

CHAPTER SEVEN

PHASE III – FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

7.1 Overview

Informed by the results of Phases I and II of the study, Phase III was the final of three distinct but interrelated data collections, and comprised two in-depth focus group interviews with groups of musicians. Focus groups were selected for the final Phase in order to encourage “interactions among the participants [that would] stimulate them to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 308). In addition, focus groups provided the opportunity to observe the interaction/discussion process of the group (Cohen et al., 2001; Ticehurst & Veal, 2000). With validity and reliability in mind, focus groups enabled participants to validate the initial results and to enlarge upon given themes enabling the researcher to re-check the translation and subsequent coding of previous data.

7.2 Methodology

7.2.1 The Sample

A potential difficulty with focus groups is bias resulting from samples systematically selected from a limited source, and therefore not representative of the total population (Morgan, 1988). Avoiding such sample bias was a primary objective, and was addressed with the selection of two distinct samples of musicians including musicians who had not previously been involved with the study, and who were therefore able to provide an independent perspective. The discussion themes for the focus group interviews were: (1) definition of a musician; (2) intrinsic and extrinsic factors impacting upon the development and sustainability of careers in music; and (3) changes to education and training.

7.2.2 Sampling Procedure

The study was mindful of the advice given by Cohen et. al (2001) to take “extreme care with the sampling, so that *every* participant is the bearer of the particular characteristic required or that the group has homogeneity of background in the required area” (p. 288). Of 152 survey respondents, 133 (87.5%) expressed willingness to participate in an interview, and provided the basis for both focus groups. Two musicians who had not previously participated in the study were also invited to participate. Samples were structured to bring together participants with the common background variable of practise within the profession of music.

The focus groups included musicians from each of the age groups specified in the survey, and incorporated both male and female musicians. Specifically, the participants in the first focus group were musicians who played orchestral instruments, and who had pursued a variety of musical roles ranging from teaching to the facilitation of community music. The second focus group sample was selected from a population of musicians who were involved in related research, and included two musicians who had not previously been involved with the study.

To allow for non-attendance of expected focus group members, focus groups were over-booked by twenty percent with the aim of promoting groups of between seven and ten people (Morgan, 1988), and to provide coverage without passivity (Gall et al., 1996; Morgan, 1988; Ticehurst & Veal, 2000). Each of the potential respondents was contacted personally and invited to participate. During the initial call, the researcher described the process of focus group interviews, explained that data would be coded and not traceable back to the respondent, and that the focus group would be recorded using an audiocassette. In total, seven musicians were invited to participate in the first focus group and ten were invited to the second, resulting in a response rate of almost 80%. Venue was considered in terms of geographical convenience, comfort, noise levels and cost. In light of these considerations, the first interview was held at a private home and the second interview was held in a seminar room at the University of Western Australia. One week prior to each focus group, the researcher made contact with each focus group member to remind him/her of the time and venue.

7.2.3 Focus Group Instrumentation and Trials

With reliability and validity in mind, the focus group was designed to yield data that would clarify, expand, confirm or disaffirm key themes emerging from the study. The instrument comprised an interview schedule (Appendix V, cf. p. A128) that was validated by two musicians known to the researcher, and the musicians who participated in the trial were excluded from the focus group interviews. Feedback on the instrument was considered, and minor changes were made according to the feedback received. The validation letter is attached as Appendix W (cf. p. A133).

7.2.4 The Focus Group Process

Prior to each focus group interview, written permission was sought from every focus group member for the interview to be recorded onto audiocassette. At the commencement of each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet and signed a consent form (Appendix D, cf. p. A17). The researcher explained how participants' comments would contribute to the research objectives, and then clarified the definitions of key terms. An interview checklist was used to track topics covered, and the researcher utilised backtracking and the introduction of a new topic only when the conversation strayed beyond the research objectives and questions.

7.2.5 Coding and Analysis

The focus group interview was designed to validate and expand upon the results of the study, thus coding categories reflected the discussion themes. Each topic in the checklist was numbered as the topic was discussed, and numbers aligned with interview notes so that the researcher could retrace the interview for the purpose of transcribing the interview immediately afterwards. The researcher checked the original interview transcripts to ensure that comments had not been taken out of context, and focus group members confirmed the accuracy of interpretation. An initial coding booklet was then developed, after which inductive coding was employed to extract and expand upon each of the themes using marginal notes and colour coding. The focus groups provided a holistic review of the study prior to final analysis.

7.3 Focus Group Number One

The first focus group interview lasted for one and a half hours and involved six participants. The transcript of the interview is attached as Appendix X (cf. p. A134), and the following section contains a summary of the discussion.

