ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Metaphor in Conflict Transformation: Using Arts to Shift Perspectives and Build Empathy

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from an arts-based intra-communal peacebuilding programme in North-Central Rakhine State (Myanmar), 2016–2018, on the role metaphors—embedded in arts processes and artefacts—played in facilitating reported shifts in conflict-related attitudes and behaviours. An established body of literature shows the central importance of metaphor to human cognition, particularly where it underpins emotional responses (especially empathy formation) to otherwise sensitive issues. Few studies have extended this to verbal dialogue in conflict settings. No studies have explored arts-based metaphor's potential for enabling conflict-affected communities to explore peacebuilding. Findings suggest metaphor were instrumental in enabling sustainable, significant shifts in conflict repertories (Bar-Tal) by allowing participants to analyse conflict narratives, imagine alternatives, rehearse intended peace repertoires and codify new ideas for easy recall post-workshop. While shifts in repertoire and resulting behaviours were small, they were significant in motivating these Rakhine villagers to reinitiate cautious contact with Rohingya neighbours.

Keywords Arts-based conflict transformation · Peacebuilding · Metaphor · Emotion · Perception

Cet article présente les résultats d'un programme intracommunautaire de consolidation de la paix fondé sur l'art dans l'État du centre-nord de Rakhine (Myanmar) entre 2016 et 2018, et présente notamment le rôle que les métaphores - intégrées dans les processus et artefacts artistiques – ont joué pour faciliter des changements remarqués dans les attitudes et les comportements liés au conflit. Un corpus établi de littérature montre l'importance centrale de la métaphore pour le cerveau humain, en particulier là où elle sous-tend les réponses émotionnelles (en particulier la formation de l'empathie) à des problèmes par ailleurs sensibles. Peu d'études ont étendu cela au dialogue verbal dans les situations de conflit. Aucune étude ne s'est penchée sur le potentiel de la métaphore artistique pour permettre aux communautés touchées par les conflits d'explorer les processus de consolidation de la paix. Les résultats suggèrent que l'utilisation de métaphores a contribué à rendre possible des

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Extended author information available on the last page of the article

changements durables et significatifs dans les répertoires de conflit (Bar-Tal) en permettant aux participant·e·s d'analyser la façon dont on parle des conflits, d'imaginer des alternatives, de s'entraîner à utiliser un répertoire dédié lié à la paix et de mettre en place de nouvelles idées pour s'en souvenir facilement après l'atelier. Bien que les changements aient été légers au niveau des répertoires utilisés et des comportements qui en résultent, ils ont été importants pour inciter ces villageois·es de Rakhine à reprendre un contact prudent avec leurs voisin·e·s Rohingyas.

Introduction: An Intriguing Observation

<div style="text-align:center">

Fiery Anger
Fiery anger, can't be calmed
Greed, can't be killed
Love, fading, No more truth…
Fiery anger.
Put love first,
Have gratitude.
Put away anger,
Keep on walking with truth.
The fiery anger be calmed.[1]

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For some years, I have been involved with community development (CD) programming with local partners in North-Central Rakhine State, Myanmar—the region impacted by ongoing conflict between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya. In 2015, local partners suggested we develop a conflict transformation (henceforth CT) module to incorporate into this programme, recognising CD would not likely achieve sustainable, positive outcomes for village communities without addressing conflict dynamics. They requested this module be arts-based, because of mutual interests in arts-based CD.

This CT module was trialled in 2016–2018. Broad outcomes of this work have been recently reported elsewhere in this journal (Ware, Lauterjung & Harmer McSolvin 2021). However, as I further analysed data from the earlier paper, and continued exploring peace and conflict literature, I noticed an intriguing pattern in arts artefacts and verbal accounts of shifting repertoires enabled by arts-based processes. Namely, metaphors utilised in arts artefacts appeared to play a key role in enabling new frames of reference for exploring local conflict dynamics and participants' roles within conflicts, helping codify new intended attitudes and behaviours in easily recallable format for application beyond workshops. In short, it appeared arts-based metaphors helped enable participants to replace 'repertoires' of conflict narratives (e.g. negative stereotypes of the Other) that promote ongoing hatred and violence, with more peace-supportive ones (Bar-Tal 2013, p. 282). To assess the accuracy or otherwise of these observations, this paper therefore explores the research question: *To what extent does metaphor embedded in group arts processes,*

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[1] Poem, written June 2018, by research participants. Metaphors in bold (author's emphasis).

and the artefacts they produce, provide effective tools for creating new frameworks for perceiving and responding constructively to conflict?

Recent work on conflict dialogue demonstrates metaphors' potential for providing effective spaces to shift repertoires and build empathy for the Other, enabling new attitudes and actions in verbal exchanges between conflict parties (e.g. Cameron 2011; Schirch 2005). In spoken language, a metaphor is the use of one word or idea to explore and ultimately comprehend something else (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, p. 6; Shinebourne and Smith 2010, p. 60). Metaphor is ubiquitous to human communication—often used without speakers even being aware. For example, metaphors like **a rose**[2] could help explore romantic love—beautiful, fragrant, precious. But it can also have **thorns** (rejection by a lover, challenges in building a relationship). Thus, Thibodeau (2019, p. 2) suggests we can 'map' ideas from a 'source domain' (e.g. a rose) onto a lesser-understood, perhaps abstract, phenomenon or 'target domain' (e.g. romantic love). Thus, simple, concrete metaphors deepen and extend our understanding of more abstract concepts. Metaphor also codifies these multiple aspects of target domains onto easily-recalled source domains.

Within conflict settings, metaphor can be used to promote hatred, mistrust and violence, or it can facilitate shifts towards more peaceful attitudes. Within conflict dialogue, metaphor can also help frame perspectives, demonstrate empathy with the Other, and provide pathways for building new, common understandings (Cameron 2011). However, as CT scholars increasingly argue, dialogue alone is unlikely to bring lasting repertoire shifts. Indeed, in settings like the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict (Myanmar), dialogue has sometimes simply not been possible. Hence, intra-communal work may help build preparedness to engage with the Other to transform conflicts.

