

ARTICLE

Exploring a potential role for music therapy to promote positive communication and emotional change for couples: A single-session pilot case study

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ABSTRACT

This pilot case study explores a potential role for music therapy in relationship counselling by employing a case study design. It is contended that music therapy might support couples in understanding and communicating their relationship, affording opportunities for self-expression, emotional expression, communication (verbal and non-verbal) and social participation. The study was conceived with the objective of establishing a possible treatment or intervention which might stand alone or be included as part of a therapeutic service being offered to couples. Constructed around a single music therapy session with a married couple, the study comprised: an exploratory, semi-structured interview with the couple before the session; a music therapy session of 50 minutes' duration; and a follow-up interview with the couple after the session. Four major themes emerged: (i) guarded, needy, things not meeting; (ii) happy together, venturing together; (iii) deep union; and (iv) transcendence. Data analysis was based on Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach. The findings from this pilot project suggest music therapy's potential for couples in promoting deeper emotional connection, positive communication and emotional change. Although the results should be treated with caution given the limitations of the methodological design, this study suggests that music therapy may provide an intimate environment to facilitate intense interpersonal interactions between the partners of a couple. This is possibly a new area of practice for music therapists, and further research is warranted.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION



Image 1: Love by Alexandr Milov (Copyright John McNamara)

The image above shows a large sculpture created by Ukrainian artist Alexandr Milov entitled 'Love', which depicts two adults who have turned away from each other, perhaps as a result of betrayal, hurt, or disappointment in each other or their relationship. At the same time, the 'inner child' of each person is seen to be reaching out, trying to touch or connect with the other. One imagines that the smaller, less judgmental, less experienced, younger inner self is eager to relent and let go, not wanting to hold a grudge. One imagines the younger selves wishing to re-establish the easy, relaxed, warm intimacy of connection, to bypass or circumvent the more 'grown-up' grudge holding and petulant stubbornness within which they have each become defended. The adult selves appear protected, encased and potentially trapped.

The image opens this study because the focus of this research is whether engaging in music therapy might support couples as part of relationship counselling. The authors contend that music therapy might support couples in relationship therapy by appealing to the 'sensible' and 'mature' child within, and softening or melting the 'childish' and 'petulant' adult, perhaps beginning to dissolve the protective, defensive, imprisoning encasement portrayed in this image (Gregory, 2004). The music therapy session explored in this pilot study seemed to have potential in terms of providing an intimate space, and it is contended that music therapy could be a useful intervention for couples experiencing relationship difficulties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on music therapy and couple counselling¹ is scarce, with very few recorded studies in this area. Searches were conducted in the following databases, Google Scholar, Cochrane, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Sage, WileyOnline and the Gluckman Library for the terms 'Music in Counselling/Counseling'; 'Music Therapy and Relationships'; 'Music Therapy and Couple Counselling'; 'Music Therapy as Couple Counselling'.

¹ The spelling 'counselling' and 'counseling' were used in all literature searches to ensure coverage of relevant literature in different jurisdictions.

Couple counselling research is well established as offering statistically and clinically significant improvement for a substantial proportion of couples in reducing overall relationship distress (Lebow, Chambers, Christensen & Johnson, 2012). However, at least 25% of couples report less success and/or no long-term benefit, and further research is recommended in the field (Snyder, Castellani & Whisman, 2006). As early as 1991, the role of creative arts therapies was being considered in family therapy. Authors recommended in a special issue of *Arts in Psychotherapy* on family therapy and arts therapies that, given the fact that the creative arts therapies are successful at overcoming and circumventing strong defenses, bringing unconscious or covert ideas to the surface, their application to family therapy should hold a great deal of promise (Read Johnson, 1991). Social workers also advised in 1984 that couples might use personally meaningful music choices in therapy to explore interpersonal conflicts and distressing situations that they might not otherwise bring forward (Ho & Settles, 1984). Despite this early interest, literature is still relatively scarce regarding the role of music in couple counselling. Three studies are particularly significant here: Smith and Herteien (2016), Duba and Roseman (2012), and Baker, Grocke, and Pachana (2012).

Smith and Hertlein (2016) suggest that the relationship between music therapy and couple counselling is under researched and largely unknown to many clinicians in this field but that the innate power of music to connect so many portions of the brain, human psyche, and relational dynamics of client to therapist is unmatched by many other forms of therapy and practice.