7.3.1 Definition

The first focus group centred its discussion on the proposed definition of a ‘musician’, which read: ‘A musician is a person who works within the profession of music within one or more specialist fields’. The role of the musician was thought to have changed over time and across different cultures according to the societal uses of music. Performance as the sole form of musical practice was recognised as being historically rare and the group cited examples such as Telemann (1681-1767), who pursued multiple roles. It was suggested that specialisations within the musician’s practice came much later. The definition posited by the research was placed within the context of ‘the musician in the 21st century’.

Diversity of genre was iterated, and it was agreed that the range of music to which musicians are exposed is greater now than perhaps ever before. Reflecting comments made by survey respondents, exposure to non-classical genres was considered to be beneficial to personal development, to the acquisition of a greater range of work, and to the enhanced understanding of classical music performance.

The terms ‘vocational’ and ‘professional’ were discussed at length, and although the group initially considered vocational activity to be essential to the definition of a musician, the notion was rejected on the basis of notable exceptions such as Borodin, who was a chemist, and Kreisler, who was a doctor. Likewise, formal training was rejected as a criterion due to the commonality of informal musical training. The group then considered the term ‘practising’, and one group member stated that being a musician is “as fundamental as being involved” (FG6). The conversation progressed to the question of performance as integral to being a musician. It was noted that less than 70% of the musicians who participated in the survey considered themselves to include performance within their practice, which led to discussion on the status of composers and musicologists who may not perform. The consensus of the group was that, given the new definition, both composers

and musicologists could be categorised as musicians; therefore the inclusion of performance was not essential to being a musician, but rather to being a performer.

The group next considered background as a criterion: for example, the researcher was considered to be a musician because of performance background rather than because of her current activities. One group member, who ran an instrumental ensemble, was asked whether she would remain a musician if she ceased performance with her ensemble and focussed exclusively on an administrative role, to which she replied “of course I would. It’s as fundamental as being what I have always looked at myself as doing” (FG6). The same participant noted that when she commenced training, she considered herself training to become a violinist rather than a musician, and the group agreed that self-definition as a musician came later. A second group member suggested that she was no longer a musician as she had ceased to perform. The group suggested that she was no longer a violinist, but still a musician. The group concluded that the term musician refers to engagement within the wider profession rather than to the specialisation of the individual. As expected, self-definition was crucial.

Involvement had been earlier described as fundamental to being a musician, and the group debated direct and indirect involvement with performance: for instance, one group member suggested that “[a]n instrumentalist may not be a performer. It’s just what they have done to become a musician” (FG5). This again implied that a musician is someone practising within the field of music rather than specifically within performance. It was accepted that musicians engage in multiple roles: “how often is it that a musician only plays? That is very unrealistic in our society” (FG3). The inclusion of indirect involvement appeared to underpin the acceptance of currency as a musician regardless of the regularity with which performances were secured. As a result of the discussion, the definition was altered to become: ‘A musician is someone who practises in the profession of music in one or more specialist fields.’

7.3.2 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Influences

The group considered the conditional matrix of intrinsic and extrinsic influences given in Chapter Six (cf. p. 183), and suggested that culture and society would surround the matrix. Strengthening the findings from Phases I and II of the study, passion was placed at the

centre of an individual's drive to pursue music. Environment was added as a result of discussion about the conditions or opportunities conducive to musical development.

7.3.3 Changes to Education and Training

The group concurred with initial results concerning recommendations for educational change, and reiterated the importance of student exposure to the profession and career preparation: "I do feel that musicians in whatever field need to be equipped a little better or to have the specific resources available to them to help them become effective" (FG1). Requisite skills included those in teaching and business. Submission writing was emphasised by one group member, and it was acknowledged that many musicians do not have the skills required to access available funding.

Psychological and physiological injury prevention was a key focus, and participants highlighted the importance of prevention to be taught at the earliest stages of development, and for safe working practices to be modelled within orchestral, school and community settings. Communication skills were raised in connection with leadership roles, particularly within orchestral settings.

The group acknowledged that university degrees in general have increased their vocational focus, but concluded that five years rather than the current four years are needed to provide music graduates with the requisite skills and knowledge for professional practice in music.

7.4 Focus Group Number Two

The second focus group lasted for one and a half hours and involved seven participants, two of whom had not been previously involved with the study. The transcript of the group discussion is attached as Appendix Y (cf. p. A142), and the following section contains a summary of the discussion.

7.4.1 Definition

Akin to the first focus group, participants in the second group spent a considerable amount of time discussing the issue of definition. The definition suggested to the group had been revised to take into account the comments of previous focus group members, and was relayed as 'a musician is someone who practises in the profession of music within one or

more specialist fields.’ The societal role of musicians was considered with respect to Merriam’s functions of music: namely, emotional involvement, communication, societal contribution, and entertainment (Merriam, 1964). Following the suggestion that a criterion for being considered a musician is society’s support for the musician’s activities, the historical civic and community involvement of musicians was discussed. One group member suggested that the dictionary definitions and the suggested definition were ‘correct’ but incomplete, in that a performer is someone who performs and a musician includes “whatever else we do that is attached to being a musician” (FG7). Thus the identification of specialist fields within the profession of music arose as a vital issue. It was noted that the new definition could classify a concert hall usher as a musician, reflecting Small’s (1998) concept of ‘musicking’. The group concluded that it was crucial to identify specialist fields, all of which required specific musical skills and knowledge.