As will be demonstrated shortly, a growing body of work also points towards the potential of sensitively-designed arts processes to provide safe spaces for exploring intra-communal conflict-repertoires and re-configuring these to support peace formation. While some make reference to the power of symbols in CT—including through arts processes (eg. Lederach 2005; Shank and Schirch 2008; Schirch 2005)—no one to date has specifically explored the role that *metaphor embedded within arts processes and artefacts* plays in supporting repertoire shifts, to explain *how* arts can potentially support CT. This paper is the first to explore this question, and aims to stimulate broader scholarly inquiry into this and other key processes by which arts supports both conflict and peace repertoires in conflict-affected communities. I argue metaphors generated through arts processes and artefacts enabled safe exploration of sensitive topics, deep engagement and reflection, and sustainable shifts in conflict-repertoires to more peace-supporting attitudes and behaviours. While small-scale, this study indicates significant shifts in participants' reported behaviour in the village, which appears to have positively influenced such change in other villagers.

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2 Metaphors used throughout the article will be bolded, a convention that comes from linguistics studies analysing various characteristics and applications of metaphor.

The next sections provide some background on the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict and programme that forms the focus of this research, and the research design. Then a brief review of a vast and complex literature ensues, to demonstrate links between metaphor, arts, emotion and empathy in CT, followed by findings from this analysis of metaphor and final conclusions.

The Rakhine-Rohingya Conflict

Rakhine State is among the poorest parts of Myanmar. The 2014 census showed just 32% of Rakhine access improved sanitation (e.g. proper latrines); 38% access safe drinking water; 73% only have thatched roofing on houses; 13% access regular electricity supply; and 38% of ethnic Rakhine and 99% of ethnic Rohingya have no identity papers (Ware and Laoutides 2018). Coupled with dire poverty, inter-communal issues have been problematic for decades. Violence erupted in Northern Rakhine, between ethnic Buddhist Rakhine and Rohingya Muslims, in June-October 2012, displacing 140,000—mostly Rohingya. Subsequent Myanmar military and Rakhine nationalist crackdowns on Rohingya militants in 2016–2017 culminated in 740,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh, leaving approx. 500,000 virtual-prisoners in village tracts.[3] Since 2015, clashes between ethnic Rakhine insurgents and the Myanmar military displaced over 100,000 Rakhine, further exacerbating inter-communal tensions. Hence, this complex three-way conflict fuels intense fears and entrenched narratives (repertoires) typical of intractable conflict, sustaining deep social cleavages (Ware and Laoutides 2018).

The CD and Arts-Based Conflict Transformation Programme

The broader research programme from which this study is drawn, is significant as one of the first longitudinal studies of arts-based peacebuilding. The research was designed around a series of six workshops, run by the author, who then collected and analysed arts artefacts created in each workshop, and conducted interviews after the last four. This section describes the workshops themselves, and the next section will explain how data was collected during and after these workshops.

Arts-based workshops formed a module of a 3-year community development (CD) programme in north-central Rakhine State, Myanmar. Approximately 20 participating villages[4] selected a community member to become a volunteer 'CD facilitator' who attended training every 6–8 weeks run by the local partner organisation, thereafter implementing learnings in their village. Twice per year (six times across three years), facilitators participated in 2–3 day arts-based peacebuilding workshops

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[3] Cluster of approx.10–30 villages.
[4] This number is approximate only, due to minor fluctuations in attendance between villages over the course of the 3-year programme.

run by the author. Workshops 1 and 3 were designed externally, with participant feedback contributing directly to selection of other workshop topics.

Workshops incorporated sequences of discussion and multi-arts activities, including poetry, song-writing, collage, storytelling and comic strips, which introduced concepts and allowed reflection, experience of emotional impacts, rehearsal of new repertoires and behaviours, and ultimately messy thinking that gradually resolved into codification of new learnings (documented in songs and poems, occasionally in stories). The concept of metaphor was actively taught in Workshop 3 (June 2017). It would be useful to conduct further research with a control group (who did not receive this specific training) to assess the impact of this specific aspect of the training on their ability to meaningfully and deliberately utilise metaphors in later workshops. However, this was beyond the scope of the current project. The author did note, however, that participants were comfortable with the concept of metaphor, and could talk meaningfully about the ways they used arts-based metaphors to support their exploration, and memory thereafter, of new ideas. Other workshop topics included: arts-based skills for learning, identity and perspective for empathy-building, how attitudes impact behaviours, restoration of agency following August-2017 violence, and conflict resolution skills.

Facilitators comprised roughly two-thirds men, one third women, aged 18–65. Of approximately twenty facilitators, one had tertiary education, two were village headmen, but most were rice farmers with an average primary grade-4 education. All participants were Rakhine Buddhists. During the programme, military-enforced travel restrictions on Rohingya, and general segregation of Rakhine and Rohingya, prevented Rohingya participation. The August-2017 violence leading to expulsion of 700,000 + Rohingya occurred between workshops three and four, negating what, until then, looked like an opportunity to bring these groups together to begin cautious dialogue. Violent ethnic cleansing shut down relationships between even those Rohingya who remained and their Rakhine neighbours, even though their villages were as little as 20 m apart. Hence, the approach focussed on intra-ethnic discussions with Rakhine Buddhists only, aimed at creating space for them to reappraise conflict narratives and reconsider their readiness to re-engage the Other, once tensions eased.

Research Design

The key research question explored here is: *To what extent does metaphor embedded in group arts processes, and the artefacts they produce, provide effective tools for creating new frameworks for perceiving and responding constructively to conflict?* To explore this, the paper also investigated these subquestions:

- Did arts-based metaphors (i.e. metaphors embedded in arts artefacts, such as song lyrics, or pictures that represented a metaphor) enable transformation of perspectives, *attitudes* and/or intended behaviours (i.e. conflict-repertoires, Bar-Tal 2013)? If so, how did this occur? This was necessary to establish whether

these metaphors embedded in arts artefacts provided new tools for *perceiving* (analysing and understanding) conflict dynamics in new ways.

- Did arts-based processes enable participants to respond constructively to conflict situations outside workshops. I explored this to attempt to establish whether the metaphors explored and created in workshops enabled participants to *respond constructively* to conflict outside the workshops.

