Songwriting in Therapy:  
Letter of Intent for a Final Project  
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Songwriting in Therapy: Letter of Intent for a Final Project

This letter of intent proposes the creation of a guide for therapeutic songwriting. For the purposes of this paper and the final project, I define therapeutic songwriting as songwriting that is guided by the goals of therapy as agreed upon by the client and music therapist or counsellor in a music therapy or counselling setting.

Identification of the problem is followed by the rationale for implementation of the project and identification of those who will benefit from the project materials. The methodology for obtaining material for the project is explained and an outline for the guide to therapeutic songwriting is presented at the end of this paper.

Overview

Problem Statement

Suggestions to use songwriting as a therapeutic method abound in the music therapy literature. The examples included in this section present work by various practitioners and the limited instructions they have provided for using songwriting as a therapeutic intervention.

Priestley (1985) suggests that the therapist encourages clients to speak their lyrics or a poem aloud, and then use the inflection of speech as a guide in constructing melody. O’Callaghan (1996) requests that patients make as many choices as possible to guide the songwriting process through choosing topics, keys, rhythms, moods, melodic elements, accompaniment patterns, and titles.

Ficken (1976) approaches songwriting in a psychiatric setting through steps of approximations. His approach utilizes popular songs with lyrical substitutions as a means of introducing songwriting. In writing original songs Ficken suggests beginning with the
pitch of speech, and then exploring those pitches through improvisation. Melodic fragments, harmonies and words can then be joined together to produce a finished song.

Mayers (1995) also uses the modification of existing songs and choice-making procedures to write songs with children who have experienced trauma. She recognizes that some children may be threatened by writing from personal experience, and therefore suggests the use of projective techniques.

Rickson and Watkins (2003) rely on the standard form of the 12-bar blues when songwriting with aggressive adolescent boys. They suggest that the advantage of this structured format is that it requires only minimal input from the boys, allowing them to take the risk of sharing a simple idea.

There is an assumption made in the music therapy literature that those who wish to implement similar procedures already have the knowledge base required. The music therapy literature contains little guidance regarding the procedures of implementing songwriting in therapy. Moreover, what approach is best suited given a client’s individual characteristics, how to treat the resulting product in an ethical manner, how to analyze the product as data, and what specific skills are required for the therapist and client are rarely if ever addressed.

A resource for therapists and counsellors that outlines various techniques for therapeutic songwriting and addresses the concerns stated above would be helpful for both music therapists and counsellors interested in the use therapeutic songwriting in practice or research.
Rationale

Creative songwriting appears to be a valuable tool in therapy. Creative experiences help people remember, feel emotions, drop their defenses, and become willingly engaged in the therapeutic process (Carson & Becker, 2004). Songwriting encourages verbal sharing, emotional experiences, and issue resolution in a flexible, creative and approachable framework (Curtis, 2000). Additionally, creative songwriting can provide the motivation for some clients to work through and resolve their issues in an expedient manner (Miles, 1993). Therapeutic songwriting may be a valuable tool to offer those clients who respond well to creative approaches in therapy. It may help clients engage in the therapeutic process from initial assessment to termination of their treatment.

Songwriting in Research

Goldstein (1990) performed a pilot study with eight adolescents to test the effectiveness of her Songwriting Assessment for Hopelessness (SAH). She adapted the true/false questions from the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS; Beck, Weissman, Lester & Trexler, 1974) by using a fill-in-the-blank lyrical structure paired with a twelve bar blues musical form. Goldstein recognized the limitations of her study due to the small sample size; therefore generalization of the findings may only be applied to psychiatric inpatient adolescents with “depression and/or a history of suicidal ideation or attempts” (p.188). Both the SAH and BHS were administered to the adolescents in the pilot study. To confirm the validity of the SAH, scores from the assessment were correlated to the scores of the BHS. Goldstein concluded that the “significance of the statistical correlation
between the SAH and the BHS suggests that the SAH may have potential as a tool for assessing hopelessness”(p.121).

