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Handbook of Critical Social Psychology Edited by Brendan Gough  
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**A Deeper Music: Arts-Based Research as Critical Social Psychology**

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**Introduction**

Twenty-first century societies—and the people who live within them—face multiple and complex challenges. Intersecting identities, environment catastrophe, economic-political instability, and diverse health threats call us to envisage and action innovative psychological research that makes a difference. Arts-based research comprises a diverse range of methodological approaches that work in radically different ways in the service of critical psychological, social, and cultural understanding and transformation. It responds to Denzin's (2003) challenge to re-animate the social world by privileging accessibility, engagement, sensory awareness, and embodied knowing. Arts-based research opens up alternative ways of thinking, feeling, relating, and experiencing through aesthetic means of inquiry and communication.

In this chapter, we explore arts-based research as a way of doing critical social psychology. We provide a brief history of the development of arts-based research in psychology and offer a rationale for using arts-based approaches in psychology to tackle twenty-first century challenges. We then focus on one specific example of an arts-based project to consider in detail issues such as processes, problems, and outcomes. The example

we have selected features a range of artistic genres that include film, music, and song. We engage with public responses to the work to explore its personal, psychological, social, and cultural meaning, showing how arts-based research can generate valued psychological insights and impacts. We close by proposing that arts-based research offers a means to radically democratize critical psychology research and scholarship.

### **An Invitation to Arts-Based Research**

Researching human experience – particularly within complex cultural, socioeconomic and political contexts – has never been an easy endeavour. The number of books, journal articles, online resources, and research methods courses produced each year provide testament to just how challenging *doing* psychological research can be. Feminist (e.g., Magnusson & Marecek, 2017; Ritchie & Barker, 2005), indigenous (e.g., Kovach, 2015; Kimmerer, 2013), race (e.g., Alexander & Weems, 2022; Salter & Haugen, 2017), queer (e.g., Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010; Riggs & Treharne, 2017), disability (e.g., Goodley, 2016; Shakespeare, 2013) and performative (e.g., Denzin, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 2012) scholars call us to work in ethical ways with and for those who are oppressed or discriminated against on the basis of gender identity, race or ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, ill-health, and/or economic disadvantage. These writers, and others, provoke us towards greater awareness of the voice, visibility, and representation of wide-ranging minority, disadvantaged, precarious, or oppressed people.

We are challenged to incorporate within our studies what might go unsaid, those aspects of human experience that may be at the borders of what can be expressed (see Butler, 1997) and to avoid excluding felt and spiritual experience (see Dewey, 1934; Freeman, 2014). At the same time, we are asked to ensure our research is accessible, so it may be communicated to wider audiences in engaging ways (see Research Councils UK, 2017).

Together, these are mighty challenges. How might we – as critical social psychology researchers – respond? Arts-based methodologies offer one set of possibilities.

Although a substantial literature on art-based research now exists (e.g., Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Belliveau & Westwood, 2016; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2007; Douglas & Carless, 2018; Foster, 2016; Haywood Rolling, 2013; Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2009, 2018; Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008; McNiff, 2008), little had been published when we began our research journeys twenty-five years ago. Within psychology, examples of arts-based research were absent. Our methods were not therefore developed from textbooks or journal articles, but instead through exploration, as we creatively responded to challenges faced by participants experiencing mental ill-health (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2010a; Douglas & Carless, 2014), trauma (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2017; Carless, Douglas, Barnes & Pineau, 2024), homelessness (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2015a, 2015b, 2020a), sexual and gender identity (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2015; Carless, Douglas, Milnes & Turner-Moore, 2020; Carless, 2021), and aging (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2005, 2013). Learning through working *with* participants has affected how we live our lives and changed in fundamental ways how we *do* research. It has called us to embrace arts-based methods.

