
The psychology of killing: Connections between trauma, impulsivity, and treatment in cognitive analytic music therapy

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With the constant threat of terrorism, people often wonder about the underlying social and cultural issues that contribute to the radicalisation of individuals and why humans kill each other. In order to think about this difficult subject, this paper refers to a play by Terence Rattigan called, *Ross*. It is set 100 years ago and it explores the impact of killing and trauma on the psyche of E.T. Lawrence (of Arabia), Alias Ross. The work then compares Lawrence's experiences to the recent case of Sergeant Alexander Blackman who shot a wounded Taliban fighter; accused of breaking the Geneva Conventions he was court martialled and convicted of having committed murder. After three years of incarceration he was assessed as suffering from an adjustment disorder at the time of the killing. The court of appeal reduced his sentence of murder to that of manslaughter under grounds of diminished responsibility. Blackman was released from prison. Clearly, the acquittal of Sergeant Blackman has relevance to *Ross* with regard to what we have and have not learned over the 100 years since T.E. Lawrence's experiences. These two examples raise more questions than answers around what happens in the human brain when either premeditated or an impulsive killing occurs, also bringing to mind questions about the nature and presence of compassion and duty. To define the difference between intentional motivation or impulsive action to kill a fellow human being involves the curiosity by which to examine the impact on the brain of psychological trauma in response to fear and traumatic loss leading to mental disorder, as well as considering the meaning of mental health and the introduction in 1953 of the conviction of diminished responsibility due to mental illness.

Keywords: crime, impulsivity, mental health, music therapy, trauma

BACKGROUND

T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) led the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. As a result of his extraordinary experiences and achievement he has a sense of belonging in the military that he wanted to sustain anonymously during peacetime. This was due in part to his own ambivalence about the fame that he had gained since bringing together the diverse Arab tribes to fight for the allies. Ross is the pseudonym that he assumed to create a new identity by which to join the Royal Air Force (RAF) when he returned to England after the war.

Lawrence endured immensely harsh conditions in the Middle East. His experiences are described in his autobiography, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935). They remain relevant today towards understanding counter insurgency warfare. Lawrence demonstrates exceptional powers of leadership as well as describing with extraordinary insight the diverse mentalities, belief systems, customs, and cultures of different Arabian tribes.

His book describes his sense of betrayal at the end of the war, due to the Sykes-Picot Agreement under which the UK was unable to keep Lawrence's promise to the Arabs of a homeland in greater Syria. The Balfour Declaration confirmed the support of the British government to establish in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people.

Executions

During the 600-mile crossing of the desert, Lawrence describes how he was put in an almost impossible situation when he was compelled to execute two of his men. The first for committing treachery by killing a fellow Arab in a feud, the second, which Lawrence defended on compassionate grounds, was the shooting of a badly wounded, valued servant and colleague. This occurred long before the days of recovery helicopters and rescue by air. Transport was by camel and mule. If this man had been left behind he would have died a much slower and more horrible death in the desert. To kill someone who has served you and of whom you are fond is indeed a traumatic even in anyone's life. It was not in Lawrence's case a callous act but an undeniably horrendous one. During this campaign, Lawrence was captured, tortured, and sexually abused. He describes how he became 'numb to all feeling' after this event. Lawrence's biographers recognise that these traumatic experiences required a strong mental response in phenomenally difficult decisions, but that they contributed to his reckless behaviour in later life. This aspect becomes important when considering the effect of traumatic events on human behaviour because impulsive actions and cognitive distortions are common in survivors of trauma.

So we may question what the difference was between Lawrence ending the life of a beloved servant and Blackman who shot a badly wounded Taliban fighter in Afghanistan, in conditions that were equated to a 21st century version of the no-man's land of World War One. The case of Sergeant Blackman raises the fine dividing line between compassion and callousness, duty, and impulsivity and yet we have to ask what causes callousness?

Lawrence became 'numb to all feeling' after he suffered torture. This dissociation from all emotion by which to endure intense pain is a necessary defence for survival and to re-avow feeling after trauma is often the work of psychotherapy. Following such events to feel anything at all sometimes involves high-risk, adrenalin-based activity.

Blackman was court martialled for breaching military rules; he was 'dismissed' from the military with 'disgrace', having previously served in the Royal Marines with distinction for 15 years in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Northern Ireland. In 2017, when the appeal court overturned the decision of the military court they agreed that the shooting was not a cold-blooded execution. They acknowledged that he was under extreme stress having served six tours of duty as an exemplary royal marine and that he was suffering from an undiagnosed mental illness at the time of the shooting.