The **qualitative data collected** during and after workshops aimed to track initial attitudes towards the Other held by participants at the beginning of the programme, and shifts in repertoires, attitudes and reported behaviours across three years. Data includes: arts artefacts created in workshops (e.g. poems, stories, pictures, song lyrics and descriptions of role plays); focus groups conducted after each of the last four workshops; 'check-in' and 'check-out' circles, where participants reflected on daily learnings, or learnings from previous workshops, and how these were being implemented; and researcher observations and reflections on workshop processes. Due to the focus on impacts of arts-based processes on the development of empathy and other peace-oriented attitudes, along with skills for responding appropriately to conflict triggers, data analysis utilised a phenomenological approach, to try to understand how workshop participants experienced workshop processes.

Phenomenological analysis of the data seeks to understand human experience through the eyes of those experiencing a particular phenomenon, aiming to 'conceptualise…processes and structures of mental life, how situations are meaningfully lived through, as they are experienced' from insiders' perspectives rather than the external researcher's (Wertz 2011, p. 124). In particular, I attempt to explicate what impacts experimentation with metaphors embedded in arts processes and artefacts had, and whether participants felt these impacted their ability to respond more constructively to conflict triggers after workshops.

Song lyrics, stories and poems were translated during workshops, so that I could engage with participants meaningfully. However, for the purposes of analysis, these were translated more carefully afterwards by a speaker of Rakhine and checked for accuracy by the head of the local organisation.

Workshop participants became research participants, with their informed consent sought at the commencement of each workshop. Where this was withheld, individuals' relevant data was excluded. Data for this research was only collected during workshops 3–6, as early workshops revolved around building arts skills and confidence to use them as learning spaces. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, project no. HAE-15-109.

Metaphor, Arts and Conflict Transformation: Key Concepts

Before presenting this paper's findings, this section briefly defines the key terms *conflict transformation* and *repertoire*, and lays out a theory of how metaphor embedded in arts processes and artefacts can play a role in CT. Because this is a complex area which has not been fully explored in development studies and

peacebuilding literature, this section lays a brief foundation for understanding how arts-based metaphors can provide powerful tools and spaces for supporting grass-roots peacebuilding. The broad argument I wish to make here is that, metaphor is key to, firstly, the emotional commitment required and secondly, the task of shifting conflict-perpetuating narratives (what Bar-Tal 2013 calls 'repertoires'). I then review a further set of literature suggesting that, as a fundamentally metaphorical pursuit, the arts engages people in exploring the metaphors that can support emotional commitment to change and transformed perspectives.

Key Terms

I use *conflict transformation* to mean '…deep transformation in…institutions and discourses that reproduce violence, [and] in…conflict parties themselves and their relationships'. Transforming conflict into peaceful co-existence builds processes of a 'dialectic nature' (Lederach 1995, p. 17), without necessarily aiming for total absence of conflict. This paper focuses on local-level CT (Orjuela 2008, p. 25; Maphosa and Keasley 2014, p. 2), particularly intra-communal work, as preparation for re-engaging directly with the Other in conflict-affected settings.

Psychological repertoire is a group's shared 'beliefs, attitudes, emotions' that form 'shared views of the world because they are group members who identify with their group' (Bar-Tal 2013, p. 20). These are 'organised around thematic clusters' generally concerning 'societal goals, self-images, conflicts, aspirations, conditions, norms, values, societal structures, images of outgroups, institutions, obstacles and problems…They provide a 'basis for efficient communication, common understanding' (Bar-Tal 2013, pp. 20–21). In intractable conflict-contexts, these become highly rigid, stereotyped, and key drivers perpetuating social divisions underlying the conflict.

Finally, I use the term *arts-based metaphor* throughout the paper to discuss metaphors which are embedded in arts artefacts such as songs, poems, and drawings. This is to differentiate these from linguistic metaphor that appears in daily speech or dialogue-based CT.

Metaphor and Emotion in Peacebuilding

Disputes are highly emotive (Katz Jameson et al 2009, p. 171; Schirch 2005, p. 35). Thus, shifting conflict-repertoires (thereby encouraging peace-supporting attitudes and behaviours) is not a primarily rational process. It requires linking emotional experience with rational deliberation. Emotion plays a role in aiding negotiations (Katz Jameson et al 2009, p. 173), can deepen understanding and 'connection to an experience' (Schirch 2005, p. 43), helping build empathy and compassion that are central to more peaceful relations (Klimecki 2019). Further, processes confronting participants with their complicity in conflict-repertoires and resulting attitudes and behaviours arguably require learning processes. The adult learning literature suggests emotion is a 'key influence on learning and memory' (Kolb and Kolb 2005,

p. 208). Mezirow posits linking emotional with rational choice enables perspective transformation (Mezirow 1978, 1981; cited in Boud et al 1994, p. 23).

Kövecses (2008, p. 380) suggests emotion is composed of metaphor, other symbolic content, and 'cultural models'. Cameron's groundbreaking longitudinal study of metaphor in dialogue suggests metaphor can build 'temporary emotional connection open[ing] up the possibility of developing empathy'—the emotion most crucial for CT (2011, p. 9). She further demonstrates metaphor in conciliation discourse plays a key role in building 'direct affective connection' with the Other (2011, p. 177). Metaphor allows dialogue-participants to preserve their identity while safely allowing exploration of the Other's perceptions and experiences, leading to sustainable perspective transformation (2011, pp. 174, 191). She suggests metaphor 'motivates and guides', 'enables discourse encounters with the Other', 'allows access to the emotions of the Other' while concurrently 'affectively protect[ing]', and 'activates emotional resonances' (Cameron 2011, p. 172). This highlights the significance of metaphor for the deeply emotional work of transforming conflict-repertoires.

Significance of Metaphor for the Cognitive Work of Repertoire (Perspective) Transformation

Bar-Tal (2013, p. 282) argues 'frozen repertoires' are central to perpetuating conflict. Hence, a fundamentally important aspect of peacebuilding at the grassroots level is the transformation of these repertoires from conflict-perpetuating to peace-supporting. Such *cognitive* shifts are a first step towards intended and actual behaviour shifts which contribute to building peace (Ware, Lauterjung and Harmer McSolvin 2021).