### **A Brief History of Arts-Based Research in Psychology**

In *Personality as Art: Artistic Approaches in Psychology*, Peter Chadwick (2001) wrote that:

‘Art’ appears to be a taboo word in Western academic psychology. Perhaps for reasons concerned with funding and academic respectability specialists will gladly describe themselves as hermeneutic; qualitative; humanistic; transformative; phenomenological; transpersonal or whatever but not as artistic or as artists. (p. 9)

While we agree with Chadwick’s observation—scientific methods, of course, came to monopolize psychology as the twentieth century unfolded—an increase in arts-based research can be seen in psychology over the past two decades. This is evidenced by, for example, a special issue of the journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* in 2018 dedicated to arts-based research and the inclusion of this chapter in the second edition of this Handbook. Despite these developments, arts-based methods remain marginal across psychology and, we suspect, few academic psychologists today would describe their work as artistic or consider themselves to be artists.

In modern times, one of the earliest and most notable proponents of working explicitly with and through artistic forms as a way of doing psychology was the psychotherapist, playwright, and educator Fred Newman. In *Unscientific Psychology: A Cultural-Performatory Approach to Understanding Human Life* (1996), co-authored with Louis Holzman, a radical and explicitly critical perspective on mainstream scientific psychology is articulated:

The myth that is psychology—it has discovered nothing (for, we would insist, there is nothing to discover), but shamelessly invented its subject matter—is identifiable with three of its more destructive pieces of pseudoscience: the myth of the individual, the myth of mental illness, and the myth of development. Taken together, they effectively form the myth of psychology. (p. 3)

In its place, they make a case for an arts-based methodology—which they term *performance activism*—as “a cultural approach to understanding that is relational, radically democratic, and non-interpretive—a distinctly unscientific psychology” (p. 2). They develop and describe what they term, “a qualitatively new kind of play, a continuous uncommodified performance of subjectivity” (p. 2). On the basis of this approach, Newman and Holzman established The East Side Institute in New York City which continues to function today as a thriving

international centre for human and community development, cultural change, and social transformation. Aside from social impact writ large, a key contribution of Newman and Holzman's work, in our eyes, is a demonstration of how arts-based approaches to psychology (in this case, performance) can be a powerful way to work towards personal, social, and cultural transformation. The work of the East Side Institute community across more than two decades stands as an inspiring model for how psychology might be thought about, researched, and practiced as a force for communal good in the face of the many challenges of contemporary times.

In the United Kingdom, Peter Chadwick's work has been an influence and encouragement in the development of our own arts-based practice since chancing on his 1997 book *Schizophrenia: The Positive Perspective* in the Bristol University library twenty-five years ago. Subtitled "In search of dignity of schizophrenic people," the book is groundbreaking in the field not least through combining autobiography and biography with discussion of psychometric and experimental research. Inclusion of an artistic sensibility allows for more broad, comprehensive, and humane representations of the lived experience of people with schizophrenia which resist and reject dominant deficit and dysfunction focussed representations. Central to all this is Chadwick's willingness to foreground—and at times be led by—his own experience as a person who has suffered with schizophrenia. Potent accounts of psychotic experience are given additional resonance by being connected to a variety of sociocultural contexts that are more often omitted from scientific psychology research. Chadwick went on to develop and reflect more explicitly on artistic approaches to psychology in other work (see Chadwick, 1996; 2001; 2006).

Back in the United States, the work of Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen has helped articulate a philosophical and theoretical basis for arts-based approaches such as performative social science and personal narrative within social psychology. Central to their work and

writing—together and separately—is sustained attention to relationality, ethics, reflexivity, and pedagogy through performance. In *Playing with Purpose: Adventures in Performative Social Science* (Gergen & Gergen, 2012), they articulate three reasons for their turn towards performative arts-based methods. First, to highlight how social science—like art—is performed *for others*. “What audiences are excluded?” they ask, along with, “What responses do we hope to achieve?” through scientific modes of inquiry and communication (p. 11). Second, they observe that any means of communication we may choose *accomplishes something in a relationship*. They therefore ask: What sorts of relationships are we creating or sustaining through an exclusive reliance on scientific means of communication? Third, they write how pursuing performative approaches “expands our scope and sensitivities as social scientists” and “calls attention to the significance of aesthetic skills in observing and reporting” (p. 12). Reflecting on their long and illustrious careers in social psychology, they write: “To experience the freedom of expression in our professional work, to inquire and profess by whatever means available, engaging, and effective—what a source of inspiration this has been to us!” (p. 33).

