

Music, Mattering, and Criminalized Young Men

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Praise for *Music, Mattering, and Criminalized Young Men*

'[This] is a reminder that in the melodies of the marginalized, we might find the keys to understanding and change.'

Iris Luarasi,
Tirana University, Albania

'A powerful demonstration of the methodological capacity of music to evoke memory, a sense of mattering and a means of making space for those we work with to share their narratives with agency. *Music, Mattering and Criminalized Young Men* is sufficiently detailed to provide a how-to for replicating multi-agency research projects, focused on music elicitation amongst criminalized people. In some senses, this is a story about navigating systems and gatekeeping in unfamiliar terrain to explore the constraints of masculinity. Yet it is in the interweaving of individual narratives with those of Albania's history, and in the stories and experience of the participants, that the book is most potently compelling.'

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Kings College, University of Cambridge, UK

'For a discipline so focused on the letter of the law, thinking with music about "crime", as this book does, opens up our ears to what our eyes can't see—inviting us to rethink how, why and who criminological research is undertaken for.'

Lambros Fatsis,
City, University of London, UK

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Music, Mattering, and Criminalized Young Men: Exploring Music Elicitation as a Feminist Arts-Based Research and Intervention Tool

BY

JADE LEVELL

University of Bristol, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Frida, Brooke, and Astrid

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About the Author

Dr Jade Levell is a Senior Lecturer in Social and Public Policy (Criminology and Gender Violence) at the University of Bristol. Her research interests include adverse childhood experiences, childhood domestic violence, on-road and gang subcultures, organized crime, masculinity theory, DVA perpetrators, and feminist praxis. She has expertise in Music Elicitation as both a social research tool and an innovative way of listening and working with marginalised groups. She is a co-editor of the *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* and has published widely on issues related to GBV. Her book, *Boys, Childhood Domestic Abuse, and Gang Involvement: Violence at Home, Violence On-Road* was published in June 2022 with Policy Press. She has also co-edited a collection published in 2023 with Tara Young and Rod Earle entitled *Exploring Urban Youth Culture Outside of the Gang Paradigm: Critical Questions of Youth, Gender and Race On-road* (Policy Press). Dr Levell has experience of working internationally on issues of gender equality, gender-based violence, masculinities, vulnerability, youth adversity, and crime.

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Foreword

In Music, Mattering, and Criminalized Young Men: Exploring Music Elicitation as a Feminist Arts-Based Research and Intervention Tool, Dr Jade Levell takes us on a compelling journey, exploring the intersections of music, masculinity, and marginalization. Through her innovative use of music elicitation, Dr Levell grants us access to the often-silenced voices of young Albanian men caught in the complex web of criminality and societal expectations.

The opening quote, 'We were beaten by life', poignantly captures the essence of the narratives within these pages. This book is not just a collection of academic findings; it is a tapestry of human experiences, woven together by the universal language of music. It's a narrative that digs deep into the heart of what it means to be a young man in contemporary Albania, struggling under the weight of patriarchal norms and economic hardships. What sets this work apart is its innovative approach of using music elicitation to uncover the emotional and psychological landscape of these individuals.

Dr Levell's work is ground-breaking in its approach. She transcends traditional research methodologies using music as a tool to unlock the inner worlds of these young men. In doing so, she sheds light on the societal structures and pressures that shape their journeys towards criminalization. This book, thus, serves as a critical lens through which we can view the multifaceted nature of masculinity, adversity, and the quest for a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world. The journey of this book begins with an international development collaboration aimed at understanding the undercurrents that drive young men towards criminality. Through the power of music, a medium often laden with unspoken emotions and untold stories, this project reveals the deep-seated pain, courage, and struggles faced by these men. Their selections of music tracks become a gateway to their souls, exposing the raw wounds inflicted by a patriarchal society that demands unattainable standards of masculinity and honour.