Metaphor is central to human cognition and provides a rich resource for examining sensitive issues such as conflict-repertoires. Humans use symbols like metaphor to structure thinking and reasoning, particularly around abstract ideas and emotion-comprehension (Goldberg 2018, p. 53; Gibbs 1994). Metaphor literally shapes conceptual structures and human thinking (Thibodeau et al 2019, pp. 3–4) and '…define[s] reality through …coherent network[s] of entailments…highlight[ing] some features of reality and hid[ing] others', leading us to believe some things are true and others false (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, p. 158; see also Cameron 2011, p. 179).

Metaphors 'shape thought by tapping into structured knowledge of…source domain[s] to help people organise and draw inferences about…target domain[s]'. They are most effective in shifting repertoires when 'emotional[ly] valen[t]' (Thibodeau et al 2019, p. 10). 'Imagability correlates very highly with learnability' (Goldberg 2018, p. 54), suggesting pictorial metaphors provide effective means of constructing and retaining abstract-conceptual learnings (Gibbs 1994, p. 131). Because 'change is essentially an act of imagination' (Goldberg 2018, p. 52), metaphors form cognitive bridges between old and new understandings (Goldberg 2018, p. 54).

While understudied for destabilising rigid narratives, Goldberg suggests metaphor communicates 'this really matters to me' (2018, pp. 61, 65), therefore building engagement and humanising conversation. In particular, as 'whole, visual and symbolic' devices, metaphors can 'do an end-run around stuck cognitive frameworks', allowing people to 'question and shift those frames once they become visible'

(Goldberg 2018, p. 65) and encouraging evaluation of conflict drivers and status quo (Burgers et al 2016, p. 418). Because metaphors are vivid and access 'different layers of sensory and informational meanings', they are more likely to provoke emotional responses in participants (Shinebourne 2010, p. 60), making metaphorical messages 'more persuasive than literal messages' (Van Stee 2018, p. 545). Furthermore, directly exploring conflict issues can potentially be re-traumatising. However, metaphor can build safe spaces through indirect exposure to emotions 'that may be too painful to express directly…' (Shinebourne and Smith 2010, p. 67).

Metaphor is inherently ambiguous, allowing multiple simultaneous interpretations to coexist (Schirch 2005, p. 81). This ability to hold ambiguity is central in CT to broadening rigid, narrow conflict-repertoires (ibid), allowing participants to agree to disagree, and 'suspend judgment [to] explore face and heart value' (Lederach 2005, p. 37). Metaphor's link into 'culturally shared meanings of a community' that 'carry deeply felt resonances such as love, fear or cultural identity', making metaphor an ideal medium for critical analysis of conflict-repertoires (Deakin Crick and Grushka 2009, p. 449).

While these two sections point to metaphor's key emotional and cognitive role in direct dialogue, direct contact was not feasible in the Rakhine context, and is often not feasible in many other conflict settings. Alternative approaches may therefore build intra-communal *affective (emotional) connections*, facilitating willingness to engage in challenging reconciliation. Creativity and imagination offer keys to shifting conflict-repertoires and building motivation to (re-)connect with the Other. Lederach calls this *moral imagination*—the ability to imagine more peace-oriented futures, while remaining firmly rooted in today's reality of a conflict-fuelled environment (Lederach 2005, p. 5). This points to arts-based interventions' potential.

Arts: Key Metaphorical and Emotional Spaces in Peacebuilding?

As fundamentally symbolic, metaphorical activity, arts can have 'profound effects… on humanity,…penetrat[ing] the impenetrable, overwhelming the defensive and convey[ing] complex messages without ….a word' (Schirch 2005, p. 4). Such 'actions…require interpretation' and 'allow for multiple interpretations'—i.e. ambiguity (Schirch 2005, pp. 16–17). Lederach (2005, pp. 71–72) suggests 'moments of aesthetic imagination' often emerge where single images can transform 'complexity and historic difficulty' into 'clarity [and] great insight' (Lederach 2005, p. 69). In particular, he looks for 'spoken images'—i.e. metaphors, suggesting people rarely analyse conflict rationally, rather 'talk[ing] in images' (ibid). This points to metaphor embedded inherently in arts processes as 'canvas…[which] invites interaction, probing, and echoes' (ibid).

As key repositories of collective memory and expressions of individual and collective emotion, arts-based approaches have much to offer CT. Because arts artefacts are implicitly linked with culture—i.e. its myths, stories and rituals—creative acts 'bring into existence processes that have not existed before' sustaining themselves through innovation (Lederach 2005, p. 73). Arts can transcend '…limitations

of verbal communication', expressing ideas and emotions through nonverbal means, and multiple senses (Shank and Schirch 2008, pp. 235–236).

Recent investigation of arts-based conflict analysis found drawing-based methods gave local people capacity to define the nature of conflicts through use of their own categories rather than externally-imposed knowledge-structures (Julian et al 2020). Similarly, Sternberg's (2003, p. 324) psychological work on hate-formation processes suggests that, because hate is fomented through stories, it must be addressed through stories. Laurence (2008) suggests group music-making may enable empathy-development where group members 'strive for an empathic knowing of the Other' in a manner 'foster[ing] acceptance and tolerance of difference' (Laurence 2008, p. 23). Jordanger (2008, p. 137) posits musical experiences can create

> …a state of "collective vulnerability" where negative emotions, particularly unacknowledged shame and anxiety, may be transformed into positive emotion…

Group arts processes can foster many skills needed in CT. Arts '…requires creativity, risk-taking, interdependence, and the embrace of…a readiness to identify how multiple narratives that may seem mutually exclusive can coexist' (Hunter and Cohen 2019, p. 4). Arts processes are inherently messy, allowing participants to explore diverse perspectives and options before deciding on pathways forward (Hunter and Cohen 2019, pp. 5, 11; Lederach 2005, p. 174). By engaging with uncertain outcomes and ambiguities, arts can deconstruct 'symbols [such as metaphors] and narratives through which they construct meaning' to formulate new repertoires (Hunter and Cohen 2019, p. 3).

Literature thus suggests emotional experience, particularly empathy-development for the Other, is central to CT. Metaphor is one key pathway enabling this. Further, human cognition is fundamentally metaphor-based (Gibbs 1994, p. 248). Metaphor defines reality, allows ambiguity (e.g. diverse perspectives in conflict that sit unresolved), and facilitates easy recall of ideas and decisions. As fundamentally metaphorical processes, arts can powerfully bring together cultural stories and ideas, learning and emotional expression to create safe spaces for exposing conflict-repertoires and enabling their transformation. Yet this idea of *metaphor as a key component of the potential of arts-process for producing change* has not been empirically tested to assess its contribution to CT. This study is the first to explore this important role of metaphor for contributing to transformed repertoires.