### **What Can Psychology Learn from the Arts?**

A great deal of the development of arts-based research as a legitimate form of inquiry has occurred in the field of education. Of particular note is the work of the late Elliot Eisner (see, for example, Eisner, 2008a; Barone & Eisner, 2012). In this section we draw on a lecture Eisner gave in 2008 titled *What Can Education Learn from the Arts?* (Eisner, 2008b) to briefly outline five things that we think psychology can learn from the arts.

#### **1. Psychology can learn from the arts that form and content cannot be separated.**

That is, the *way* we express something affects *what* is expressed. From this it follows

that different kinds of knowledge are made possible—or closed down—as a result of our choice of genre. What may be ‘said’ through a scientific tale differs to a poem which differs to a film which differs to a sculpture. Multiple forms of expression are therefore necessary within our discipline.

2. **Psychology can learn from the arts that everything interacts.** Naturalist and environmental philosopher John Muir wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (Muir, 1911). Within the complex psychosocial systems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have found this contention to be true. For Eisner (2008b): “There are no separate parts in a whole. What, for example, a color looks like depends upon the colors around it” (p. 2). The arts are uniquely able to ‘hold’ interactions through a simple, elegant form that is faithful to complexities yet remains accessible to diverse audiences.
3. **Psychology can learn from the arts that surprise is not an intruder in the process of inquiry but a reward one reaps when working artistically.** Eisner (2008b) suggested that in technically oriented control-focused societies, surprise can be regarded as little more than an inability to predict. But surprise can also be the result of securing a new insight that was not expected. As he put it: “No surprise, no discovery, no discovery, no progress” (p. 2).
4. **Psychology can learn from the arts that the limits of language are not the limits of cognition.** In other words, we know more than we can tell. Because unconscious and subconscious knowledge, somatic experience, tacit knowing, and felt sense (for example) are all relevant to psychology, it follows that we require alternative means of inquiry and communication that accommodate these different ways of knowing.
5. **Psychology can learn from the arts that the exercise of imagination is one of the most important of human aptitudes.** The processes of art provoke us to deviate



from procedural research methods to more closely follow—or better allow for—leaps of imagination. Through embracing imagination, we are more likely to create scholarship that is generative—that is, suggestive of diverse, new, or alternative solutions. As Eisner (2008b) put it: “It is imagination, not necessity, that is the mother of invention” (p. 4).

### **Arts-Based Research as Critical Social Psychology**

Like many researchers, arts-based researchers in psychology may work towards impact or transformation through any number of avenues, including generating new knowledge, questioning existing understandings, education, informing policy, influencing culture, or activism. In practice, however, it is often the case that philosophical differences, paradigmatic controversies, and the relative valuing of different forms of research mean that arts-based work is better suited to particular channels. In our experience this is especially the case in contexts ruled by ‘evidence-based medicine’ (EBM) or ‘evidence-based practice’ (EBP). While the insights arts-based research offers are certainly research informed, they tend to be undervalued (seen as secondary or lower ‘quality’) within current hierarchies of evidence that favour quantitative, experimental methods. In medicine and healthcare, for example, it is randomised controlled trials that exert primary influence. Arts-based approaches, though, offer something different – something we term *understanding-based medicine* (UBM) and *understanding-based practice* (UBP). We use these terms as an umbrella for conceptualizing how arts-based research generates different kinds of knowledge to what is valued in EBM and EBP.

First, insights from arts-based research tend to be generative (Gergen & Gergen, 2012) rather than prescriptive. EBM and EBP are often directive of a particular course of action, thereby closing down alternatives. While at times this is useful, at other moments it

serves to impoverish possible responses that a particular individual may find helpful. Arts-based research is more likely to provoke audiences with a question that suggests possibilities for a personal or local response, thereby opening up new context-specific courses of action.