Blackman was initially court martialled, having broken the rules of engagement and the harsh outcome was of dismissal. In the 21st century however, following his wife's campaign and with greater knowledge and science in mental health treatment. He was eventually diagnosed with an adjustment disorder and it certainly sounds as if Lawrence too suffered in that way. He struggled to maintain a familiar sense of belonging by wishing to stay in the military services and he continued to seek thrills through high-risk, high-speed motorbike rides. Yet while hailed as a distinguished and decorated hero, he felt the need to disguise himself from being recognised. He was a complex character who fluctuated between polarised responses of driving his bike many miles to see famous people and seeking to retreat to obscurity.

Traumatic responses and underlying aetiology with disrupted attachments patterns are often present in mentally disordered offenders (MDOs) who have killed. They are diagnosed with serious and enduring mental illnesses, hence not just labelled 'bad'. The course of the illness precedes an offence; hence many are incarcerated under grounds of diminished responsibility. Too often seek to hide their true identity for fear of being infamous (rather than famous), but rather because of their fear of exposure in public or by the press. Prior to psychotherapeutic work they are often hiding from themselves. Over the course of time in music therapy treatment, many gain greater emotional recognition, thereby re-avowing the dissociated terrified aspects of themselves, furthermore recognising that they had been terrifying to others. The nature of making music in a therapeutic setting sometimes enables them to express their fear of going to hell. Some seek to find meaning in their lives and develop empathy and a desire to make can lead to a process of restorative justice. For example as described in a case study (Compton Dickinson & Gahir, 2013) working with conflict: a summary of treatment of a man suffering with schizophrenia who committed manslaughter. Similar clients are often willing participants in research studies are often willing participants in research studies for which an informed ethically approved consent procedure is always sought. One study (Gold et al., 2013) demonstrated how motivation can improve through music therapy. Ethically approved forensic music therapy research demonstrates how creativity and self-reflection can help to ameliorate the traumatic impact of negative responses on the ability to socialise and relate positively to others, thereby helping individuals to be less withdrawn and hostile (Hakvoort & Bogaerts, 2013; Compton Dickinson & Hakvoort, 2017).

The role of music in brain function and recovery

Trimble and Hesdorffer (2017) explain how in evolutionary development our ancestors began to articulate and gesticulate feeling with very limited vocabulary. They cite Langer (1951) to explain how meaning in music came before meaning in words. Because the human ear, unlike the eye, is never closed. Furthermore, explaining how and why the auditory cortex in *Homo sapiens* is larger and more developed in comparison to that of other great apes. This author names in particular the dorsal area of the brain which relates to auditory reception of speech. The expansion of which, and its connections, are associated with the increased size of the cerebellum and areas of the prefrontal and premotor cortex, Langer (ibid) suggests that this led to the shift of creative aesthetics based on sound, and the ability to entrain with external rhythmic impulses (an aspect which is central in a developmental approach in music therapy). Langer continues by citing Mithen (2005) who argued that spoken language and music developed from primate calls used by Neanderthals. This communication was emotionally based without words at least as we know them. Hence, the first and often most impactful form of musical communication is song.

The role of music in the treatment of men who have killed legitimately in the line of duty, is a creative one which was illustrated on Remembrance Sunday in 2017 on BBC Radio 4 *Songs for Solders* (BBC, 2017), a programme of songwriting with US military veterans who are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While music therapy was traditionally thought of as a 'soft' therapy, forensic music therapy requires a rigorous evidence base because the risk of violence and harm are high, hence clinically and scientifically tested model that is used in locked psychiatric hospitals and prisons (Compton Dickinson, Odell-Miller, & Adlam 2013). Along with other creative therapies such as expressive writing (Relajo, 2015), impulsivity is reduced as mindfulness and emotional recognition develop, conflicts can be resolved, safely in a group cognitive analytic model (G-CAMT), often firstly within creative expression in musical improvisation which can lead to the ability to find the words and to improve interpersonal relationships (Kellet, Hall, & Compton, in press)

Music therapy treatment developments and research with mentally disordered offenders who have killed, demonstrate visibly how unconscious impulses result in high-risk behaviours. To some extent it is argued that musical interactions are one key to handling the complexities of the practice of freedom in everyday life (Gallagher & Steele, 2002). More specifically, in this form of treatment patients move around to play and interact musically, thereby experiencing a sense of embodiment and engagement with the overall mood and group cohesiveness through which a common theme emerges, rather than passively sitting in a chair in a traditional psychotherapy context.

Physical responses are observable in body language and symbolic gestures, which sometimes parallel more sinister behaviours that relate to the offence committed. This is a central component of forensic music therapy, which can tell us more than words do about how to understand what is taking place within the individual's mind, even if this may not be fully conscious to the individual. Symbolic examples may include stabbing movement with drum-beaters, tactile stimulation through symbolic stroking of instruments or predatory stalking behaviour such as remaining on the periphery of the group. The therapist can then help the patient to understand his impact on others.