Two Caveats

I stress two caveats before proceeding. Firstly, while literature suggests the powerful potential of metaphor for CT, metaphor is not a panacea. Metaphor, whether embedded in speech or arts artefacts, is equally used to promote hatred and violence. The very fact metaphor hides some issues while foregrounding others means it can misrepresent, and open use of metaphor to promote conflict is also common. Care should be taken in designing CT interventions utilising metaphor-based approaches, to ensure participants can safely explore all aspects of conflict openly and honestly.

Secondly, arts are not neutral exploits. While much literature presents an uncritically, ubiquitously positive picture of arts as producing positive-only outcomes (noted in Ware and Dunphy 2019: 481), an equally large body of evidence demonstrates arts can also perpetuate violence and hatred (Sternberg 2003, p. 324). While metaphors embedded in arts processes and artefacts may help build empathy that connects divided groups, knowledge of the Other's humanity can also provide tools for exploiting their weaknesses to further embed conflict. Hence, a circumspectly critical perspective of arts-based CT is crucial (Ware and Dunphy 2019: 496)'. We should also note some art forms may not be appropriate in some cultural contexts. So, care is required when designing arts-based CT processes to select appropriate art forms.

Findings: What Impacts did Metaphors Embedded in Arts Processes and Artefacts Generate?

Findings are reported in two sections, exploring two broad issues noted in 'Research Design' (above)—(a) whether/how arts-based metaphors enabled transformations; and (b) whether this translated into concrete changes in their behaviour outside the workshop. These two sections are used to explore the extent to which metaphors embedded in creative arts-based processes and their resulting artefacts provides effective tools for creating new psychological repertoires, and related attitudes and behaviours. Names of participants have been withheld, for obvious security reasons. Translations of arts artefacts are literal rather than poetic, for analysis of metaphors used. Where metaphors appear in artefacts or participant comments, they are bolded for easy identification.

Did Arts-Based Metaphors Enable Transformation of Repertoires and Intended Behaviours?

Workshop data shows several ways arts activities facilitated creative exploration of metaphors, enabling new perceptions/understandings, attitudes and intended behaviours to emerge and be codified, aiding recall at key conflict moments in villages. The three subsections below demonstrate that:

(a) Ready engagement in pleasurable arts activities in safe workshop-environments enabled participants to probe ideas long enough to recalibrate (i.e. absorb, reflect, re-imagine, rehearse change, codify new ideas).
(b) Metaphors embedded in arts processes and artefacts created the emotional safety required to explore sensitive topics.
(c) Metaphors expressed through creative arts processes and captured in artefacts enabled linking of cognitive, emotional and imaginative functions to enable repertoire shifts.

Staying with Ideas Long Enough to Recalibrate

The workshops created enjoyable, relational environments, where participants increasingly felt safe to fully engage over a period of 2–3 days in exploring conflict together. In the workshop exploring responses and agency immediately post-August 2017, one participant discussed song-writing processes *as a metaphorical space* for cooperation and peaceful relations:

> Five members of my group each contributed two sentences…As a team, we combined ideas to make a song. Different ideas/perspectives, but working together, it produced a beautiful result. So I learned about unity in diversity, and how this can create a beautiful world.[5]

Group arts processes enabled deep absorption in an activity—often for over an hour—which further helped build the cooperation required to explore sensitive topics together. This sense of camaraderie was conceptualised in metaphors related to a sense of family and closeness:

> We have 5 group members but each person wrote their perspective. When we gathered and combined these together to write a song or poem, that was very helpful for teamwork. And also easy to remember. So that's why I appreciate arts. We experienced **warmth** like family members – **brothers and sisters**.[6]

Intensive 2–3 day arts-workshops allowed people time to sit with ideas, expressing reflections and feelings, then encapsulating these in metaphors for continued processing post-workshop. Because a song or poem '…is good to listen to [and]… penetrates our brains',[7] it enabled ongoing deeper reflection on, and therefore absorption of, new ideas – as these participants suggest:

> …learning through lectures produces only **head knowledge**. But writing poems and songs expresses our feelings. It **penetrates** into the poems. We are **soaked**, like **soaking cotton wool**.[8]
> But it's very helpful to understand. After we compose them, they remain in our mind.[9]

Note the metaphors used in the first quote—i.e. reflection is like *cotton wool soaking* in a new idea, which *penetrates* the mind. The second one refers to the way arts artefacts can stay in the mind, allowing further reflection on the metaphors generated. Another participant suggested grappling with ideas through arts and metaphor enhances comprehension: '*It's easier to understand [new ideas] through storytelling*'.[10]

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[5] Male, check-in circle, December 2017.
[6] Male, focus group, December 2017.
[7] Male, focus group, June 2017.
[8] Female, focus group, December 2017.
[9] Female, focus group, June 2017.
[10] Female, focus group, June 2017.

One group song-writing activity, reflecting on a conflict resolution exercise (June 2018), shows how writing allowed re-imagination of more peaceful solutions, codifying these in readily-recallable metaphors (Fig. 1). The **6–9 figures** metaphor, a well-known perspective picture (see Fig. 2) became a conflict resolution metaphor—i.e. accepting both perspectives as valid versions of truth. This picture had been introduced 12 months earlier, and participants referred back to it, when reflecting on negotiation skills for conflict resolution. By exploring this metaphor across both pictures and then song-writing, arts processes strengthened the potential impacts of a more dialogue-based approach, and enabled longer-term recall of important ideas discussed in earlier workshops.

Fig. 1 Song: Dealing with negotiation

Verse 1: The two people on the street are arguing.
Who are they?
It's **6 and 9**.
They are in confrontation
As their views are not identical
Verse 2: Let's find a way to **fix** this.
Shall we find it?
If we could cooperate and understand each other,
Then it will be fine.