Second, given the research methodologies that are most highly prized within EBM and EBP (quantitative, positivistic, scientific), the insights that are produced tend to be cognitive, rational, logical forms. Arts-based research offers different kinds of insights. Here, embodied, local, contextual, experiential ways of knowing come to the fore, calling on (for example) emotional intelligence. Thus, arts-based methods support a way of knowing long valued in indigenous cultures which recognise that “we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 47). This kind of intersectional knowing, while impossible to pin down through numbers or articulate in words, is no less important in developing—and acting on—psychological insights.

Third, by privileging technical knowledge (Cole & Knowles, 2008), the forms of knowing that support EBM and EBP are often exclusive and inaccessible to non-academic audiences. While academic audiences may be able to put information in this form to good use, many members of the public are likely to disengage from the research. It is inaccessible to them. At times, this may cause little harm – technical knowledge is consumed by professionals who process, utilise, or apply it across particular practical scenarios. At other times, though, it can serve to sustain or deepen the divide between ‘professional’ and ‘Other.’ Examples of this polarisation or separation can include ‘doctor/patient,’ ‘healthy/ill,’ ‘expert/novice,’ ‘teacher/student,’ ‘rich/poor,’ ‘educated/practical,’ et cetera. This can breed damaging power differentials, entrench inequality, and disenfranchise certain groups from awareness of and power over processes that impact their lives. In the long term, individuals

or groups can be enforced into silence or passivity regarding important issues that shape their lives.

Fourth, Barone and Eisner (2012) write of how arts-based research is unique as a methodology because it is the only form of research that offers audiences *an experience*. By, for example, stimulating multisensory engagement, taking audiences into a particular emotional territory, activating audience member's memories, or preserving polyvocality through allowing space for multiple and sometimes conflicting voices. Through these vehicles, a kind of vicarious experience is offered which encourages us to step for a moment outside our own lives and preconceptions (e.g., the dominant narratives that constrain thinking). This process of destabilization can challenge what we think we know; help us tune in to our emotions, embodied sensations, or felt sense; and/or lead us develop empathy, even seeing our own involvement in new ways (e.g., seeing ourselves as 'part of the problem' in a way that provides an incentive for personal change).

A final way through which arts-based research can contribute is suggested in Arthur Frank's (2000) observation that at this point in time, "more knowledge may be less important than a clearer sense of value" (p. 363). He argues that new theories and facts do not help us with the key ethical question of what to do with what we know. On this basis, "The challenge for intellectuals is to help people make policy, clinical, corporate, and personal decisions in a milieu of profound dislocation" (p. 363). Positioning ourselves, as researchers, in different relationships with 'data,' our participants, their experiences, et cetera, has a tendency to open up new ways to imagine, see, or construe helpful responses. In a similar vein, the ways that arts-based products take audiences into different *kinds* of engagement with participants' lives and the psycho-social-cultural contexts where they unfold, can provoke new insights, questions, reflection and/or action in others.

While these characteristics are potentially valuable across any number of disciplines, within critical social psychology we consider them to be of particular importance. Together, the unique qualities of arts-based research can together help promote critical engagement and questioning; inclusion of diversity and plurality; openness; widened participation; respectful dialogue; empathy; and democratic values.

### **Filmmaking as Arts-Based Social Psychology**

Given there are many artistic genres under the arts-based umbrella, each of which may be used to different effect as a form of psychological inquiry or practice, we focus in detail now on one approach: filmmaking. There are two reasons why we consider film to be a particularly fruitful way forward as a way of doing critical social psychology. First, film is culturally omnipresent in 21<sup>st</sup> century and, as a result of the technological revolutions of recent years (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo, smart phones), widely accessible. Second, film combines multiple genres (e.g., moving image, sound, music, narrative/story) which can provide high levels of emotional and sensory engagement. Dan Harris (2018) suggests that: “Video-based research offers us the most affective, primal, and thorough rendering of the complexity of human life, which is the core business of all research” (p. 449). Weaving together multiple genres in myriad ways, films powerfully evoke wide ranging emotional, sensory, and/or intellectual experiences. In some films, it may be the cinematography that accrues recognition. In others, it may be the soundtrack. While in others, it may be the storytelling that takes centre stage. Informing these decisions are costs and preferences of the producer and director and of course other issues related to the purpose/s of the film.

