiences of childhood trauma, discrimination and disadvantage, may find it hard to hold a sense of self-worth and feed this into lowered aspirations and expectations of their future. In that sense, the facilitator above is describing an intention to disrupt these discourses and replace them with experiences of connection and belonging that will profoundly alter their aspirations and expectations of their lives to come and strengthen their place in the world.

A SENSE OF GROWTH AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

All the respondents voiced a clear sense of development as a result of coming to the sessions, and a strong sense of the positive impact the workshops had had on them. This impact was powerful on multiple levels which were personal, musical and relational, and compounded a sense of themselves as moving forward and getting better. Together, these built a sense of accomplishment, confidence and ambition.

It has challenged me, it has made me open up in ways that I wouldn't have. It's also provided a platform for me to say everything I need to say. Just being able to show up for myself and go 'I'm alright.' I'm brave enough to say that and to see that the more that I'm honest with myself, the quicker I get help, and the quicker I'm able to bounce back. (Participant 5)

If we're talking generally, it makes me a better person. It opens me up to more insight. I've always thought 'maybe I shouldn't do this and maybe I should do that' but as soon as I think of R2R I just think, 'you know what, go for it! Don't think about whatever, just have confidence and everything will be fine.' And I'd say that's definitely had a great impact on me. (Participant 3)

When you come here you feel like you can accomplish anything. You just feed off each other, get better, evolve. you get good advice, music advice, life advice, so you feel more true to yourself and more knowing what to do in your life. So it brings a bit of hope, a bit of structure, and instructions on how to cope. (Participant 4)

Research suggests that young men in their late teens and early twenties welcome opportunities to critically explore traditional notions of what it is to be men, and are open to looking beyond the standard stereotypes to identify new ways of being in the world (Connell 2002). However, they report having very few opportunities to do so in a safe, constructive way (Walsh and Harland 2021). It's clear that R2R provides this space, offering multiple opportunities to explore alternative, non-toxic forms of masculinity.



Be very prepared for your perception of what being a man is to be flipped on its head. And if you're willing and wanting to be challenged, if you're wanting to unlearn – 'cos that's what R2R has done for me. It's done a lot of unlearning and learning. (Participant 5)

All of us are unique and talented in our own way, but there's something very special and unique about having a community of people, even though there might be different elements of manhood, like androgyny, being gay, bi, trans. But it's so inclusive that even though it's important that it gets seen, it almost feels like none of that matters. (Participant 3)

The facilitators themselves are a key part of the learning, both as respected artists and as men who can model ways of being that are strong, relational, confident and respectful:

We see another side of masculinity come through, the kind of vulnerable side, and I think that's enabled because they've got a couple of role models in the room who are modelling that it's OK to do so, as older men who also love hip hop and rap, and they can prove it by showing you just how great they are. So there's people that the young man can look up to or at least see as peers. And then they're modelling that it's ok to talk about what's going on in your life, while also weaving it into your lyrics and being great as an MC. (Counsellor 2)

I think they're both great from a musical perspective and also just as people. Musically its great as you might want to go to them for something and you can just do that. Or I can workshop lyrics with them and get help with that, which is great. And then on a personal level or psychologically or whatever, it's really sick talking to them. I think what helps is that first and foremost they're MCs and then on top of that they are doing this, which I think makes a difference. (Participant 1)

I think rapping and freestyling are very exposing. There's a vulnerability in simply sharing what you've written and performing it, and often also a vulnerability in the content as well. They are risking looking a fool, but it's held well by the group, and through that experience they learn a different way of being. (Counsellor 1)