The authors integrated a programme of listening to client-selected music into the therapeutic sessions and found the reported benefits for couples. Receptive music was found beneficial whether used in the waiting area, in the session area as the clients arrived and left, or within the couple counselling sessions (whether used for short or long periods of time). In particular, the authors present evidence that music used in couple counselling sessions can foster openness, encourage depth and wealth of disclosure, and enhance the willingness to change. While cautioning against unchecked implementation, they present evidence that music therapy has physical, psychological and emotional benefits, in particular through enhancing family communication, reducing anxiety and fatigue, and regulating blood pressure and respiration (Smith & Hertlein, 2016).

Duba and Roseman (2012) discuss the benefits of 'musical tune-ups' to couples in relationship, suggesting that because music therapy sessions do not require clients to speak any given language or have a certain degree of life experience or intellectual level, their applications are endless. They conclude that music, combined with a skilled counsellor (in this case not necessarily a music therapist) and an engaged couple, can bridge partners in ways that many other techniques fail to do. In a case study, they describe a couple with whom music was used as an additional tool to facilitate a fun and light-hearted activity designed to address two of the couple's goals: having fun and enhancing communication. The couple were reminded that although they will face challenges and difficult discussions during any given therapy session, it was still important to practise enjoying each other during the therapy context, as well as to learn something new about how the other was feeling and what they were thinking.

Music therapy specifically was reported to have positive effects on both the caregiver and spouse in terms of (i) engaging in music-enhanced enjoyment and relaxation; (ii) enhanced quality of spousal relationship; (iii) strengthened reciprocity; and (iv) increased satisfaction with caregiver role (Baker, Grocke & Pachana, 2012).

Given the scarce literature on couple counselling and music therapy specifically, broader relevant literature regarding music therapy and relationship work can be explored. Stewart (2002), for example, suggests that sharing music-making fosters emotional relationship, containment, security and trust, and that the experience of emotional relating and containment through the shared music-making

contributes to a developed sense of internal cohesion and emotional self-awareness, and therefore the ability to engage in the unpredictable arena of social interaction. This aspect of music therapy work may be relevant to couples in counselling. Scheiby (2006) adds that music therapy can reveal 'blind spots' in self-awareness. Greater awareness of unconscious structures and a new openness to sharing emotion and to warmth and fun seem to offer a field of uncomplicated possibilities for couples to play and communicate safely together, and perhaps to rekindle the original shared emotional flame. Music is non-verbal and intrinsically emotional, and the sense of play and fun allows for small but significant acts of risk taking in expression. The authors contend that couples experiencing relationship difficulties may become 'stuck' in negative communication patterns, and the experience of bringing creativity and playfulness into the communication may assist to open up partners to new experiences and awareness. When the couple risk creative playfulness in their music-making, and find these are received, honoured and validated in the music by the music therapist, this may transform into 'successful' emotional disclosure and relating between the couple (Aigen, 2014; Jensen, 2001; Smith & Hertlein, 2016). According to Aigen (2014, p. 110), "[t]he therapist provides a container in which the client can project primitive feelings of rage that otherwise might threaten to overwhelm and destabilize a weak and vulnerable ego".

At the end of a section of music-making which results in feelings of intimacy, a vulnerable moment may be savoured for a time before the mind retakes control and defences are re-established. Client feedback sometimes includes reports that something 'moves' or 'shifts' psychologically or emotionally, offering awareness of opportunities for accommodation and change (Austin, 2008; Bunt, 2012). As many clients have reported, when you sing with someone you do not only share sounds, but also vibrations. Some clients have found this shared energy field as intimate, even more so than touch. The client and therapist can potentially affect each other on a level that goes deeper than words, and this may also be relevant for couples in therapy, an idea which is relatively unexplored in the music therapy literature (Austin, 2008).

Music therapy can help a person to gain insight into their needs and concerns, potentially allowing them to develop awareness of issues, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and conflicts (Wigram, Pedersen & Bonde, 2002). Chazan (2001) says that one of the aims of psychodynamic therapy is insight, the capacity to understand one's own defences and motivations, to be aware of one's own responses, to appreciate the meaning of symbolic behaviour. Insight, to be effective, must be emotional and not merely intellectual, and although it refers primarily to self-awareness and self-knowledge, it is also used to refer to the capacity to understand others (Chazan, 2001). Growth in awareness of the other is also significantly positive for change and personal growth. When either person in a relationship changes even a little, the relationship changes; if both change together in a positive way, possibilities for benefit may accrue. The inspiration for this study is the possibility that two people may gradually gain insight into themselves and each other through participation in music therapy sessions. Gaining insight offers a more realistic perception of the truth of ourselves and of others. Insight and realistic perception mean opening the door to parts of ourselves and of the other of which we were previously unaware. The aim of therapy is to make the unconscious conscious, to learn to see aspects of oneself and of others to which one had been blind (Chazan, 2001). Sensitivity to and awareness of other people and how they feel may be fostered through music therapy group work. Music therapy offers the development of other-awareness, of relationship and, significantly, the opportunity for difficult experiences or feelings to be identified and shared. This process is sometimes not available in everyday life, but it is possible in music therapy to develop awareness and a realisation of the impact of actions and feelings on others (Watson & Vickers, 2002). Pavlicevic (2003) suggests that music therapy groups may be informed by verbally-based group theory, but the therapists work directly through music, being highly skilled at using a flexible