The group suggested that specialist fields ought to include, but should not be limited to, the performer, composer, conductor, teacher, and artistic director. Another point of reference raised by the group was Elliott’s (1994) term ‘musicing’, which referred to music as an activity. The participant who cited Elliott’s work suggested that musicians perform active work within fields of music, echoing the first focus group’s inclusion of the term ‘practising’.

Involvement as a performer was rejected as a criterion for inclusion on the basis that musicians such as composers may not perform, and it was agreed that a composer’s intimacy with the music was most often with the product rather than with the expression, or performance of the product. The group agreed that a performer is a specialist within the profession of music: “All musicians can be performers, but performers can have the exclusivity of being a performer” (FG7). Echoing the first focus group, musicians noted that they trained initially to be instrumental specialists such as a pianist or saxophonist. Self-definition as a musician arose with the addition of industry roles other than performance, and the group reflected that very few musicians work solely in performance.

A mention of Yehudi Menuhin as one of the world’s most revered performers prompted the observation that many top performers include a teaching role in their practice. One group member observed a difference in the role of the elite jazz musician, who is almost never a teacher. The point was made that the process of teaching and learning in jazz is evolving; whereas jazz may have been traditionally learned informally, it is increasingly studied

formally. As a consequence, the traditional roles of jazz performers as teachers rather than mentors may also be changing. The participant described himself as a commercial performer on the basis that his performance activities are driven by the need to earn an income.

A recurring theme was that of the hierarchy or status of the various roles within the music profession: “you are a lesser musician if you teach music, and you are an even lesser musician if you teach in schools or other settings ... there’s a hierarchy within the industry, but it’s not set and you don’t know where you are with that” (FG11). The group agreed that musical hierarchy is a societal view, and that the dictionary definition of a musician as a performer reflects the general perception of a musician’s role. The consensus of the group was that musicians’ roles evolve according to political, industrial, social and personal circumstances. It was not considered feasible to define someone as a musician based upon a set of criteria such as performance, income or formal training: “You can’t lock one person into a narrow definition because that’s the way music is - always evolving” (FG13).

The group concluded that the term musician is “an umbrella term under which all these other activities happen” (FG10). The group agreed that the inclusion of specialist fields within the suggested definition would provide clarity and specificity.

7.4.2 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Influences

The group concurred that passion is central to the desire to become a musician, and considered the term ‘resilience’ to be dealing with an external force. Hence the group preferred the term ‘inner strength’, which is more intrinsic and so more appropriate to the concept of a personal attribute. Also discussed were the concepts of teachers as dreamers and realists, and the sustainability of passion when musicians transfer roles. In line with the literature review discussed in Chapter Four (cf. p. 73), focus group members acknowledged that subjective and objective identity posed a strong influence on musicians’ passion for their field; non-acceptance of one’s current roles is likely to de-motivate. Adaptability was thought to be vital, and was described by the group as flexibility within the industry: “If you want to eat, you have to do other things” (FG 13). The group concurred with the design and content of the matrix of personal attributes included in Chapter Six (cf. p. 183), and agreed with the proposal made by the first focus group that the matrix could be situated within a socio-cultural context.

7.4.3 Changes to Education and Training

The group accepted recommendations that had arisen from the study in relation to changes to the education and training of musicians. Group members discussed the necessity of training in generic skills such as those used in teaching and business. A particular focus was the need for musicians to be taught effective communication skills, which were considered vital to a musician's practice in every musical field and particularly in teaching and ensemble roles.

7.5 Concluding Comments

Focus group members concurred with the recommended changes to education and training given by participants in Phases I and II of the study (Chapters Five and Six). Based on these changes, focus group members emphasised the importance of experiential learning, communication skills and both psychological and physiological injury prevention. The matrix of intrinsic and extrinsic influences (cf. p. 183) was well received by both groups, who verified the terminology used and agreed with the placement of the matrix within a socio-cultural context.

It was concluded that a musician identifies vocationally with the profession of music, whether or not income is derived elsewhere. The term 'musician' was accepted as an umbrella term for the profession: a musician whose only role is in performance was identified as a performer, and is most likely to self-define according to instrumental specialty, for example as a violinist or clarinetist. Likewise, a composer is most likely to self-define as a composer rather than as a musician. Group members declared that they had initially trained as instrumentalists or composers, and began to define themselves as musicians after their practice included more than one role. Given the nature of musical practice as an evolving multiplicity of roles, the suggested definition was accepted as a starting point from which the perception of a musician as a performer may progress towards a broader and more inclusive understanding of the profession.