The stories of these young men, articulated through their musical choices, are stories of pain, hope, resilience, and the human yearning for significance. They challenge us to rethink our perceptions of criminality and to see beyond the labels society often hastily assigns. Dr Levell's empathetic and nuanced approach reveals the complex interplay of societal expectations, familial pressures, and personal aspirations that these young men navigate. Moreover, this book is a testament to the power of arts-based research in reaching into the depths of human experience, unearthing truths that conventional methods might miss. Dr Levell's pioneering

work in music elicitation stands as a beacon for those seeking to employ more inclusive, empathetic, and holistic approaches in social research and intervention.

As we turn these pages, we are invited not just to read but to listen – to really listen – to the melodies of lives that are too often unheard. In listening, we are compelled to reflect on the broader societal and cultural contexts that shape individual trajectories, particularly those of marginalized groups. This book highlights music’s role as a catalyst for connection, healing, and hope amidst adversity.

In conclusion, *Music, Mattering, and Criminalized Young Men* is an essential read for scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in the transformative power of music and the human stories behind societal labels. It is a reminder that in the melodies of the marginalized, we might find the keys to understanding and change.

Iris Luarasi PhD

Former President of GREVIO, Council of Europe 2015–2023

CEO of Executive Director of Counselling Line for Women and Girls and
Counselling Line for Men and Boys, Albania

Professor at the Department of Journalism and Communication in Tirana
University, Albania

Preface

Sounds

We heard the soundtracks to young men's lives,
Men who had survived
Despite,
Or because.
Boys who had been gifted,
And taken,
Risks.
On the promise of *becoming somebody*
Yet slept behind bars.
We created spaces for silence and sound.
Ears open to their
Lamented arias of pain and pride
Their hurt
Their grit
The deep-cut wounds
Of abandonment.
Refugees from the patriarchal family.
In lands where trauma seeps from Communist concrete
Walls of silence,
Silencings.
Hopes buried in the bunkers.
We asked professionals to open their ears
Sonic – mattering
We carved a circle;
Hearing, heard,
Hearing, heard.
The search for connection to understand
Masculinity.
without the resources the patriarchy promised them.
Scars glistening on the surface,
Of men left in the bodies of boys.

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The creation of the music elicitation handbook was a team effort. Thanks to Lee Colvin and Adrian Kingswell from SCJS who contributed the safeguarding guidance. Redion Qirjazi and Regina Vathi provided editorial contributions. Thank you to the Albanian design team involved in the translations and production of the handbook.

Thank you to all the training participants who agreed to try something new and different with open minds and hearts. I would like to offer huge thanks to Amalia Koleka who was an excellent co-trainer with me in all regions, co-facilitating, translating, as well as translating all of the training slides. In terms of the training delivery thanks go to Regina Vathi for coordinating the training attendees, as well as Majlinda Vogli for logistics. Thanks to Merita Mece for the evaluation and to Matilda Duri and Alesia Burnaszi for organizing the communication around the training.

Overall, I owe a big thank you to Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers for being an excellent mentor, collaborator, and role model. It was in combining her expertise on Albania and mine on music elicitation which founded this whole project from a seed idea we discussed many years prior. It was an honour to work together, and I am glad that we were able to see our ideas come to life.

A sincere thank you to all the RAYS team in Albania as noted above, led by Redion Qirjazi.

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A huge appreciative thank you to Will McInerney and Rod Earle who were my beta-readers for this book, giving up their time freely, and offering invaluable suggestions to improve it. Thank you to Ashley Hickson-Lovence and Andrew McMillan for the mentoring at the Arvon masculinities retreat (2023) which encouraged me to try poetry which I included as the preface.

A personal thank you to my family who supported me through the several years that this project lasted. I made numerous trips out to Albania, which would not have been possible without the unending support of my husband Richard. I was also very lucky that my family were up for the adventure and embarked on a trip to Albania with me. Thank you to Richard, Frida, Brooke, Astrid, and Pia for sharing the journey with me and keeping me grounded in your love. The memories will last a lifetime.

This project has been an absolute privilege for me. Getting to know the people and lands of Albania has been a real honour. I have kept the little fortune cookie note from the neighbourhood coffee shop in my purse ever since: *ëndrrat e mëdha, kanë fillime të vogla*/big dreams have small beginnings.