As is sometimes the case in other critical psychology research, the germinating idea for a film may begin with one individual being challenged by a particular issue. We see this in *Blue Jean* (2023), an example of a commercial film release exploring sexual identity

within sport and physical education culture. Director Georgia Oakley, who self identifies as queer, was inspired after reading about the bravery of a group of lesbian activists who in 1988 abseiled into the public gallery at the House of Lords to protest Section 28 (a now repealed British law which silenced conversations around homosexuality in schools). Oakley pitched her idea to the commissioning editor/director of BBC Film and was given the go ahead. Oakley and co-director H el ene Sifre then travelled to Newcastle, UK (where the film was shot in 2022), to talk with and interview over 50 people affected by Section 28. “I could tell by speaking to these women that no-one had ever given them the time of day,” says Oakley. “They’d been on these personal battles with their own history through their whole lives” (Tabbara, 2022). With financial backing from iFeatures and BBC Film, a six-week shoot took place in Newcastle in 2022 and the film was released in early 2023. Here the director was also the researcher, incorporating first person narratives to weave a compelling story.

Although feature films are a wonderful way to engage audiences with social issues, they come with a hefty price tag that is beyond the budget of most researchers. Further, screenwriters may rewrite important details to tell the type of story which makes it more likely investments will be returned at the box office; this can create tensions in research contexts. Perhaps the closest form of film to social science research therefore is documentary. Here, there is an expectation that ‘real facts’ are used and if participants’ voices and images can’t be used, they are performed by actors. Within the documentary tradition there are numerous experimental forms, blurring of boundaries and weaving together image, sound, and narrative. And some documentaries are made with modest budgets and production costs.

Our own filmmaking is broadly positioned within the experimental documentary tradition given that we incorporate personal narrative, songs/music, poetry, and imagery. To further explore the methodologies and outcomes of arts-based research as critical

psychological inquiry, we now consider in detail one film-based example. We encourage readers to experience the film for themselves (see Douglas & Carless, 2015) before reading the remainder of the chapter.

### **An Example of Arts-Based Research: *The Blue Funnel Line***

#### *Background to the research*

This piece of arts-based research emerged from an ethnography commissioned by two charities (Addiction Recovery Agency and St Monica Trust) to understand the experiences and needs of residents in an urban supported housing scheme in Bristol, UK. Over several months, we engaged in day-to-day life in the scheme and conducted narrative interviews with all residents who were willing to participate. In addition to the commissioned report, we published a journal article (Douglas & Carless, 2020a) and YouTube films (Douglas & Carless, 2015a, 2015b) which take different arts-based approaches to communicating our findings. *The Blue Funnel Line* (Douglas & Carless, 2015a) focuses on one resident—Don—whose experiences offered rich insights into complex and challenging life events. In so doing, tells of a life journey replete with critical psychological, sociological, and historical context.

#### *The move to song*

It was several months after completion of the ethnography that David was drawn to further explore Don's story through song writing. A curiosity remained, a feeling that his story offered something more from which we could learn, something we had not been able to incorporate in the commissioned report. Playing an instrument while exploring a story lyrically and through rhythm, melody, and harmony allows access to embodied emotional intelligence, felt sense, or subconscious understanding (see Carless, 2018). It can allow new

realisations to enter into our awareness (see Douglas, 2016). As singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier (2021) puts it, “A song waiting to be born has something to teach the songwriter, something we didn’t know before we wrote it” (p. 3). This turned out to be the case with *The Blue Funnel Line*.

Over subsequent months, we recorded an audio CD of the song, alongside other songs and stories from the project (Carless & Douglas, 2010b). We gave live performances at conferences, events and in lectures and collected feedback from audiences which we analysed in order to understand more fully what this arts-based research product offered over traditional forms of dissemination (Carless & Douglas, 2011). However, there were two issues which we needed to overcome. First, live performance requires us to be there in person, which necessitates expensive and time-consuming travel. And once it is over, it is *over*: there is no legacy, no surviving resource to reuse. Second, the audio CD loses a visual dimension. It was through taking a filmmaking course that we realised a solution to both these issues: a way to (re)incorporate visual elements to our arts-based portrayal and a way to provide a lasting legacy through hosting on YouTube.