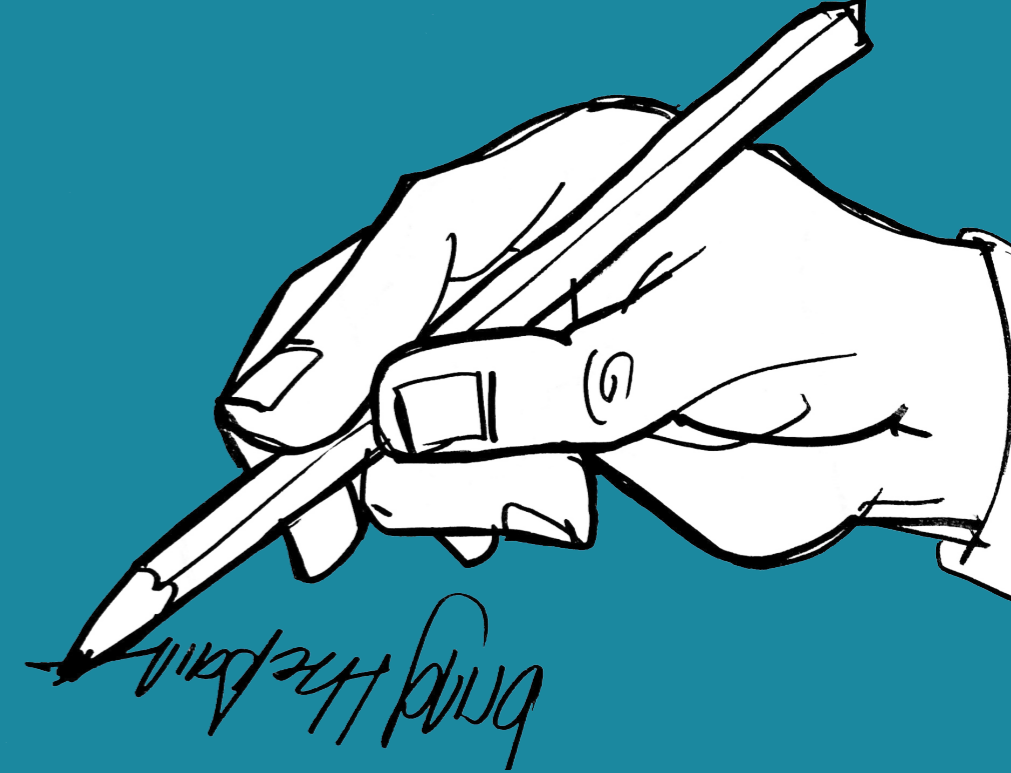
Research suggests that young men often work better in groups (Kiselica and Englar-Carlson 2010), and the facilitators harness the group dynamic to allow for a gentle competitiveness. This pushes everyone to do better, which serves to build a sense of competence and ability to achieve. All the members reported enjoying the competitive element and wanting to out-do each other.

I'm a competitive guy and I want to go in and just lick somebody's head off. We can joke about wanting to murder each other, but it's all gonna be love, 'cos we're all wanting to bring the best out of each other in that space. (Participant 5)

I disliked my competitive side for ages 'cos it was always getting the better of me. but when I came to R2R it was like 'you know what, there's always gonna be somebody who's better than me and I'm just gonna have to accept that, but I'm still gonna try for it.' But it's subtle. You don't say 'so who can rap faster?' You do it by showing yourself, and that's awesome. (Participant 3)

Walsh and Harland (2021) discuss the value of strength-based starting points when working with young men. Instead of focusing on problems and deficits and seeking mainly to correct, they suggest that starting from a focus on their strengths, helps to secure engagement with other processes, which can lead to growth and development overall. This echoes the conscious position adopted by the project - to begin at the point of a shared passion for rap, and then use that as an avenue for development in all fields.