Part 1

Research Foundations and Overview

The first portion of the book lays the foundation of the project and introduces the aspects of the study which contextualize the later findings and render them intelligible. The practical context of the project is outlined, including an overview of the socio-political context of Albania, the wider project, and the specific prisons and communities which took part in the study. Part 1 of the book will lay out the cornerstones of the project. The first cornerstone is the detailed process description of the use of music elicitation as a methodological tool both in research, pedagogy, and later in interventions. The second cornerstone that is outlined in Part 1 is the way in which a gendered theoretical understanding informed this project throughout. This started with the feminist ethical stance and its relationship to the project in terms of feminist praxis, but also in the framing of masculinities and gender equality in Albania as central to the work. The third cornerstone is the development of the theory of sonic mattering, which has been developed as a way to begin to understand the utility of feminist and sound-based interventions in reaching and communicating meaningfully with diverse and marginalized groups.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

We were beaten by life. (Erjon, Probation Participant)

This book began as an international development collaboration which sought to explore what drives young men into involvement with serious and organized crime in Albania. I was funded as part of a wider academic and practice interdisciplinary partnership to use music elicitation to explore risk factors, prevention, and adversity faced by young people carrying out sentences in Albanian prisons and under probation supervision. An Albanian research team and I asked men in prison and under probation supervision to share music tracks which helped them tell parts of their life stories. We created spaces for the silence needed to hear their tunes. Hear their pain. Their courage. It has become a book about the deep-cut wounds of patriarchy. The abandoned boys. The drunk fathers, pushing down. The violence. The discipline. The family abandonment. Given the herculean task of holding up the weight of their family's honour, their 'besa', their word. The downward pressure placed upon boys to protect their mothers, their sisters, and the desire to make their families 'someone'. Boys who were searching for a sense of meaning and mattering in a patriarchal world yet lacking the resource's society had promised them. In hearing these stories and songs we sought to understand; What is life really like for these Albanian boys *in conflict with the law*. In conflict with the state. Trying to fit into the puzzle piece of a culture which held a masculinity yardstick often experienced as unreachable. We then took their narratives and tracks to social and youth work professionals in Albania. Elders trying to reach these boys. We shared their music and stories and then found the professionals also pouring out their own. People who were not used to being in a safe space to be heard. To hear. In our professional training, they also shared their music – songs that once made them feel they mattered. These same professionals then opened their ears to the young people they were currently supporting. Creating space to sit within a circle of sonic mattering through being heard as well as authentically listening to each other. Ultimately, we are left with a story of Albanian boys and adversity, of professional's desire to hear, and a question of whether this model of sonic mattering can heal patriarchal wounds.