### *The move to film*

The processes that comprise filmmaking as research are less well understood than most other forms of qualitative research (Douglas & Carless, 2020b). Gupta (2019) describes six steps behind her filmmaking process: select sociocultural phenomena for conscious raising, collect participants’ anecdotes of lived experience, code and thematise the data, translate data into cinematic language, produce a film, promote the film. This kind of preordained procedural approach does not work for us. For example, we do not know before we begin a project how we will move forward and we are much more likely to be led by emergent aspects (such as physical environment, social interactions, soundscapes, etc.) Thus,

our films might arise through exploring the stories of participants, by what is provoked in us visually within an environment, or in response to something missing from an already in progress piece of research.

In the case of *The Blue Funnel Line*, we wanted to construct a world for the viewer that is “cognitive and immersive and sensuous” (Yacavone, 2014, pxvi). A world that would invite those watching to experience something for themselves – in this case, the story of one merchant seaman who worked on the Blue Funnel shipping line. This ‘world’ is in part created by our filming, direction and editing, thus could be considered a ‘virtual’ world. However, it is also a representation—or evocation—of an ‘actual’ world: you can go there and observe it. Our aim with the film was not to literally follow the song’s lyrical cues but, rather, to expand what was an already powerful audio portrayal, by ‘thickening’ the audience’s sensory experience through, for example, introducing different visual elements alongside the song’s narrative arc. Until we actually shot, edited, and produced the film, we didn’t know what that the end product would look like. It emerged through the *doing*.

On this point Merleau-Ponty (1964) suggested that a carefully crafted film enhances the viewer’s perception as aspects of life that can be missed or taken for granted are seen anew. Merleau-Ponty (1964) looked to cinematography to bring out “the fine grain of real life whose aesthetic value may have been lost from sight” (p. 58). The aesthetic quality is both ‘felt’ and pre-linguistic, and we attempted to become attuned to this by immersing ourselves (yet again) in the environment while being guided by an internal compass which was being evoked by the music and song to create a visual horizon. That is, we allowed the work that had already taken place in our bodies, through doing the research as well as performing the song (see Carless, 2022), to be placed anew within the context, with the particular place the participants lived and described.





Fig. 1: A scene from *The Blue Funnel Line*

### *Shooting on location*

Our work thus far had been in Bristol where all the participants were living. Nearly all of them, however, had come to Bristol from elsewhere. That was the case for Don, who had grown up in Liverpool, where his life as a merchant seaman had begun. It seemed necessary, then, that we visit Liverpool not only to shoot, but also to gain a sense of history and place. While we knew Liverpool was historically an important port, before visiting on this occasion neither of us knew the port had dominated global trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, continuing to be important through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We felt it important that these historical and cultural moorings were incorporated in the film as a way to add authenticity and context to Don's story.

Of course, Liverpool in 2015 was different to the Liverpool Don knew in the 1950's and 60's. That said, some aspects resist change: the River Mersey, the Port of Liverpool building, the Royal Albert Dock buildings. Standing on harbourside, watching ships sailing

out from port and disappear over the horizon, gave us a sense of the Blue Funnel Line ships setting sail all those years ago. We took a ferry across the Mersey, felt for ourselves the cold wind off the Irish Sea, the thrust of the engines, and the rock from the bow waves of other vessels. These embodied sensory experiences contributed to our experiencing Don's story in new ways and are essential if we are to (re)create embodied sensory experiences for others through the film.



Fig. 2: Blue Funnel Line poster

The film also benefited from a visit the Maritime Museum at the Royal Albert Dock. Here, we saw a scaled model of a Blue Funnel Line ship, posters advertising travel, and watched an historical film about the docks. These physical exhibits gave us—and our film—an important visceral sense of time and place. An example of this is demonstrated in David's reflection (taken from our unused footage):

It's amazing hearing someone talking about being on one of those ships and going out on the Far East Line through Ceylon and Malaya, talking from his room in Bristol

between smokes. It becomes more real when you see it documented like this. He wasn't just spinning a yarn.