Fig. 2 6–9 perspective picture. Copyright unknown
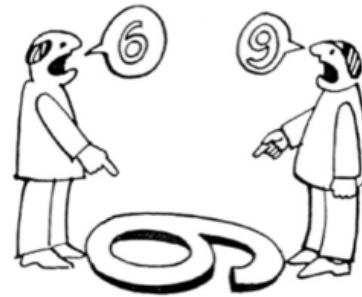
I recognise the risk of such pictures for potentially relativising different perspectives. However, this was carefully curated to maintain focus on differences that exist without evaluating truth claims per se.

Metaphors Provided Safety to Explore Sensitive Topics

'Safety' in workshops has many facets. This section illuminates one specific aspect: safety of emotional distance from sensitive topics, which arts-based metaphors created. In turn, this enabled exploration leading to new attitudes and reported behaviours. By mediating metaphors via non-threatening arts artefacts, participants were also provided safer formats for raising contentious peacebuilding ideas in more risky village settings.

Participants frequently used metaphors to distance themselves sufficiently from conflict dynamics to enable open examination of their own attitudes and behaviours—e.g. in one exercise, individuals placed in groups were each given an uneven number of lollies,[11] and instructed to discuss what to do with them. In a context of deep poverty and competition for resources, these lollies became a metaphor for structural power in community: some shared them evenly, others negotiated loans of lollies to poor people, blaming them for their poverty in the process. This allowed really frank, honest de-briefing about social power in and between communities, and how this drives conflict, without having to potentially shame themselves by admitting publicly (or even to themselves at first) that they may have participated in conflict-perpetuating behaviours.

Arts-based metaphors' safety in creating emotional distance was also evident in feedback about metaphors used in villages between workshops. In the immediate post-August 2017 workshop, we opened with a sharing-time about the events, where multiple participants expressed desires to see all Rohingya expelled or killed. Following this, I narrated a story, using the visual metaphor of three hats—one **white** (good), one **black** (bad) and one **mottled** (good and bad). I wore each in turn as I described a 'good' man who did both 'good' things (wearing white hat) and 'bad' things (wearing black hat), and hence was 'both good and bad' (wearing mottled hat)—see Fig. 3. The key idea explored was the notion of good and bad in every person, and the need to look beyond surface assumptions about identities to assess whether someone is good or bad, based on attitudes and behaviours. Again, having to admit that one's attitudes and behaviours are driven by negative, possibly inaccurate stereotypes of the Other could be potentially shaming, which could have shut down open, mutual exploration. The indirectness of the arts-based metaphors enabled sufficient cognitive distance from the problematic attitudes and behaviours. They were also sufficiently playful to allow deep engagement with an important aspect of CT—namely, re-humanising the Other rather than seeing them only through the lens of stereotypes.

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[11] I retain the terminology of my home country, Australia, here. Also referred to as 'sweets' or 'candies' elsewhere.
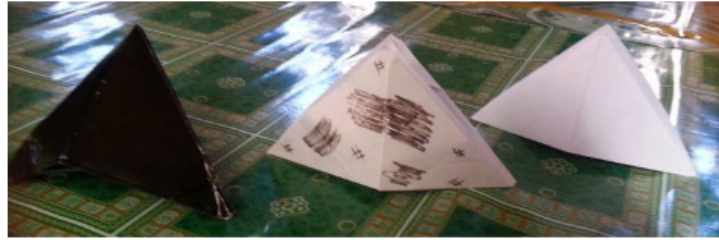
Fig. 3 Hats: good and bad in everyone (© [Vicki-Ann Ware])

This visual metaphor became a powerful codification of this discussion, provoking significant prying open of narrow conflict-repertoires like 'We Rakhine are good, and the Bengali[12] are bad', to allow more nuanced consideration of individuals from both groups. One participant suggested she would use this illustration in her village:

I will use the hats as an example. No one is perfect, bad and good go **hand in hand**. So I will teach that.[13]

Evidence the arts-based metaphor shifted this repertoire—and codified a new perspective and attitude—is seen in the frequency and longevity of feedback, indicating participants not only remembered the idea, but used it to support sustainable change in their own behaviour, and as a teaching tool in villages—as much as 18 months after the original discussion. One participant reported six months later:

So I really remember the illustration of the **three hats**. People can change and they have different characters.[14]

Another participant reported using the metaphor to promote understanding and empathy in his village:

I used the illustration of the **hats** – three colours. I shared with others what you taught – some people have good attitudes, some have bad attitudes, some are also mixed. So like **different colours** – the **same hat, but different colours.**[15]

Novel metaphors developed during arts activities became powerful and concrete containers of abstract ideas, enabling creative recall and application in everyday conflict situations. When asking what they remembered and had applied from previous workshops, participants almost universally cited the metaphor and then explained abstract lessons it encapsulated. For example,

It's very helpful to use metaphors like the moon. Each one has their own view on the moon. So as we express our ideas and opinions, that's helpful to understand [conflict] – like having a broader understanding of what the moon means.[16]

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[12] *Bengali* is one local term for the Rohingya. It implies their foreignness, and is considered derogatory. I use it here to foreground the voice of participants.

[13] Female, focus group, December 2017.

[14] Male, focus group, June 2018.

[15] Male, check-in circle, June 2018.

[16] Male, focus group, June 2017.

Another metaphor developed through a visual arts exercise became a key recurring discussion point throughout the programme: a palm leaf exercise from workshop 3, in which participants drew palm leaves and labelled each frond with aspects of their individual identities. The leaves then joined together to form a **tree** (metaphor for community). This opened up common and conflict-perpetuating narratives around a single, ethno-religious identity—'us and them'—to broaden participants' understanding of each person's multiple identities, and the interconnections that humans have regardless of narrow, ethnic labels. (Hence, many **branches** are needed to form a healthy **tree**.) Additional arts activities extended this group of metaphors to explore ways those multiple identities could create commonalities and points of potential connection with the Other. One participant used the palm leaf metaphor quite courageously in his village to challenge people's biased attitudes:

> You used the palm leaf to talk about unity, and not discriminating between people. [In the village] I said… we should not discriminate because of colour, ethnicity or religions, as we're humans. So I use that to talk to people wherever I go – like at the teashop.[17]

Safety afforded by arts-based metaphors, particularly visual ones, allowed dialogical spaces to open while avoiding any shaming, thereby enabling participants to distance themselves from their own everyday attitudes and behaviours, to begin exploring alternative options. Metaphors in pictures, poems and stories provided a tool for codifying new ideas for implementation post-workshop.