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Using music to connect with young criminalized Albanian men initially received a certain amount of scepticism. Both in the UK and the USA there has been enhanced attention on the use of violent lyrics within rap music, some of which has then been used as evidence in court (Fatsis, 2023). In the UK, there has been attention on the rise in popularity of Albanian rap music in the UK tabloid media, who have viewed the music videos, often with transnational elements filmed in both London and Tirana, as rampant displays of hypermasculine aggression and glorification of crime. Headlines in the UK have included claims that explicitly link Albanian hip-hop culture and rap music as a means through which ‘mafia’ ‘gangs’ were recruiting ‘foot soldiers’ who are lured to Britain on the promise of a glamorous lifestyle upon arrival. *The Sun* newspaper reported, under the strapline of ‘BAD RAP’, that, ‘Albanian cocaine gangs flaunt Lamborghini and wads of cash in rap videos “to recruit more foot soldiers to Britain”’ (Christodoulou, 2019). *The Daily Mail* accused the Albanian drug gangs of flaunting their wealth online, with, ‘Lamborghini and Rolls Royce-driving rappers glorify kingpins “linked to cartels”’ (Hookham & Ryan, 2019). *The Express* newspaper lamented the ‘Albanian drug lords who “run London” flaunt pictures of guns and wads of cash on Instagram’ (Austin, 2018). *The Telegraph* took a criminal justice focus, stating that Albanian gangs, ‘mock British justice as they mount violent social media posts from jail’ (Hymas, 2019). The list goes on, and undoubtedly there is a connection between this heightened media attention on the perceived threat of Albanian gangs which has fuelled the fire and driven public support for the UK government’s recent crimmigration turn against Albanian migrants (Stumpf, 2006). The narratives that are being told in these newspaper articles point to discourses of masculinity (as ‘kingpins’ and ‘lords’) and power, with popular tropes of the hyper-violent ‘gangster’. Applying an intersectional lens to this is enlightening and it provides an understanding of the power structures at play. From the outset of the project, gender was raised as a concern, the ‘toxic masculinity’ of Albanian rap stars who put forward a gangster masculinity with a militarized aesthetic (i.e. driving tanks around a London housing estate in a Hellbanianz music video; Levell & Schwandner-Sievers, 2023). The lens of gender is important to consider the ways in which males are framed by the UK criminal justice system as invulnerable. Gender in this way intersects with age in the adultification of children, particularly in the UK immigration system. Albanian boys who were framed as part of this criminal gang influx were discussed in the media as being the un-deserved threat (Levell & Schwandner-Sievers, 2023). This context provided a backdrop to the funding of this study which sought to go to Albania and find answers to the questions around gender, masculinity, vulnerability, adversity, risk, and criminality. This study was underpinned by a narrative criminological approach. Central to the narrative approach is the focus on the stories that people tell rather than a preoccupation with the ‘truth’. Externally funded research projects are situated within a nexus of stories; from the funders, the implementing bodies, the stakeholders, the universities, the researchers. This is all before even getting to the stories of the research participants themselves. All of this is bound together in a complex tapestry which blur the boundaries between truth and fiction. Narrative criminology seeks to explore

crime not as a fact in itself, but rather as it is, ‘produced as a communicative reality’ (Dollinger & Heppchen, 2019, p. 303).

A gendered perception around criminality was also echoed across the miles in Albania itself. Gender politics and dynamics were researched both before and during the fieldwork and then some concepts were tested in the music elicitation training. One such concept was the common Albanian phrase ‘Burgu është për burra’, translated as, *Jail is for men*. I first came across this term when I was engaging in digital ethnography, delving into open social media groups for street-life aesthetic groups in Albania and for the diaspora. It is important to note that the Albanian word for man which is ‘burre’ also means husband. Luci noted that:

it is by way of this imagined relationship which the family that a man creates and observes his roles and can enact his masculinity/manhood. In this context enacting manliness, ‘burrerine’, requires the observance of familial hierarchy and values. (Luci, 2002, p. 74)

When I shared this phrase in the training across the three regions it was revealing as to attitudes among professionals around stereotypes and values that linked masculinity, gender, and criminality. In Albania, jail indeed is ‘for men’, as it follows wider global trends in that the prison population is the vast majority made up of men (World Prison Brief, 2023). In 2022, I took the phrase ‘jail is for men’ and spoke to 60 Albanian youth and social work professionals about this common phrase. What does it mean? Why is it a commonly known expression? The discussions that followed gave great insights into the expectations placed on Albanian boys and men to take risks to provide for their families. Men being robust and tough are enough to withstand the heat. How involvement in the transnational illegal migration is viable for some working-class families. What makes a ‘real man’ in Albania which means that this phrase is common enough for a room of people to be familiar with it? Yet, as always it is important to point out that most Albanian men are not incarcerated – so it returns to the perennial questions around risk, vulnerability, adversity, and masculinity. Why do some young men find themselves criminalized from a young age? What are the dynamics for boys who live in a patriarchal world that they cannot succeed in through conventional means? If boys are raised with the expectations that they will provide and protect, yet the conditions are not there for them to achieve it then what redress do they have?