A good outcome is people getting good at rapping, 'cos they want to improve in the thing they value and when they do, they get a sense of self esteem out of that. It gives people a chance to actually practice their social skills, to practice speaking from the heart and saying how they feel, which is the beginning of any sort of movement in their life. It's knowing how you feel about things, knowing what you like and what you don't like, knowing the factors that are pressing in on you, identifying them so that you can change them if you need to. It's taking ownership of your life and moving towards a future that you've got in mind. (Facilitator)



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ROOM TO RANT, IT CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE
ROOM TO RANT; IT JUST DOES ME RIGHT
ROOM TO RANT, I CAN SAY WHAT I CAN LIKE
ROOM TO RANT, I DON'T HAVE TO BE SHY

YOU HAVE NO IDEA ABOUT THE TIMES THAT I WAS STRUGGLING
21 TO 23, NO MONEY WAS COMING IN
AND WHEN I TALK ABOUT THE PS, I TALK ABOUT MY CONFIDENCE
IT'S ONLY NOW I'M 24, ACKNOWLEDGING ACCOMPLISHMENTS
BECAUSE OF MY EXISTENCE, IT JUST BOTHERS THEM
BLACK AND F***ING PROUD OF IT; AIN'T NOBODY DOUBTING IT
MY MELANIN IS POWER, I JUST DROWN IN IT
I'M LOUD WITH IT, M***** IS THE NAME; I BE REPPING ALL MY ANCESTORS
THAT WERE FALLEN AND WERE NEVER RECORDED
ROOM TO RANT IS THE RECIPE, IT NEVER GETS BORING
I CAN TALK ABOUT MY VULNERABILITIES WITHOUT THE QUESTIONING
I'VE GAINED SO MANY BLESSINGS FROM THIS MOTHERFUCKING HELL I'M IN
BRIGHTON IS MY FAMILY MY FATHER NEVER WAS TO ME
I TOLD HIM I WAS RAPED; AND THE MOTHERFUCKER WAS ON TO ME
HE NEVER BELIEVED A WORD I WAS SAYING TIL I LEFT
NOW HE'S MESSAGING MY PHONE, HE HAS LOST ALL MY RESPECT

2021'S THE COMEBACK
LEGENDARY STATUS, TELL ME WHERE ALL THE FUN'S AT
WHAT I MEANT TO SAY IS; SHOW ME WHERE ALL OF THE FUNDS' AT
ABUNDANCE IS MY BIRTH-RIGHT, MANIFESTING GREATNESS TO EXISTENCE; GOT MY
MIND RIGHT

2020 VISION, I LOOK AT THAT YEAR IN HINDSIGHT
ALMOST TOOK MY OWN LIFE TIL JAKE CAME THROUGH
I WAS DYING TO SEE HIM BUT REALLY NOBODY KNEW
I WOULD GET STRONGER THAN THE SUICIDE ATTEMPTS; I'M SPITTING TRUTH/
TO THE YOUNG YOUTH, YOU REALLY WANNA BE LIKE ME?
GIVE ME ALL OF MY POWERS, THE PAST IS BEHIND ME
I BE RETURNING TO THE FUTURE LIKE THE PRESENT NEVER HAPPENED
WINNING AWARDS AND THEY'RE ALL OVER MY TABLE; I BE GRATEFUL
JESUS AND MY GUARDIAN ANGEL, I FEEL STABLE
LIKE THE CANE THAT WAS STUCK, I WAS ABLE

CONCLUSION

Room to Rant successfully creates a vibrant, dynamic and nurturing space in which young men engage in activities which are fun, creative and therapeutic. Using rap as a culturally credible vehicle for openness and honesty, the young men encounter a variety of opportunities to share their fears and difficulties, and in return receive support, guidance and validation. Working with experienced, respected artists, the young men gain a sense of progress and accomplishment in an activity they love, which serves to bolster their view of themselves and their abilities. The sessions are skilfully built around relational practices which encourage empathy, understanding and kindness, and foster a strong sense of community and connectedness. This unique combination of factors has a powerful, transformative impact, enabling the young men to develop positive strategies for dealing with difficulty, improve their connections with others and strengthen their belief in their self-worth and ability. R2R successfully disrupts their current and expected pathways, opening up new possibilities for ways of being; and enables young men who are struggling with multiple difficulties, to thrive.



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