and dynamically insistent medium to draw the group together.

The emotional power of music is as ubiquitous and famous as it is mysterious. Budd (1992) suggests that music communicates a process which is experienced with emotion and its value is dependent upon its ability to arouse emotion in the listener. Forms of human feeling are much more congruent with musical forms than with the forms of language, therefore music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach (Juslin & Sloboda, 2011).

Shared music-making is widely reported to contribute to a meaningful and mutually engaging social connection (Matthews, 2015). Music therapy song writing may improve group cohesion and social interaction (Aldridge, 2005). Edwards (2011) discusses the use of musical elements to co-create mutually satisfying encounters; these encounters may create a strong foundation for future capacities for intimacy and positive relating such as promoting self-awareness, self-expression and communication.

Within couple counselling, conflict often arises from mismatches in perception and need, which lead to misunderstanding, hurt feelings, escalation, anger and emotional withdrawal (Gurman, 2008). When interpreting the behaviour of others, people assume they are perceiving reality. Interpretation can lead to misunderstanding and, therefore, to conflict. Misunderstandings can occur even in long-term relationships and it may take an outsider, such as a therapist (or therapeutic group), to show that perception is relative (Chazan, 2001).

In summary, the literature in the field can be collated into four areas of relevance to couple counselling practice: (i) increasing self-knowledge, self-awareness and emotional awareness; (ii) increasing awareness of others and fostering relationship; (iii) facilitating self-expression and communication; and (iv) enhancing social interaction. The rationale for this pilot study is based on the hypothesis that music therapy might allow a couple to express emotion, listen to each other and potentially experience deeper awareness of self and partner.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore the potential for music therapy to contribute to couple counselling. The objectives were to pilot one music therapy session with one couple to explore how music therapy might contribute to positive communication and shared emotional intimacy, and to examine qualitatively the experience of music therapy for one couple. The couple selected were identified by a relationship counselling centre as a healthy couple. They were selected for the pilot so that the approach might be tested with a healthy couple before testing on couples experiencing relationship difficulty. This was based on ethical concerns around piloting a new approach on a more vulnerable couple.

During the session of this pilot study, the following music therapy techniques were integrated: call and response music-making, free improvisation in music, joint song-writing, and meditation using receptive music therapy techniques. The choice of these techniques was based on previous practice experience and on related literature in the field. More specifically, these techniques were recommended in papers relevant to this study (Bruscia, 2014; Mössler, Assmus, Heldal, Fuchs & Gold, 2012). Given its exploratory nature, it was decided to pilot this study prior to engaging in a larger empirical study.

METHODOLOGY

The study method included three main components: (i) an exploratory interview with the couple conducted before the music therapy session; (ii) a 50-minute music therapy session; and (iii) a follow-up interview with the couple conducted after the session had finished.

A case study is an in-depth study of a situation; a method used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one easily researchable topic (Pope & Mays, 2006). An exploratory/pilot case study was the method used for this study. Pilot studies play a fundamental part in health research. A pilot study contributes important data to assist researchers in the conduct of their study. Undertaking a pilot study provides the researcher with the opportunity to collect preliminary data, evaluate their data-analysis method and clarify the resources required in a larger study (Doody & Doody, 2015).

Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach was used to inform the data analysis process. This phenomenological approach was followed to explore the benefits and challenges experienced by this couple receiving music therapy and to explore the learning experiences of conducting this pilot study (Van Manen, 1990). The data was compiled from the interviews, therapist's journaling, video analysis, interviews and feedback. Interviews were semi structured. Van Manen's process of phenomenological enquiry was followed, step by step, to bring together the therapist's observations, the interview data and the video analysis. The six steps of Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological study are: (1) Turning to a phenomenon which is of serious interest; (2) Investigating experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualised; (3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (4) Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and re-writing; (5) Maintaining a strong orientation to the original question; and (6) Balancing the research question by identifying parts and the whole (Van Manen, 1990).

