

# Participation in a community music group and mental health wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees



Christalla Pithara-McKeown and Selin Sivilis  
Senior Research Associate (Qualitative Research)  
NIHR ARC West

# An NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) West collaboration with a community music orchestra for refugee and asylum seekers and local musicians



## Lead collaborators

Dr Jonathan James, Dovetail Orchestra

## ARC West Staff



**Pippa Craggs**

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER



**Dr Loubaba Mamluk**

SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE,  
QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH



**Dr Selin Sevis**

SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE

**Dovetail Orchestra exists to provide a welcoming space for asylum-seekers and refugees, building connections through music and supporting musical learning on a regular weekly basis.**

# Activities



Partnership with  
local community  
organisation



# Mental health and wellbeing

- More poor mental health risk factors for refugees and asylum seekers (RAS)
- Loneliness, social isolation, discrimination, stigma
- Mental health inequalities among refugees and asylum seekers (RAS)  
(Blackmore et al 2020; Patane et al 2022; UK)
  - 4-5 times higher risk for PTSD
  - 7 times higher risk for depression



## The mental health of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK

2025 Edition

Wellbeing as ability to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose (WHO, 2022)

MENTAL  
HEALTH  
FOUNDATION

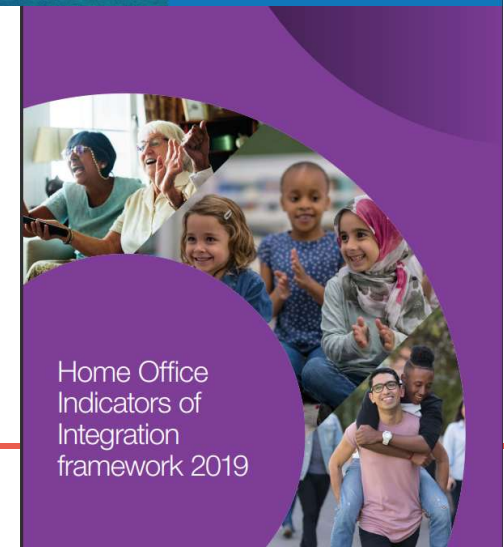


# Social and cultural participation and mental health wellbeing

Protect and improve mental health wellbeing through social and cultural participation

‘communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities’ Home Office

- **Social connections, relationships** (Keyes 1998; Strange and Quinn 2021; van der Boor et al 2020)
- **Participation in arts and culture** (Clini et al 2019; Rodriguez et al 2024; Gordon-Nesbitt & Howarth 2018)
  - **Leisure: context and attainment domain for integration**

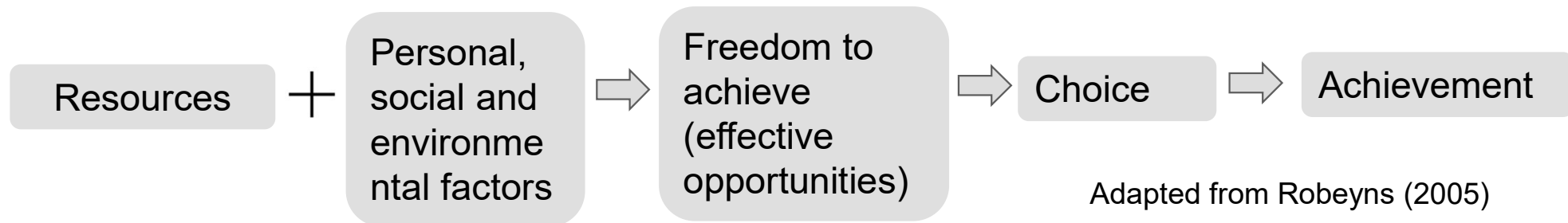
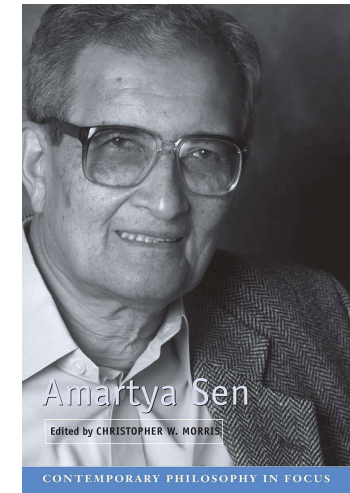


# Can a community music group improve mental health for asylum seekers and refugees (RAS) in Bristol?

## A “capabilities approach” lens



An evaluation of wellbeing has to take the form of an assessment of individuals' effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities they want to engage in and to be whom they want to be (Crocker and Robeyns 2010)

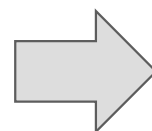


Adapted from Robeyns (2005)