Robb and Ebberts (2003) presented an exploratory case study where they examine how anxiety and depression levels vary with phase of bone marrow transplantation and how a music therapy protocol can affect anxiety and depression levels. A descriptive case study design with quantitative measures was used to examine changes in anxiety and depression levels according to phase of treatment. Random assignment to the conditions of music therapy or no-music contact controlled for possible effects of attention. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC) developed by Speilberger (as cited in Robb & Ebberts, 2003) and the Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI) developed by Kovacs (as cited in Robb & Ebberts, 2003) served as outcome measures for both groups.

Songwriting played an important role in the brief model of music therapy intervention constructed by Robb and Ebberts (2003). Songwriting afforded the patients the opportunities to “make independent choices and decisions, express feelings related to self-identity and/or hospitalization, provide multisensory stimulation, and engage in a goal-oriented intervention that encourages mastery”(p.6). Although the authors warned readers not to make generalizations from their study due to the small sample size, they reported that four of the six bone marrow transplant patients experienced decreased anxiety following a majority of the music therapy sessions.

Curtis (2000) used a case study approach to assess the effectiveness in increasing the self-esteem of women abused by their male partners. The feminist approach to music therapy included gender-role socialization through lyric analysis and songwriting. Six women from a treatment group of 35 met criteria for inclusion in the data-collection part
of the study. Criteria were the completion of at least eight of the feminist music therapy sessions and completion of the final evaluation and interview. Effects of feminist music therapy were assessed through the analysis of individual interviews and pre- and post-test scores on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) written by Fitts (as cited in Curtis, 2000) as well as by analyzing the content of the women’s original compositions. TSCS measures indicated a distinct increase in self-esteem for four of the six women, and a moderate increase for one. However, Curtis notes, “because of the nature of the case-study approach, it is not possible to definitively identify any single factor as solely responsible for this increased self-esteem in the case of the TSCS results alone” (p.366).

Content analysis of the women’s final interviews and the lyrics or their self-composed songs indicated an increase in self-esteem for all six participants (Curtis, 2000). Curtis was particularly impressed by the ability of their songs to reflect the growth in power and other changes experienced by the women.

Identifying the Need

Research that includes songwriting as a means of intervention appears to demonstrate the beneficial results of its use. Though numerous methods exist for therapeutic songwriting, no single resource has been developed that brings many of the methods together in one document. When such a document exists, music therapists and counsellors will have a valuable resource that creates a common language for therapeutic songwriting and gives examples for each technique. A thorough exploration of therapeutic songwriting techniques in terms of required skills and materials, client characteristics, ethical issues, and data analysis will help standardize practice and provide more opportunities for researching the benefits of songwriting as a therapeutic tool.
Creating a resource. A precedent exists for presenting an overview of diverse music therapy methodology in a single resource (Bruscia, 1987). In his book, Bruscia provided a form of documentation that explained more than a dozen main improvisational methods of music therapy as well as their variations in form and technique. In doing so, Bruscia encapsulated the diversity represented by various improvisational techniques into one succinct resource. This provided music therapy practitioners with a resource to guide and inspire their clinical work or research using the tool of musical improvisation in therapy. A resource written for therapeutic songwriting would likely serve a similar purpose.

Data analysis. Currently, using clients’ creative writing as data presents a challenge for music therapists and counsellors (Shapiro, 2004). The guide for therapeutic songwriting will identify factors that affect interpretation of the data and will suggest means for avoiding or reducing the chances of misinterpretation. A constructivist/interpretive framework for implementation and analysis will be helpful in this area of research. The emancipatory paradigm will also be kept in mind when suggesting means for measuring data so that voices of oppressed individuals are heard and represented.

An ethical question. Finally, this project will explore ethics in songwriting so music therapists and counsellors have an understanding of the implications of co-creating what is traditionally thought of as a work subject to copyright. When co-creating works with artistic merit, the parties involved need to understand the limits and freedoms placed on the creation itself and the co-creators. Agreements regarding how songs are to be treated and used will need to be in place so as to avoid misunderstandings and ethical
dilemmas. Documents such as consent and release forms, as well as advice that assure protection for both music therapists/counsellors and clients will be presented as part of the final project.