The interviews focused on the experiences of the couple regarding their engagement in music therapy activities with their partner and the experience of the process in terms of learning about the other person, relating and communicating. Congruent themes emerged from the process of categorising and organising verbal, non-verbal and musical contributions. These themes were further refined, filtered and categorised, which yielded more general, principal themes. These themes were subject to further refining and categorisation, resulting in four main themes.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Limerick ethics committee. A process of exploration was carried out to find subjects, during which two marriage counselling organizations were approached. These organizations assisted the researchers by identifying potential couples who might be appropriate. An information letter briefing the couple on the nature and extent of the investigation and a consent form were given to the two subjects prior to the study. Informed consent was given to each individual in the relationship couple separately to ensure informed consent.

The 50-minute music therapy session comprised the following elements: (i) opening musical game; (ii) first free improvisation; (iii) song writing; (iv) receptive music therapy; (v) second free improvisation; (vi) finish – gentle music and silence and finish.

The video recording of the interviews and the session were transcribed. The transcripts were subjected to a line-by-line examination. Lee and McFerran's (2015) process of Interpretative Phenomenological Video Analysis was followed.

Validity of the data was ensured by returning to the participant couple with the emerging themes for their assessment in terms of congruence with their understanding of their own experience. The participants responded to the coding and interpretation positively and supportively, with minor clarification to language used to describe their experiences. Interview data was transcribed and coded by two researchers to check for bias; journaling and research supervision ensured that any bias was checked and the researchers returned to the couple to check that themes were consistent with their experience. Audio-visual recordings were analysed through written descriptions primarily, and specific sections of interest were transcribed.

Two researchers undertook this study (authors one and two). The first author conducted the music therapy session. The second author conducted the pre- and post-session interviews and the

three-month follow up. The third author provided research supervision throughout the process.

Description of the couple participating in the pilot study

The couple who took part in the session were a married couple in their early 40s, who had been in a relationship for 14 years and had one child. They were Irish nationals, identified as heterosexual, and both worked in the area of mental health and addiction. They were selected on the basis that they reported no current serious marital problems and that they were part of a stable and loving relationship.

As explained above, the rationale for identifying a couple who were not experiencing crisis in their relationship was that, firstly, the study was exploratory, and secondly, and most importantly, the safety of participants was paramount.

RESULTS

This section focuses on the results of the pilot study, but first a description of the session is provided. This description outlines the key components and processes of the session alongside some reflections regarding the therapist's own emotional responses. For purposes of confidentiality, the couple are identified as M (male partner) and F (female partner).

Description of the session with reflection on the process

Element (i): The Opening Musical Game was designed to be a warm-up to introduce the couple to the experience of playing music together, an activity they had never shared before. A certain amount of initial self-consciousness and embarrassment was expected and proved to be the case. The subjects were invited to play a short sequence on a drum and the other to respond by answering with the same sequence; they were free to modify the beat from time to time. This was done using a single, large, shared drum. To begin, a beat was initiated by the therapist and passed around between the therapist and the two subjects. After a couple of rounds the therapist stopped playing the drum and supported the subjects in the game using chords on the guitar. The game lasted for four minutes. The beat changed several times and the game became playful as they tried to catch each other in an incorrect response. The opening musical game seemed important, on reflection, although it was a little tense and awkward. It seemed to begin the process of relaxing the couple and to establish a playful and safe atmosphere. It seemed to lay the groundwork for the subsequent stages.

Element (ii): The First Free Improvisation was designed to create a shared musical space and to build on the musical relationship that began in the open musical game. This section was designed to establish their individual expression and to encourage listening to each other's unique voice. The couple seemed to begin to share the space, and interacted in the way they played together. They listened to each other, responded to each other, and were aware of each other in the music. The couple were using two glockenspiels. The therapist supported their music, playing the guitar using chords of C, A minor, G, E minor, F and D minor when they played on the white notes, and F# minor and C# minor when they played on the black notes. This section lasted approximately ten minutes.