Linking Cognition, Emotion and Imagination Generated Empathy and Commitment to Change

The literature points to metaphor's potential through art artefacts to allow linking of cognition (perception), emotion and imagination, thereby enabling empathy for the Other to emerge and form commitment to change. Arts artefacts presented multiple layers and types of metaphors—some verbal, some visual, some symbolic acts (e.g. role plays). These multiple layers and combinations of metaphor enabled new insights (cognition) to emerge, supported by emotional expression of frustrations and desires, and creative imagination of how things might change.

Ambiguity and multiple meanings in metaphors allowed participants to explore old issues from fresh angles. By being colourful and engaging, arts-based metaphors enhanced receptivity to new ideas:

> It's very helpful to use metaphors. We can express our ideas and opinions so it helps us have broader opinions and understand different perspectives.[18]

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[17] Male, check-in circle, June 2018.
[18] Male, focus group, June 2017.

Ambiguity allowed holding of multiple perspectives simultaneously, creating space where narrow conflict-repertoires could broaden, allowing diversity and recognition of the Other. Significantly, this enabled seeing the Other as human – hence worthy of respect – even if not liked:

> I learned that even though we are still in a conflict, we can love them.[19]
> Yesterday and today I learned about how I need to look at people as human beings instead of looking at them as **objects**. Even though this man or this girl is bad, [they] still have…capacity in some parts to be good. So I will encourage…villagers to [consider] viewing other people as human beings.[20]

Empathy slowly emerged from these insights, with moments of new clarity surfacing, as one participant expressed, following a visual perception-exercise. He suddenly saw both perspectives could be true, and this supported new empathy:

> They are right, but we are not wrong[21]!!

By allowing safe expression of difficult emotions (as noted earlier) arts-based metaphors facilitated emergence of empathy and commitment to peaceful co-existence. A clear progression from new ideas with limited commitment to an increasingly active commitment to concrete behaviour change is illustrated in the following three poems (Figs. 4, 5, 6). The following group poem (written June 2017) shows emerging empathy, i.e. the recognition that both sides of the conflict are human and are suffering, even if somewhat pessimistic about change:

> *A **drop of water's value** is only known by a person who is thirsty.*
> *A **drop of tears** is only known by a person who has felt something.*
> *The violence of [R] is only known by the [M].*
> *The violence of [M] is only known by the [R].*
> *R **fights** and M **fights** but it's the same **fight**.*
> *And the chance of peace between R & M is 10%.*

Fig. 4 Poem (untitled)

In the original language, this plays on words: the R and M are from the Burmese alphabet and are code for Rakhine (R) and Rohingya-Muslim (M). The following comment six months later (immediately post-August 2017) indicates slowly shifting attitudes:

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[19] Male, check-out circle, December 2017.
[20] Female, check-out circle, October 2018.
[21] Male, check-in circle, December 2016.

I feel very sad. We could kick them out. But how can we find perspectives for equality and peace[22]?

The following group poem, written in December 2017 (the first workshop post-August 2017), shows a progression from pessimistic and somewhat passive recognition that change is desirable but feels beyond their reach, into a more active expression of micro-level actions they can take to start moving towards peace-oriented behaviours. The combination of visual and spatial metaphors allowed this group to imagine alternatives to conflict, express new acceptance of contradictions inherent in people, and exhibits a degree of empathy, namely, understanding the importance of looking beyond surface-behaviours at others' motivations before judging their character. The human mind is compared to a **clock**, always **changing**. We also see the metaphor of **heart** as the place where attitudes exist:

*Human's mind, just like the **clock***
*Always **changing***
Right and wrong always together
Never think we are wrong, but right
Never think others are right, but wrong
*I want all people to have a **heart** that differentiates right and wrong*
It is human nature to think I am always right.

Fig. 5 Poem: Human Nature

The following group poem (written October 2018) shows the further progression from passive empathy and resisting stereotypes to really see the Other as a human with good and bad sides, to a clearer commitment to actively re-engage with the Other for conflict resolution. Anger is seen as a **force** that **bursts**, and the **heart** (home to attitudes) is a **mirror** revealing what the **heart** holds. The **building** love idea suggests effort is required:

Fig. 6 Poem: The Result

A problem happens
*Angers **burst**.*
Their anger, our anger
*Their **heart**. It's just like a **mirror***
*When we **hold** anger in us*
We continue with hatred

A problem happens.
Only if we try to solve it peacefully,
*Will we know their **hearts and minds** are **good or bad**.*
*Only then can we **build** love.*

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[22] Male, check-out circle, December 2017.

This signifies a series of shifts in their perceptions of the Other, enabled through open and genuine expression of feelings through the safety of colourful arts-based metaphors, and utilising imagination to explore alternate ways of relating. Thus, this first section of the findings suggests that arts-based metaphors enabled repertoire transformation, by allowing participants to sit with new ideas long enough to explore and absorb them, by creating emotional safety required to unpack sensitive topics, and by using imaginative processes to link cognitive and affective (emotional) processes to build empathy.

Did arts-based metaphor enable constructive responses to conflict situations outside workshops?

In this second part of the findings, we explore whether the shifts in attitudes enabled constructive responses outside the workshops. Clear commitment to intended behaviour change is demonstrated in multiple participants' feedback in focus groups and check-in/check-out circles. However, noting while all participants reported changes in inter-communal behaviours, one third remained resolutely resistant to any inter-communal cooperation. I discuss here shifts that did occur, although data was not sufficient to warrant even speculation on why one third resisted inter-communal changes. The reasons why some resist such change would benefit from further, focussed investigation.