It wasn't that we didn't believe his story. It was more that our imaginations were unable, from a small flat in the heart of Bristol 30+ years later, to grasp the scope of the story he shared. At first glance it seemed incongruous with his current life. Experiencing for ourselves the physical place and witnessing exhibits that 'recreated' a past now gone, seeing the historical moorings to his story, allowed it to be visually amplified in our understandings. From this position we are then able to bring—through moving image—a more expansive narrative to the film; a narrative that evoked what young men born *in this place* did, the types of stories *available to these men*, and how an identity is created from these pieces.

For Eisner (2008b), the most promising way to 'see what is actually there' is to work in ways that slow perception to allow us to notice more. Filming—aiming a camera, opening an aperture, panning, and so on—compels us as researchers to slow down. On this occasion, this helped us become more aware of the 'gravitas' in the story, while at the same time helping us resist cementing and fixing interpretations. David reflected on this openness during our time in Liverpool:

We didn't specifically talk about how he felt about leaving his family—not just leaving his wife but leaving his children and never seeing them again, that stuff. But there was a sense of, 'That's life. I've done some wrong stuff. Get on with it.' He didn't really reflect on how he felt about that or where that left him, aged 60-something, living alone in a supported flat in Bristol.

### *In the editing suite*

Bowden and Thompson (2013) write that the core of filmmaking is "good storytelling" (p. 4). Editing is the time when the story is assembled into its final form. It

requires hours of time working with accumulated footage. The process inevitably creates additional insights and awareness while simultaneously developing a visual language to share these insights. There is a certain degree of alchemy, but also play and experimentation. Eisner (2008b) suggests arts-based researchers are guided in their choices by *a rightness of fit*. At the core of this film was a song with an already well-developed story. We wanted to create visual sequences that did not detract from the existing story but instead anchored the story in its historical and cultural context, evoking a sense of time and place. All decisions we made during editing were made in service of the story and the song, to enhance rather than diminish its emotional resonance. In our experience trialling different shots is rather like a burglar trying to crack a safe: we turn the dial and wait for it to click. When it does, it brings a revelation that visually fits with the narrative arc of the song/story at that moment. At times this can be an extremely powerful and emotional moment which contributes to the sensory evidence we accrue that we are on the right lines. However, it's not until the film gains an audience that we learn if we have got it right, whether or not the film is doing its work.

### *Audience responses*

The primary purpose of arts-based research is not, in our view, to create good art. Rather, it is to create art that does good in the world – that achieves something constructive for someone somewhere. The important question for us, then, is not “Is this a good film?” but “What is this film good for?” The way to discern this is by seeking and listening to the responses of others to our work. We have done this for our arts-based research which utilises story, song, and live performance approaches (see Carless & Douglas, 2010c, 2011; Douglas & Carless, 2020b).

To date, *The Blue Funnel Line* has received over 12,000 views—much higher engagement than any journal articles or books we have published. Some people have left

comments through which we have been able to learn about the work this film does in the world. A first type of comment comes from academic audiences (e.g., students, peers and ‘fans’ of our work). For example:

Sat and listened to this on the balcony with a friend of mine. I love your work and wanted to share this with somebody - share the moment of powerful reflection and serenity. It is so important to share these stories to remember people's lives and memories. It is these sort of accounts that honour those stories. The music encapsulates the feeling so well and I love how you do not actually see the blue funnel line - the unseen truth... and it's as if we are travelling 'together with' this man's story/memory.

While academic responses are helpful, we are primarily interested in how the public responds to our research. A second type of comment, then, comes from those who are unfamiliar with the context of the story, but nonetheless gain something from it. For example:

Beautiful song. Really strange twist at the end, even more so when I read the lyrics. I feel quite disquiet when the song comes to an end but reading lyrics gave me a sense of hope. So it was an interesting contrast.