Element (iii): The Song Writing was intended to offer opportunities for musical sharing and cognitive sharing. The couple were invited to recall a special place or time, a significant, shared experience. They chose this together and developed the following song together also, agreeing to the activities when these were proposed by the therapist. The couple chose a recent holiday which had provided a peaceful, shared experience for them; they recalled sitting together in the evenings and

looking out over fields where hares played and settled down for the night. The experience comprised emotion of which they had not been aware, and the song writing process allowed them to delve deeply into what was shared in those moments. The couple dictated the lyrics, chose the key, the tone, the pitch direction of the melody, and suggested some of the notes. The therapist added some structure and organised their words in order to create rhyming lyrics, which the couple requested. Writing the song took approximately 20 minutes. This activity offered an opportunity to share creativity, recall the shared experience, find out what the other noticed, felt was important and wanted to share. The exercise was designed to encourage communication, intimacy and emotional sharing. It is suggested that such mutually satisfying encounters may create a strong foundation for future capacities for intimacy and positive relating (Edwards, 2011).

Element (iv): Receptive Music Therapy was designed to allow the couple to relax and reflect on the memory and shared emotion of the experience that was the basis of the song. The couple was invited to face each other, to hold both hands and to make eye contact to encourage communication. As they sat in that way, the song they had written was slowly and gently played and sung to them by the music therapist. After about five minutes, it was apparent to the therapist that the experience of eye contact and holding hands was becoming uncomfortable for one of the couple, and they were both invited to close their eyes. This seemed to relieve the discomfort. The gentle playing of the song continued for a further seven or eight minutes. There was a sense of sharing an intimate moment. After this section it seemed clear to the therapist that something had changed for the couple. A new, much more fluid, more relaxed atmosphere seemed to prevail, and the small therapy room seemed to become much more spacious.

Element (v): The Second Free Improvisation was designed to capture and to amplify the experience in the previous section, and to bring into shared musical expression whatever might have happened in the previous section. In this Second Free Improvisation, the tone was significantly different from the First Improvisation; the music was slower, more synchronised with little if any disharmony; it felt like a profound sharing was taking place. This section had lasted for approximately eight minutes when the time came to finish the session.

Element (vi): The session was over and the subjects were invited to relax. The therapist played some quiet notes on the guitar during these relaxed minutes. A sense of awe prevailed which, eventually, seemed to demand silence and respect and everyone sat quietly for a few minutes. Then the therapist invited the participants to gently return to awareness of the room and the present moment, the end of the session. The therapist thanked them, took some feedback and left the room. After the session, the second interview was conducted. Three months later the third interview was conducted.

Pre and post interview results

Pre-session interview

The couple described their relationship pre-session as: "really getting on, we have fun together but we also piss each other off, as every couple do". When asked how they communicate presently they described themselves as follows:

If there's something coming up, an event.... (looking at him) Yeah we just discuss it, the logistics of it or the finances of it, yeah, we just kind of make decisions and say like will we do this? (F)

I like that to get her blessing or get her ideas and stuff like that. And yeah but also like stuff that's going on with my family. There's nothing that... I can't talk to her about. (M)

There's a kind of flow. (F)

In the pre session interview, the couple stated that although music is not a huge part of their relationship, it plays a part in connecting closely.

F: You know that once in a blue moon, we sit in here and we play music and it's not something like that we planned to do, it just kind of happens. And we will go through apple music and we won't put an album on. It'll be like, do you remember this song?

M: Do you remember this tune?

F: And this song. And someone will take control and they'll play, it's like "oh god, do you remember that?" And we'll kind of talk about where we were in our life when we were listening to that. And concerts or oh, I used to listen to that album all the time...

M: The most fun I've had with music was creating music for our wedding, the actual songs for the ceremony, but then we had a playlist that played during the meal. And just sitting here, we had a couple of nights like that.

When asked about emotional intimacy, the couple noted that intimacy comes and goes, depending on the time of life, business of schedules, work and family commitments:

F: We'll have times where we are really close and times where we are not as close. And it kind of comes and goes. *[M said "comes and goes" simultaneously]*

M: Erm, yeah, even though like say we are disconnected, there's something that... I trust us. I trust us as a couple that even if we are in the dip. Yeah, I'm not panicking that oh, god are we going to break up or anything like that, that doesn't come into it, it's just - okay, we are here.

F: *[intake of breath]* Yeah, sometimes that's not even about us, it's about outside stuff. He might be preoccupied about something else or I might be preoccupied about something else and I kind of just pull back. I can have a tendency to retreat a little bit. When my head is elsewhere I'll retreat a little bit. A lot of the time I like to kind of work stuff out in there (pointing to her head), so I'll be a little quiet maybe for a day or so.