In the first post-August 2017 workshop (i.e. December 2017), feedback from the majority showed noteworthy shifts in attitudes and reported behaviours across the two days. This was highly significant: on the first morning, several expressed a desire for ethnic cleansing or genocide. However, at the end of the two days, they reported a clear shift towards empathy, reconciliation and active peacebuilding, e.g.:

> I realised…I am very selfish, but I need to model…compassion for others.[23]
> Even though we are…attacked, we should forgive and show others how to act the right way. I was directly affected – I was stoned. If I took revenge, they would have died and their children would also suffer. So instead of choosing revenge, I chose…forgive[ness]….Now I understand the importance of distinguishing right from wrong, and not resorting to violence.[24]

Using arts-based metaphors enabled participants to talk about delicate issues, in ways that enhanced their ability to imagine alternative responses and then respond constructively. Such metaphors enabled them to imagine ways they could respond differently when confronted with conflict. One traditional Burmese story we explored narrated the story of a **gravely-ill king** who refused treatment from many doctors. A humble young doctor approached the king gently, resulting in him accepting treatment, and recovering. One participant reported using this in his village to softly approach resistant villagers and encourage them to participate in a collective project.[25] Such intra-group conflict resolution was an unanticipated, creative application

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[23] Male, focus group, December 2017.
[24] Male, focus group, December 2017.
[25] Male, focus group, June 2018.

of workshop topics aimed at inter-group issues. Another participant reported using the **hats** story (above) to encourage alcoholic brothers to stop drinking and begin participating in community development projects—both of which they did over several months.[26] By the final year, we see evidence of willingness emerging to re-engage with the Other, shown in this group song (written October 2018) (Fig. 7):

Fig. 7 Song: What should I do?

What should I do?

I've thought of it

*I can't **struggle** out of this **darkness***

Please help me my dearest friends

I think about it and I'm scared…

It's easy… They said that it's easy

Just admit your fault

Apologise and solve the problem,

Then it will be alright.

Please forgive me…I'm sorry…

Leaving behind conflict-repertoires and accepting peace-oriented ones is likened to **struggle** out of **darkness**. This represents the difficulty of change, and the need for significant courage to face potentially strong resistance in villages. In the final workshop, I asked participants what they had applied from the previous workshops. Eight responded with stories of concrete, positive change:

- Four female participants reported negotiating conflict resolution within their villages, or between two neighbouring villages, around community development projects (e.g. repairing roads and bridges). They used skills and lessons from workshops to negotiate, getting people involved and successfully completing projects.
- One male participant reported using lessons to repair longstanding divisions within his extended family.
- Three male participants negotiated with their villages to promote more active, peaceful engagement with Rohingya neighbours. In all three cases, this resulted in marketplaces being established in neutral areas between villages, or allowing Rohingya into their village to trade. This quote illustrates the positive influence participants had on villagers:

  One lady stood up and said I will do business with Muslims because I should not only do business with Buddhists. This is business, and we are all human beings. So she started doing business with them.[27]

These eight stories form a small sample, and are thus a more preliminary finding. Nevertheless, for eight out of twenty—from a group expressing the desire to see Rohingya expelled or killed just a year before—this small change was significant. This

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[26] Female, focus group, June 2018.

[27] Male, check-out circle, October 2018.

suggests potential for arts-based training, utilising metaphors, to encapsulate new discourses that help shift powerful, longstanding conflict-repertoires at very localised levels. It is significant that, despite ultimate resistance to shifting repertoires in approximately a third of participants, no one reacted strongly against any arts-based metaphors or arts artefacts generated during workshops. This may be why they nevertheless were able to learn from and apply these concepts at least within their own villages.

Conclusion

Literature demonstrates metaphor is fundamental to human cognition, thus to changing perceptions and attitudes. Metaphor provides images that assist learning, adding 'emotional valence' that ensures commitment to ideas (Thibodeau et al 2019, p. 10). In CT, creating willingness for change is primarily emotional work. Metaphor appears to have great potential for creating shared understandings, holding ambiguity, and shifting perspectives to enable empathy. As profoundly metaphorical practice, literature suggests arts activities/artefacts have potential to support processes exploring ambiguity and contradictions.

This study is the first to explore how arts-based metaphors enable such conflict-repertoire shifts, leading to attitudinal and behavioural shifts, through re-imagination and emotional connection to new ideas. It also innovates by moving beyond previous studies (e.g. Cameron 2011) of dialogue-based CT to explore impacts of creative-metaphoric work in shifting repertoires, attitudes and behaviours. The study demonstrates group arts created safe, pleasurable, relational workshop-spaces, enabling emotional expression and exploration of sensitive topics. Deep engagement and mutual learning supported small-yet-significant shifts in conflict-repertoires through re-imagination, reflection and rehearsal, which was maintained over time.

Conflict transformation is slow. Each small step, while itself seemingly insignificant, is important in moving people towards peace-oriented attitudes and behaviours. Multi-layered metaphors, embedded in processes utilising visual, pictorial and linguistic metaphors created new conceptual frameworks and language around conflict and peace, with metaphors' ambiguity enabling holding of diverse, multiple perspectives. Arts-based metaphors contributed memorable codification of new repertoires for ready recall in multiple settings. Through metaphors' ambiguity, arts-based workshops fostered renewed empathy, commitment to change, and emerging reports of real, sustainable change in villages. In short, arts-based metaphors enabled small-yet-sustainable shifts in conflict-repertoires, enabling very cautious re-engagement with an Other, formerly kept strictly segregated.

This study illuminated several areas requiring further investigation, however. Firstly, why approximately one third of participants steadfastly resisted applying new knowledge to inter-communal conflicts merits further attention. Secondly, this programme utilised a multi-arts approach, to provide multiple tools, attempting to engage as many as possible. It is unclear from this study whether some art forms achieve specific types of change more effectively than others, or whether/how multiple arts may provide mutually-reinforcing mechanisms. Thirdly, the common assumption among artists and arts-scholars

that arts 'transcend' verbal processing of emotions may yet be true, but current data does not demonstrate this clearly, and merits further, focussed investigation.

Fourthly, a major programme constraint was the inability to bring Rakhine and Rohingya together to deliberate. It would be useful to extend this paper's findings by exploring inter-communal deliberation through arts-based programmes. Within this, comparison of metaphors used in intra- and inter-communal deliberation would further illuminate which metaphors appear useful in addressing dynamics of this conflict.

Finally, there is a small amount of evidence in the literature supporting claims that arts provides legitimate spaces for expressing emotion, particularly in contexts where this is otherwise taboo (e.g. Bergh 2010). My observations of workshops certainly suggest a freedom not usually seen in this context to express overt emotions, and discuss deeply personal problems. However, my research did not purposefully collect data to directly support this idea. While that does not disprove this idea, it indicates an additional area for further exploration.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The corresponding author states there is no conflict of interest.

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