In my previous book, *Boys, Childhood Domestic Abuse, and Gang Involvement* (Levell, 2022), I explored the ways in which boys made sense of their own masculine identities in light of their experiences of male violence (most often perpetrated by their fathers) within a wider context of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (Hooks, 1997). I applied Connell’s (1987, 2005b) theory of the hierarchy of masculinities in order to make sense of the routes available and taken by men who were broadly marginalized in a patriarchal world due to the intersections of gender, race, and class. What I found was the symbiotic relationship between protest masculinity and vulnerable masculinity. That the overt hyper-violent behaviours arose from a deep sense of existential vulnerability. In this study, I also was

alert to the gendered experiences of childhood adversity; that childhood abuse is experienced in gendered ways which impacts boys' expectations of manhood. There has been much written about the lens of 'Balkan patriarchy' (Kaser, 2008) and the kanun-inspired gender roles and norms (Çaroa et al., 2018; Schwandner-Sievers, 2004). However, there has been less English-language research which has explored the perceptions of available masculinities in Albania for boys who have experienced adversity and marginalization (Dizdari, 2016). A core theme which arose in the analyzed fieldwork data was the fact that no one in our 20-participant sample shared the experiences of a traditionally supportive patriarch in their family. Instead, it was a milieu of boys placed with the heavy weight of becoming the protector/providers at an early age for a range of reasons. Throughout this study with a focus on Albania, there again was evidence of a sense of masculine failure through a patriarchal lens. This was not always about the participants themselves, but also about their reflections on the male role models who were present early in their lives.

This Project

It is important to note that the music elicitation pilot was just one aspect of a much larger international development project which focused on improving the systems to support children at risk of involvement in serious and organized crime in Albania, including those at risk of exploitation. Uniquely, it was a partnership not just of third-sector organizations and NGOs, but also an interdisciplinary academic team who conducted research and developed pilot interventions. The partnership also involved capacity building to develop the foundations for a multi-agency child protection system in Albania, alongside the piloting of many positive diversionary activities for young people under the project banner of 'Reconnecting Albanian Youth and Society' (RAYS). My role within this large partnership was as the Criminology lead and the head of the music elicitation sub-project. The music elicitation research, training, and intervention pilot was undertaken in Albania between 2021 and 2023. In the very initial stages of the music elicitation pilot, an online training day was delivered to project partners and stakeholders ($n = 20$). The purpose of this training was to deliver an overview of the method as well as to provide training to the project partners, some of whom would later become research assistants at various stages of the project. The primary research with Albanian young men who were in 'conflict with the law' was conducted in three prison sites and with men under probation supervision in the community. Twenty men who have been involved with the criminal justice system in Albania took part in the music elicitation pilot, including participants from three prison sites ($n = 11$), and community Probation Services ($n = 9$). Local Albanian-speaking research assistants were trained and supported to carry out the music elicitation interviews. The target participant group were young men (18–25 years) 'in conflict with the law' in Albania, both in prison (across three prison sites) and under community supervision by the probation team. However, we also had some participants who had committed their offences in childhood and within this age bracket but were older at the time of the interview (with the

oldest being 39 years). The term ‘children in conflict with the law’ refers to anyone under 18 who comes into contact with the justice system as a result of being suspected or accused of committing an offence (UNICEF, 2006).

The analysis of the data suggests that there were a range of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that impacted young people. These ranged from abuse/violence/neglect as well as the loss of a significant supportive figure such as a key parent, through death, estrangement, or migration. Several participants discussed the impact of such losses on their security and family collective. This may have impacted their desire to instead identify with an extra-familial peer group in place of the lost family security. The craving for love from both mothers and fathers was discussed vividly at times, aided by the use of emotive song (hip-hop) lyrics. Early experiences of migration were discussed in several interviews as having had a significant impact on young men’s experiences of childhood. One participant had been trafficked into Germany as a child, given counterfeit papers and a family, to reside illegally. He discussed how he stayed for two years and then returned. Another man shared his experience of being sent to live in Italy as a minor without his family but begging to return to be with his mother. We also heard stories where the young men had been left in Albania without their immediate family who had migrated. It appeared that families fractured by migration to Western Europe were common; however, in the music elicitation research, we heard testimony of the impact that this has on young boys who were left behind and felt grief at the loss of the key adult supporters. Although there was a sense of wider community solidarity expressed, reflecting the collective societal structures in Albania.