Implications

The potential exists for songwriting to be accessible, meaningful and purposeful for many clients. A guide for therapeutic songwriting will present information and techniques for bringing that potential to fruition with various client populations in many settings. A thorough exploration of therapeutic songwriting techniques along with suggestions for use will help standardize practice and provide more opportunities for researching the effectiveness of songwriting as a therapeutic tool. Clients who consult counsellors and music therapists will benefit from this guide, as it will increase the accessibility to therapeutic songwriting. Ethical considerations included in the project will help guide professionals in their use of songwriting techniques, and a discussion of the options for managing the resulting product according to professional standards and copyright law will also be presented. The Canadian Association for Music Therapy (CAMT) may benefit from the research on the ethical and copyright implications in therapeutic songwriting since the CAMT Code of Ethics (CAMT, 1999) does not address these issues. Therapists and clients remain at risk for litigious actions if attention to ethical and copyright issues is not taken into consideration when cooperatively creating what could be termed expressive works of art within a therapy setting.

Method

Initially a literature review will attempt to gather and synthesize all possible information regarding songwriting as a creative treatment procedure in music therapy and
counselling. Search terms for the literature review will include: songwriting, therapy, music therapy, journaling, poetry, lyrics, chord progressions, music, writing, songs, counselling, art therapy, copyright, creativity, research, and data analysis. The search terms used are meant to include related disciplines and activities as these may contribute valuable information that is not contained in the music therapy literature alone. For example, the field of art therapy has addressed how artistic products are treated in regards to ownership and confidentiality in a therapeutic context.

Search engines will include: internet search engines such as Google, and data bases such as Academic Search Premier, Proquest, PsycArticles, PsycInfo, ERIC, Ingenta, as well as the catalogues of the Universities of Calgary, Lethbridge, and Athabasca libraries.

Information gleaned from the literature review will inform the writing of a guide for therapeutic songwriting by presenting an overview of various approaches used for songwriting in therapy and research projects. It will also help define the need for specific instructions, suggestions and procedural techniques for therapeutic songwriting that are largely missing in the literature. There will be no other data collection other than the literature review.

Design

The design of the research will be qualitative because it focuses on the process, implementation and development of therapeutic techniques (Patton, as cited in Mertens, 1998). A literature review will be completed. Most often the literature mentions songwriting techniques as part of overall treatment plans, but the instructions for implementing the techniques are missing or unclear. The author of the guide for
therapeutic songwriting will acknowledge the sources of each technique as presented in the literature while providing a thorough explanation for implementing the techniques so they may be successfully implemented by others. Additionally, the author will present self-created techniques for therapeutic songwriting based on his fifteen years of clinical experience in the field of music therapy.

Data Collection and Analysis

An initial literature review of the subject of therapeutic songwriting resulted in a paucity of documents devoted exclusively to therapeutic songwriting. Therefore it is not unrealistic to search for all available writings, publications, and materials pertaining to therapeutic songwriting techniques. Sources of information will be identified through a comprehensive search of the music therapy literature, including journals, books, dissertations, and conference programs.

Similarly to the work of Bruscia (1987) each technique will be described according to a basic outline that will provide a uniform way of organizing the information. This will also provide a framework for synthesizing different techniques according to common goals or client needs. Each technique will be described according to: salient features, clinical uses, client prerequisites, therapist skills, goals, media and roles, format, preparation required, procedures, data interpretation, and client-therapist dynamics or group dynamics.

The Final Product

The final product for this project will be a complete guide for therapeutic songwriting that may be published and act as a resource for music therapists and
counsellors who wish to include songwriting as a therapeutic treatment procedure. The format of the guidebook follows.

Section one will include the rationale and literature review. Section two will present therapeutic songwriting techniques with detailed instructions and examples of materials. Those techniques mentioned in the literature will be fully explained and referenced. The author will supply additional techniques.

Section three will include index lists of client populations, physical, communicative and cognitive abilities, skill levels, and goals, along with suggestions of appropriate methods of therapeutic songwriting for each of the aforementioned headings.

Section four will provide an explanation of ethical concerns raised by the co-creation of songs written for therapeutic purposes within music therapy or counselling sessions. Model consent forms and agreement for use forms will also be presented in this section. Finally, section five will present a resource list for materials, software and resources for further information.
References