There are social aspects to structured therapeutic group work in cognitive analytic music therapy. The process of jointly creating a musical improvisation in the form of a musical dialogue within a musically therapeutic relationship is a highly attuned form of interactive engagement. In manualised forms of treatment such as G-CAMT, the activity of jointly creating music is clinically proven to be a catalyst for self-development. Patients who received group cognitive analytic music therapy; in addition to their standard care in feasibility randomised controlled trial became less hostile and less withdrawn and more sociable. Indications are that their move to conditions of lower security is escalated compared to those receiving standard care only, none were re-admitted which suggests a sustainable effect and potential reduction in recidivism.

DISCUSSION

To return to the play of the man: T.E. Lawrence or 'Ross' – His responses may be understood from the point of view of being an individual who was apparently not able to talk about or to fully process his war time experiences and losses, indeed his autobiography was heavily edited as if censored, prior to publication.

Maybe for fear of shame, unable to talk about or disclose his homosexuality or for fear of having distressing flashbacks of having killed of the sexual abuse that he endured, he possibly suffered an inability to mourn. In effect, the individual is unable to feel the grief. The associated sense of shock

when facing trauma and loss and an inability to grieve when the 'stiff upper lip' is required to keep soldiering on might explain that Lawrence was never able to exceed his exciting and successful Middle Eastern military career. This phenomenon is described by Millar (2017) as 'unprocessed terror'.

Perhaps not too dissimilarly, but at the opposite end of the social spectrum, men and women who suffered childhood abuses and who subsequently developed serious mental disorders often feel too shameful to talk about or to remember abusive events when they were the victim because they 'numbed out': an experience which can create feelings of nausea and disorientation.

Perhaps this is why the Pink Floyd song 'Comfortably Numb' is so popular with patients receiving music therapy in secure hospitals. It describes the loss of innocence and childhood, the anxiety of having to perform and how to become comfortably numb in situations of conflict if often the only way to cope with profound anxiety.

Carefully structured, psychologically founded interactive forms of forensic music therapy can help to thaw out emotional numbness thereby helping the individual to become less unpredictable and less likely to get involved in risky behaviour. The psychological response to trauma is to disconnect from what feels intolerable. As a result of which, sometimes, the individual may seem absolutely normal; a moment later a different, more dangerous state of being might suddenly be accessed through a distressing trigger event, hence impulsive action becomes a risk.

Music therapy can contribute to multidisciplinary treatment because expertly and carefully attuned live music making mediates the musical vibrations that cross from the right to the left hemisphere of the brain thereby promoting a greater sense of mental integration and the ability to think more clearly rather than just to struggle with unmanageable feelings. The aim is for the client to discover how to transition more gradually from one mood to another, rather than to free or 'dissociate'. In this way, he may feel all one of a piece by also being able to think straight as both left and right hemispheres are connecting, giving a sense of mental integration. In this way, the individual can develop insight and he becomes less of a risk to others.

CONCLUSION

The cases of Sergeant Blackman and of T.E. Lawrence demonstrate that an emotional trauma is endured when killing, which is compounded through perpetual repetition that can erode resilience and for some individuals lead to the loss of mental health. The result may be a sense of diminished responsibility or at the very least unhappiness and polarised responses of retreat or towards seeking excitement.

A perpetrator of an illegal killing is committed of the offence of murder, incarcerated in prison, thereby paying the price of the loss of freedom having inflicted loss on others through violent aggression. In the case of Sergeant Blackman he was also stripped of his distinguished military identity and status as a member of the armed forces. Ultimately, his sentence was lifted and a more compassionate response meted out, due to the more modern understanding of how sustained stress and conflict as well as witnessing atrocities, can affect the brain and judgement of even a highly regarded, decorated and disciplined soldier.

Many mentally ill patients who have killed have a fear of eternal damnation and they seek not to be an outcast. Their contribution to future treatment developments can be one form of a redemptive response. While this may possibly be viewed as an altruistic defence to be helpful in contributing to treatment developments can also make a difference towards the individual some finding inner peace and reconciliation.

By following a treatment manual, thereby using a psychologically tested model, forensic music therapists are able to stay safe and to help their clients to develop more self-awareness and mutual understanding between group members. This can lead to new experiences, positive changes, and new bonds in how clients relate to each other. The ongoing research is aimed to further demonstrate how this form of 'live' interactive music therapy contributes positively to recovery and resilience through sustainability of effect. People with mental illness may no longer feel so feared and may live relatively normal lives if they can access services from prisons right through community care.

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