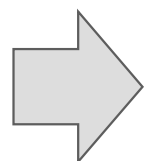


## Qualitative research study

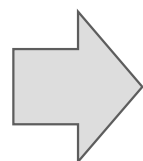
**How do orchestra members and interest holders (musicians, volunteers, trustees, community partners) understand and experience the orchestra and its impact on wellbeing?**



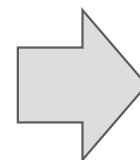
- Motivations and aspirations
- How are these achieved through the orchestra
- Enablers and challenges
- The future



UoB  
Research  
Ethics  
approval



Recruitment:  
32 individuals  
Diverse  
linguistic, ethnic,  
gender, and  
roles



Interviews and  
focus groups

# Aspirations, achievements and wellbeing

I Joined the orchestra because...

- Music learning and personal development
- As a coping behaviour to overcome the stressors associated with the asylum and refugee experience
- Acculturation, cultural exchange
- Social wellbeing
  - Be part of community and society
  - Social contribution, social change

\*get rid of depression

\*I enjoyed it very much and the time passes quickly

\*every time I went to the orchestra I be in a better mood

*In my country, I was part of a small orchestra [...] That's why, when I found out that there were music classes here, I wanted to attend because as a refugee or asylum seeker, especially those of us who live in hotels, manage a very high level of stress. [...] it is necessary to occupy the time we have free to do different activities. (FG2)*



- **The orchestra as a resource and mechanism**

- Member's and organisations material, cultural, social, emotional assets
- Cultural, social, and symbolic capital cocreated by members over time

**Wellbeing enhanced through**

**Individual:** stress reduction, self-efficacy

**Relational:** bonds, connections, networks, sense of belonging

**Community:** voice and space, acceptance of other cultures, empowerment,

**Cultural:** cultural exchange between orchestra and community, collective sense of identity, transformation

Rodriguez et al (2024)

**The orchestra as resource and space where wellbeing is (co)created**

It's that mix of cultural music [...] it's just lovely to mix it all together because **by mixing the music, you're mixing the people** [...] there's just something about it that's very, very rewarding (P02)

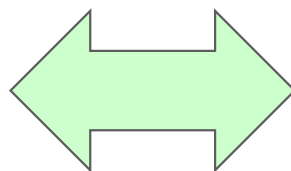
(Other members') songs and stuff really affected me a lot. [...] (M)y perspective and views towards other cultures, other peoples, changed (P08)



# Factors enabling / hindering participation

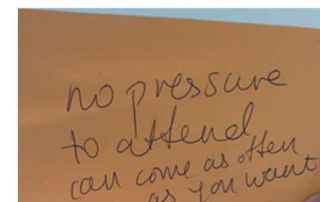
## What is it about the orchestra?

- Focus on music co-creation
- Capacity building
- Inclusive opportunities; choices
- Music leadership
- Links with the community
- Distribution of power
- Material and human resources



## Personal circumstances

- Motivations; beliefs
- (Music) literacy;
- Social/gender roles;
- Health status, SES;
- Home Office asylum policies - status,
- Hostile environment,
- Integration policies,



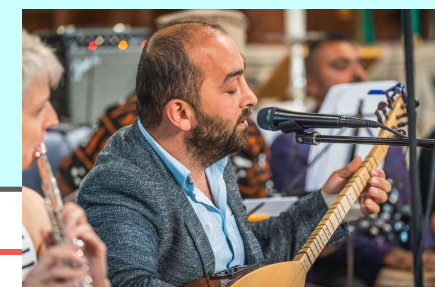
And I think probably one of the worst aspects [...] is being moved just like that! (T)hat's a major challenge, because if you're trying to run an orchestra and you've got a concert coming up and five of the people can't get there because they've been moved [...] that's a challenge for the orchestra. P01

Good management in the orchestras is really important. [...] Someone maybe a good musician, but he or she may not have the skill to bring everyone together, to let them coexist in the same place. FG2

## Lessons learned

- Being part of music groups can contribute to the core determinants of mental health
- Direct impact on wellbeing; and through upstream factors (e.g. relational, community, cultural)
- Inclusiveness and co-production approaches
  - Individual diversity in personal, social and environmental enablers and challenges
  - Immigration policies & hostile environment
  - Power and choice
  - Community-led and community-based

It's like happiness is there. You seen that little child was dancing yesterday, it was a **very powerful thing how the music can motivate** somebody to move like this, you don't care who's watching. [...] **she was having the confidence and I was feeling very powerful [...]. So this thing can bring happiness, bring joy to people even no matter where they came** from. [...]. Even the sound can make you feel like you belong. (P06)



# Thank you!

<https://arc-w.nihr.ac.uk/research/projects/dovetail-orchestra-can-a-community-music-group-improve-mental-health-for-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-bristol/>