Post session interview

After the session, the couple were asked to reflect on the music therapy session:

F: A little bit uncomfortable at first, because I'm not a bit musical and it was kind of more up here (gesturing to her head) than in here (gesturing to her body). But I kind of got into it, especially the last piece. It was powerful. Yeah, there was a lot of feeling, there was a lot of wonderful feeling. Yeah I really, really enjoyed it.

M: Yeah, it was the same for me, yeah, a little bit self-conscious at the start, but I didn't let it get in the way too much. There's lots in it, lots of nuances and stuff, with bits of feelings and thoughts and memories. Yeah it's quite powerful And exciting as well. Especially that piece in writing the song.

F: Yeah.

The female described writing the song as

...particularly profound, a sense that no matter what's going on, the storm or whatever is going on the surface, underneath there's kind of, yeah, there's a solidness there. We come back to that, and come back to that. (F)

When asked to comment on the music-making in the session, the couple both expressed having experienced embarrassment at times, but concluded that the benefit of shared music-making, for them, was just being present, right there at the moment for each other, there was no expectation, nothing to do, nothing to worry about.

The vulnerability of improvising was noted as a powerful activity:

...cause it's vulnerable, it's vulnerable. We don't know what we are doing, you know. That's vulnerable. It's kind of unconscious what's going to come out because we have no control over it. There's always going to be a bit of "oh, sugar!" (laughter). What's going to happen? But there was nothing that would have gone on that wasn't helpful. I think I learnt something from every single bit of it. (M)

Results of the phenomenological analysis

In bringing together the interview data, therapist observation and journaling and video analysis, four significant themes emerged.

Theme 1: Guarded, needy, things not meeting

This theme arose principally from early in the session when everybody was feeling understandably awkward when the couple were invited to experience the vulnerable position of playing music together for the first time.

At the beginning there was a sense of self-consciousness, disconnectedness and tension in the room. The sense was noticed by both researchers in their reflective journals.

I found it a little bit uncomfortable at first... and it was kind of more up here (gesturing to her head) than in here (gesturing to her body). (M)

I suppose initially, emotions would be foolishness, or silliness. (M)

I'm maybe a bit selfish here, we're supposed to be connected in this but I was just off on my own stuff. (F)

It felt kind of foolish and embarrassing at the start. (F)

These sample comments led to the idea that unease, nervousness, apprehension and some of the distance and poor connection that normal life can confer was extant at the beginning of the session. The comments were congruent with the experience of the researchers and also with the views expressed in interviews.

Theme 2: Happy together, venturing deeper

This theme arose as the session developed from sharing music to the writing of the song. As they relaxed into the sharing of music, most of the awkwardness dissipated and a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere prevailed. Concepts and comments in relation to this part of the session were:

There is more of a sense of connection. (M)

There was a playfulness in it, almost childlike, kind of like child fun and see what happens. (F)

As the session developed, the music played by the couple seemed to synchronise gradually. It was not uniform; there seemed to be an imbalance in the relationship. The imbalance was noted, reflected and discussed by M and F towards the end of the session and in the post session interview. The imbalance was presented by the couple as a relationship problem for them that was not being addressed.

I'm just thinking the [music] that we threw out just raked up a ton of emotions. Just love, and peace and contentedness and yeah. (M)

There was joy in it. Just not being in my head so much and banging on that (glockenspiel) as well just got me out of my head. (F)

We still have stuff to work through and stuff but we're okay. (M)

Theme 3: Deep union

When the couple listened to the final version of the song they had written together, they became united in a shared memory, and the atmosphere felt intimate and profound. Some examples of comments recorded in relation to this part were:

M: Writing the song, that... How do you describe it? It's that (deep exhale) big breath (F nods her head), and it... We're okay we're in good shape...

F: Yeah, there was a lot of feeling, there was a lot of wonderful feeling.

During the song writing piece, the unity that sometimes gets lost in a relationship was recalled and brought front and centre. The lyrics centred around a holiday they had taken together and the music made the moment seem very personal and special; it seemed to draw emotion to the surface in a way had not happened either on the holiday or since.

M: No matter what's going on, the storm or whatever is going on the surface, underneath there's kind of yeah, there's a solidness there. We come back to that, and come back to that.

F: No matter where your head goes and you might think certain things or you know. So you know I think for me there was just a huge sense of yeah this is it.

Theme 4: Transcendence

Towards the end of the session the therapist perceived a profound quiet and deeply personal atmosphere. The therapist felt like an intruder as he observed the developing warmth and unity of the subject couple. Comments that were recorded were:

M: Yes, it's kind of like seeing you or not seeing the mask or seeing your persona, it's actually seeing you.

