



Arts-based research practices in music therapy research: Existing and potential developments

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ABSTRACT

Poetry, drama, music, dance, and visual art are increasingly used in healthcare research to learn about the experiences of healthcare workers and recipients, to gain access to marginalized voices, and to communicate research findings to a wide range of people. Despite this emerging inclination towards the recognition of the value of the arts for healthcare research, creative arts processes have had limited use in music therapy research to date. In this article, we reflect on the small body of existing music therapy literature about arts-based research and explore possible reasons for the current neglect of these methods. We provide examples from Alison's doctoral research that demonstrate the value of using arts-based research for developing a deeper understanding of the profession of music therapy. Our reflection on the current literature leads us to propose further uses for arts-based research practices, for developing rich and evocative findings, accessing the voices of people who receive music therapy services, and communicating music therapy research findings to a broader audience eager for this information.

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The purpose of this article is to examine the existing literature on arts-based research in music therapy, in order to to explore possible reasons for the neglect of arts-based research methods in music therapy to date. Opportunities for the future use of arts-based practices in music therapy research are also considered. We are strong advocates of arts-based research methods. Jane has a long-standing interest in arts-based research methods, developed through her involvement in the Sauen Qualitative Research Symposia, Germany, and through leading workshops for MA Contemporary Dance Performance students at the Irish World Academy with the Director of Contemporary Dance Mary Nunan. In these dance workshops, Jane supports students to use writing to explore their primarily studio-based practice processes. Jane has also supervised many MA level music therapy student research projects employing arts-based methods. Alison more recently developed an interest in arts-based methods in her doctoral research, when she wrote poetry to analyze narratives of music therapists' service development experiences. Through this research, Alison became aware of the distinct advantages of using arts-based research methods and began to question why more music therapists have not used this valuable research approach.

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This article is the result of our further discussions and reflections around this topic. Together we draw on existing literature as well as our own professional and personal experiences to suggest reasons why music therapists may be reluctant to adopt arts-based research practices and to highlight opportunities for further research of this type.

Arts-based research-history and definitions

Arts-based research practices have been in common use in the social sciences since the 1990s (Leavy, 2009). In the text *Method Meets Art*, Patricia Leavy (2009) defined arts-based research (ABR) practices as “a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, and representation” (p. ix).

In arts-based research, art forms such as poetry, music, drama, dance, or visual art are used to explore and process research topics (Austin & Forinash, 2005; Leavy, 2009). With advances in technology, such as the internet and digital media, additional forms of arts-based research have also become possible and are ripe for further exploration (Hervey, 2000; Jones, 2007; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 1998).

Researchers who use arts-based methods have explained how the arts offer a powerful means for increasing insight and understanding (Austin & Forinash, 2005; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 1998). The arts have been presented as a way of exploring aspects of life that

cannot be expressed in other ways, such as subjective experiences and strong emotions. It is also reflected that the arts can give voice to people who are marginalized as a result of their race, gender, sexuality, cultural background, or disability (Estrella & Forinash, 2007; Hadley, 2006; Leavy, 2009).

Another benefit of arts-based research practices is increased access to aspects of experience that are not communicated in narrative terms, or in language. Panhofer, Payne, Meekums, and Parke (2011) reviewed research from the fields of cognitive science and philosophy and discovered that non-language processes are increasingly understood to provide access to ways of knowing that are not accessible via verbal or written means. They proposed that “An emphasis solely on verbalization, leaving aside the body, risks neglecting experiences which have been stored as body memories or in other sensory modalities” (p. 10). The creative arts, including movement and dance, may bring us closer to these less tangible forms of knowing.

As the arts can be evocative, moving, and compelling, they provide opportunities for bringing research findings “to life” (Piercy & Benson, 2005, p. 107) and can “grab people’s attention in powerful ways” (Leavy, 2009, p. 12). The arts can therefore be highly effective in engaging a wide range of people in research and in promoting dialogue with non-academic audiences (Austin & Forinash, 2005; Leavy, 2009). As artistic processes and artefacts invite multiple interpretations, this aspect of arts-based research is valued by qualitative researchers who aim to access multiple meanings of phenomena (Elliot, 2011; Lapum, 2005; Leavy, 2009). McNiff (2008) stated in describing “art-based” research, “While many areas of science strive for replication and constancy of results in experiments, the arts welcome the inevitable variations that emerge from systematic practice” (p. 29).