Using a gendered lens is pertinent in the Albanian context, as the on-road (*Jeta e Rrugës*) space has been conveyed as a male-dominated environment. Albania is widely considered a deeply patriarchal society, within which men take a dominant position of power both within in the family and the state (see Chapter 2). The data was analyzed with a focus on masculinities to understand the specific gendered experiences of the participants. A predominant theme was the ways in which masculinity pressures were experienced by the participants. These included the ways in which boys felt pressure to be ‘the man of the house’, financially support, as well as protect the females in their families. It appears these conventional masculinity pressures were heightened in fractured families, displaced due to death or migration. Arguably this heightened pressure on boys at an age where they had little recourse to enact traditional masculine responsibilities resulted in the development of ‘protest masculinity’ (Connell, 2005b). An interesting pattern arose in the research data, which was around the aspirations of the participants. For some, there were concrete hopes, such as being able to leave Albania and work abroad (particularly for those in prison who did not see a way forward in Albania with the stigma of criminality). There were also aspirations of university and further study as well as being financially independent and developing a respectable career, for instance as a teacher or even a judge. A deeper theme that arose however was the concept of ‘becoming somebody’, both as an individual and as a family.

This can be linked to prior research around the importance of ‘mattering’ to young people involved in youth offending. Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2021b)

explored this concept in the UK among young people involved in serious youth violence. They suggested that the concept of ‘mattering’ can be used to understand why some young people engage in serious youth violence, and the ways in which certain state criminalization tactics can result in ‘anti-mattering’. Exploring how young people perceive the ways that they do (or do not) ‘matter’ enables a deeper understanding of how young people’s experiences of trauma and marginalization impact their sense of place in the world. Mattering is about both feeling valued and being of value to others in your community (Prilleltensky, 2020). It is centred on the ‘the perception that (...) we are a significant part of the world around us’ (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 339). ‘We have a deep-seated need to matter to other people, and to matter in the physical world – to be a consequential causal force in both a social and material sense we all want to be ‘someone’ – a person seen as significant by others – and we all want to be ‘something’ – an entity with some force or power in the world’ (Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2021). Exploring how young people perceive the ways that they do (or do not) ‘matter’ enables a deeper understanding how young people’s experiences of trauma and marginalization impact their sense of place in the world. Creation and production of music as a way that young people organically develop a space in which to ‘matter’. ‘Mattering is not just about feeling valued. We have a profound need to have influence in the world. The need for feel connected to others is fundamental to the human experience. We want to add value to ourselves, others, work, and community’ (Prilleltensky, 2020, p. 21). Exploring how young people perceive the ways that they do (or do not) ‘matter’ enables a deeper understanding of how young people’s experiences of trauma and marginalization impact their sense of place in the world. Music is ideally placed to both express and enhance a sense of mattering due to the embodied and collective nature of performance. As Dell’Anna et al. (2021) noted, music can enhance a real sense of belonging. What is interesting is the way that music designed for the masses can also inspire connections both on the macro (grand?) and micro (interpersonal) levels. Creation and production of music as a way that young people organically develop a space in which to ‘matter’. We tested this concept not only in the fieldwork but also in the professional training and intervention pilot.

In the second phase of the project, I worked to explore the potentials of music elicitation as an intervention tool through the training of professionals who work with vulnerable and ‘at risk’ young people. This was supported by the creation of a bespoke handbook in the Albanian language, which serves as a manual and a support tool for professionals to use long after the project closes. The research findings were then shared with youth and social work professionals in three regions in Albania in specific training on how to use music elicitation to engage young people. The training was designed using a feminist praxis pedagogy style, disrupting the objectification of research participants by asking the training participants to share their own music choices; learning through doing and sharing in a non-hierarchical space. This embodied learning style meant that participants both through research and the training were able to experience the feeling of being actively listened to via the medium of music elicitation. In this book, I draw on the concept of ‘mattering’ to both analyze the narratives of the