F: Yeah, yeah

M: This feels like you're sharing a vulnerable moment;

F: Yeah something has kind of shifted. And for the better; definitely, I think it just opens a whole new... What I don't know. But it does. A new depth, a new level.

M: Something very deep, much deeper than I expected happened: I felt it in my stomach, like a ball of energy, a warm feeling.

This final part of the session was very quiet with very little talking from M or F; a quiet depth seemed to fall into the room. One of the couple whispered "I just spent three weeks in France", and the therapist's notes reflect what occurred in this part of the session:

As the music continued their heads moved slowly closer together during the whole time the music was playing.

This improvisation felt, seemed, to be profound, deep, quiet, calm, There was almost no eye contact between f and m, just one moment to share a quiet smile during the music but otherwise it felt/seemed like four and a half minutes of musical unity.

The couple commented after this part of the session as follows:

I am sure for both of us, we will be having conversations, there are loads of nuances in that, tons of stuff, like, tons of information, that will take a while to decipher. There will be a lot to process from that. (M)

When the findings of this study were subsequently checked with the couple, their responses remained positive, referring to the "power of the music" to "weave a kind of magic" and saying that "it's amazing how you can just get into the whole thing in such a short time" (F). At the time of writing, they are still grateful for the experience and have subsequently begun to talk privately about some of the things that came up for them during the process and to use the experience to deepen their relationship.

Creative description of the session

The findings were brought together in a written, creative description, developed by the researchers during the process of analysis, to describe the pilot case study. This creative reflection is in keeping with Van Manen's approach.

By writing and rewriting the essences and themes arising in the data... themes condense into a discursive whole which we may call 'theory'. Responsive-reflective writing is the very activity of doing phenomenology. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 132)

The session was like “a journey” or “a walk” into a swimming pool from the shallow end to the deep end. The Opening Game and First Improvisation felt shallow with only a little meaning. When the Song Writing began, it seemed we reached the beginning of the pool’s decline and started the descent into deep water. A harmony seemed apparent after about 20 minutes, and seemed to be firmly established by the end of the song writing process. That process seemed to prolong the descent and to offer many connections and opportunities for shared emotions and memories. Then the session came to a very still and deep place, which we entered through the receptive music: playing and singing the song that had been written, slowly and softly while the couple held eye contact, for a time, and then closed eyes and held hands. Second improvisation seemed profound, deep and still. It was as if communication needed no words or looks, it was just being. The music had changed and seemed harmonious, slow and beautiful. The journey into the deep was complete. In the space of an hour, the session seemed to be a journey from a shallow, unsettled, uncomfortable beginning through increasing closeness, emotional honesty, positive regard and sharing, finishing in a place of sincere, profound connection.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this pilot study suggest that music therapy may assist couples in relating and expressing emotion, and communicating and connecting non-verbally, and warrant further exploration. The project was conceived with the objective of establishing a possible treatment or intervention which might stand alone or be included as part of a therapeutic service being offered to couples. Whilst this case study focused on a relatively healthy couple, its findings suggest that the elements of listening, self-expression and non-verbal communication afforded by music therapy may possibly benefit those experiencing relationship difficulties. Music therapists might be able to work as part of a relationship guidance organisation alongside marriage guidance counsellors in a number of ways. For example, music therapists could offer one or two such music therapy sessions at the beginning of the therapeutic journey. This could have the effect of shortening the time it takes to enable a couple to lower defences and to unite in the approach to shared difficulties. However, this might require joint working with psychotherapists to maintain therapeutic relationships across sessions. Alternatively, where couple counsellors experience blocks or difficulties in verbal work with couples, the involvement of a music therapist might assist by offering creative, non-verbal approaches to communication and self-expression. It is recommended that music therapy might be explored as part of established evidence-based couple counselling services (Gottman, 2002). Referral by relationship counsellors to music therapy would be recommended to ensure that appropriate couples are referred. The non-verbal nature of this intervention may support some couples for whom verbal communication and listening are difficult. This effect should be explored through further research because it represents a relatively new area of investigation and practice.

The study was limited in several ways, and as a pilot can only indicate some benefits and potential upon which future research can build. It is true that single session evaluation reports have limited value for practice (Miles, 1979; Yin, 1981), but this does not necessarily diminish the quality and impact of music therapy in this session. The reported results of this music therapy session for the participant couple were positive, especially regarding the depth of connection reported. As such, the results signpost to what might be possible, and the authors contend that this area of work is novel and worthy of consideration and development by music therapy practitioners and researchers.