In the case of *The Blue Funnel Line*, most responses came from those with personal experience of the context of this story: merchant seamen and their families. These responses suggest the film offered something meaningful—authenticity, insight, communion, validation, and visibility—to this community. For example: “Sailed the Autolycus 68 coastal then deep sea to China. All the ports in the song. Brings back great memories this video brings it all back. Thanks.” Some comments help ‘fill in’ what isn’t shown in the film, extending the story of the shipping line and the sailors who worked on them:

Went to Gravesend sea school 1970 aged 14 and became a 'Peanut', joined the Port Melbourne on my 15th birthday at KG5 in London and spent most of the 70's at sea including with Blue funnel. Then one day went down to the pool office after leave and there were no more jobs on the board, with a long face he said "it's containers from here and there are not enough jobs for the company men". So did a spell in the army and then worked on fishing boats for a while but then those jobs were disappeared by the then 'Common Market' Life was pretty grey and uneventful after that.

It is often said that *stories invite stories*. This film seems to have created a canvas for others to share elements of their own story, to connect their lives with their peers, to add personal colour or deepen context.

Perhaps most powerful for us was feedback from people who wanted to *use* the film or the song in their own lives, extending its reach in ways we hadn't imagined. For example:

I am from a small charity drama group. We are performing an original piece about the Blue Funnel Line called 'The Benefactor.' I wondered if you would allow us to use your song. Unfortunately we don't have any money to pay royalties but didn't want to use the song without your permission.

Fantastic song incredibly evocative (lump in throat and trembly bottom lip time).

My old dad was Blu Flu (AKA The Welsh Navy) 1950 – 1968 and I can remember me an Mum waving him off from the Wallasey side during the 60's on his many voyages. During WW2 he was RN and he served on HMS Hector which was an Armed Merchant Cruiser acquired from the Blu Flu for war service. She was in port in Colombo being decommissioned when the Japs attacked, and he lost a lot of mates

– many of them from the Hebrides who often used to communicate with each other in Gaelic. [...]

In 1968 the old man took a shore job – it was a disaster, and he eventually went back to sea – just like the song. In 1973 he did his last voyage on the Cardigan Bay out of Southampton and lost the sight in one eye after a welding accident at Kobe in Japan!!

I was wondering if I could have the chords to the song as I wouldn't mind a little go at it myself. At the most I would get up and do it at an open mike night with appropriate accolades to David. Either way it is pretty much a brilliant acknowledgement of those hardy souls (and their families) who kept this country (and a lot of the world) supplied and were put out of work by containers.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have offered a wide screen view of arts-based research—with an emphasis on its place in social psychology. We hope this broad, general, and somewhat distanced view has served to introduce, describe, and situate arts-based research theoretically and conceptually. However, as Eisner (2008b) said, “the devil lives in the details. It can also be said that the aesthetic lives in the nuances that the maker can shape in the course of creation.” In recognition of this we have also included an in-depth examination of the processes and outcomes of one particular arts-based project. In our experience, this level of detail, specificity, and focus is necessary if we are to seriously engage with arts-based research in ways that allow us to develop, learn, and extend our practice. It is important at this point to emphasise that there are, however, myriad ways to do arts-based research. Our way is not the only way. Part of the promise of arts-based ways of working is their inherent plurality and

openness to creativity and ongoing innovation. It is not unreasonable to say that every arts-based project necessitates developing its own methodology. Arts-based research is therefore not a procedural methodology and it does not, in our view, benefit from methodological prescription. To do so would impoverish the potential for arts-based researchers to contribute new and exciting insights, questions, and engagements to the field of social psychology.

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**Further Information:**

**Boomerang Project** is an online network dedicated to supporting researchers interested in arts-based, performative, and autoethnographic methodologies. For information on events, workshops, conferences and collaborators see: <https://boomerang-project.org.uk>

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For further examples of arts-based research see [Kitrina Douglas](#) and [David Carless](#) YouTube Channels

Contact us if you are interested in arts-based research workshops, collaborations or supervision: [kitrina.douglas@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:kitrina.douglas@uwl.ac.uk) and [david.carless@uws.ac.uk](mailto:david.carless@uws.ac.uk)

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