For ethical reasons, the participants were deliberately chosen for their lack of serious marital problems or issues. They were a couple who had experienced couple counselling in the recent past.

Bruscia (2014) suggests that there is no inherent reason that music therapy may not have a role in improving the experience of people who do not have diagnoses or who do not suffer with particular pathologies. People regularly choose to engage in a range of therapies, e.g. massage, acupuncture and acupressure, reiki, hot stone therapy, hydrotherapy and reflexology. Many forms of therapy are available and advertised to the public for various reasons. Some of those reasons are the opportunity for life enhancement, relaxation and stress relief, personal growth and pleasure. On this basis, a music therapy session might enhance connection for people in a couple relationship.

We would recommend further studies using content analysis, video analysis by external professionals and interviews with participants as key to the development of similar interventions. Couple counselling can often be contentious and adversarial and, as with other kinds of conflict, healing does not happen until solutions are sought in partnership (Gottman & Silver, 2005). The prospect of investigating some of the areas mentioned in this report is appealing and exciting; this work offers a potentially new area for music therapists to cultivate.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Εξερευνώντας τον δυναμικό ρόλο της μουσικοθεραπείας να προωθεί τη θετική επικοινωνία και τη συναισθηματική αλλαγή των ζευγαριών: Μια πιλοτική μελέτη περίπτωσης βασισμένη σε μία συνεδρία

Peter McNamara | Ruyu Wang | Hilary Moss

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αυτή η πιλοτική μελέτη περίπτωσης διερευνά έναν δυναμικό ρόλο της μουσικοθεραπείας στη συμβουλευτική των σχέσεων, με τη χρήση ενός σχεδίου μίας μελέτης περίπτωσης. Γενικότερα, κυριαρχεί η άποψη ότι η μουσικοθεραπεία μπορεί να υποστηρίξει ζευγάρια στο να κατανοήσουν και να επικοινωνήσουν τη σχέση τους προσφέροντάς τους ευκαιρίες για αυτοέκφραση, συναισθηματική έκφραση, επικοινωνία (λεκτική και μη λεκτική) και κοινωνική συμμετοχή. Η μελέτη αυτή σχεδιάστηκε με στόχο την καθιέρωση μιας πιθανής θεραπείας ή παρέμβασης που θα μπορούσε να λειτουργήσει ανεξάρτητη ή να συμπεριληφθεί σε μια θεραπευτική υπηρεσία για ζευγάρια. Η μελέτη συγκροτήθηκε στη βάση μίας μουσικοθεραπευτικής συνεδρίας με ένα παντρεμένο ζευγάρι, και περιλάμβανε: μια διερευνητική, ημιδομημένη συνέντευξη με το ζευγάρι πριν από τη συνεδρία, μια μουσικοθεραπευτική συνεδρία διάρκειας 50 λεπτών και μια συμπληρωματική συνέντευξη με το ζευγάρι μετά τη συνεδρία. Από τη μελέτη αναδύθηκαν τέσσερις μείζονες θεματικές: α) επιφυλακτικοί, απαιτητικοί, χωρίς σημείο συνάντησης, β) ευτυχισμένοι μαζί, αποτολμώντας μαζί, γ) βαθιά ένωση, και δ) υπέρβαση. Η ανάλυση των δεδομένων βασίστηκε στη φαινομενολογική προσέγγιση του Van Manen [Van Manen] (1990). Τα ευρήματα από αυτό το πιλοτικό πρόγραμμα υποδηλώνουν τη δυνατότητα της μουσικοθεραπείας να προωθήσει τη βαθύτερη συναισθηματική σύνδεση, τη θετική επικοινωνία και τη συναισθηματική αλλαγή των ζευγαριών. Παρόλο που τα αποτελέσματα πρέπει να αντιμετωπίζονται με προσοχή λόγω των περιορισμών που εμπεριέχει ο μεθοδολογικός σχεδιασμός, αυτή η μελέτη υποδηλώνει ότι η μουσικοθεραπεία μπορεί να προσφέρει ένα οικείο περιβάλλον για να διευκολύνει τις έντονες, διαπροσωπικές αλληλεπιδράσεις μεταξύ δύο συντρόφων. Αυτό είναι ίσως ένα νέο πεδίο πρακτικής για τους μουσικοθεραπευτές και είναι απαραίτητη η περαιτέρω σχετική έρευνα.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

μουσικοθεραπεία, μουσική, συμβουλευτική ζευγαριών, θεραπεία ζεύγους