Arts-based processes also invite collaboration and group reflection. Vaillancourt (2011) described how she developed arts-based group processes to explore her own and music therapist group members’ experiences of mentorship. Using the commentary of participants generated through interviews and reflections on the arts-based group experience she proposed that:

“The co-researcher group created a microclimate... We searched for fertile ground and, like gardeners, we learned while doing—tilling, preparing the soil with care, planting seeds, and cultivating our garden... Music was the air we breathed... Within our garden there was an imaginative nest where co-researchers came for sharing, nurturing, mentoring, and support. (Experiencing group, para. 3)”

Vaillancourt’s description indicates that arts-based research practices may be highly beneficial when a researcher wishes to develop a close collaboration with other participants in the research.

Arts-based research is often associated with a process that leads to an eventual artistic representation of research findings (Leavy, 2009). However, artistic processes can be used for all phases of the research process including the formulation of the research question and the generation and analysis of data (Austin & Forinash, 2005; Leavy, 2009). Austin and Forinash (2005) emphasized that in arts-based research the arts are not secondary but are included as central and essential to the research process. In their view, “the artistic process can provide information at each step of the research study that is unique and is not knowable by other means” (p. 459).

Existing definitions and reflections on arts-based research processes promote engagement in the arts as an effective means of processing experiences and deepening understanding. The following sections contain examples of previous arts-based projects, to explore the potential for using the arts to deepen understanding in music therapy.

Arts-based research and health care

The arts are increasingly being used in healthcare and related research to learn about the experiences of care workers and recipients, to gain access to marginalized voices, and to communicate research findings to a wider audience. Some examples of arts-based research in health include the use of poetry to make sense of women’s experiences of heart surgery recovery (Lapum, 2005), the use of dance performance to express young people’s struggles to gain access to mental health care (Boydell cited in Fraser, 2008), and the use of theatre to engage large audiences in debates surrounding the reproductive sciences (Nisker, 2010). It is now recognised that the arts portray aspects of health care that “do not lend themselves to numerical reduction, or even portrayal through traditional narrative and naturalistic methods” (Furman, 2006, p. 565). Furthermore, through facilitating shared understandings of people’s experiences of illness and health, arts-based research may play an important role in informing “humanly sensitive care” (Biley & Galvin, 2007, p. 806).

The opportunities afforded in arts-based approaches additionally include the use of art as a means to educate medical students, a practice that can be traced back fifty years (Perry, Maffulli, Willson, & Morrissey, 2011). Medical students experience the arts through watching dramas or reading literature about patients’ experiences, or by creating art in many forms as a means to get closer to a mature understanding of human suffering (Perry et al., 2011). The use of the arts for medical education purposes has even been conceptualised as “compulsory creativity” (Thompson, Lamont-Robinson, & Younie, 2010).

Arts-based research and music therapy

Despite the emergence of arts-based research as an established research method in the social sciences, and increasingly in healthcare research, few arts-based research studies have been undertaken in music therapy. As music therapy research appears to be lagging behind research undertaken in other health care disciplines (see healthcare examples above), we have given consideration to this observation by using our own personal experiences, and reflecting on the commentary provided by the few music therapists who have employed arts-based processes in their research. The following section outlines some of the current literature about the use of arts-based research in music therapy. Questions that guided our reflection on the literature included: *Is all research that includes artistic processes “arts-based”? What arts-based processes are possible? And why is there so little arts-based research in music therapy?*

Arts-based research was included as an extant research methodology in the main research textbook to date in music therapy (Wheeler, 2005). In discussing arts-based research in this text, Dianne Austin and Michele Forinash distinguished arts-based research from studies that analyzed the music created in music therapy sessions, and also outlined the theoretical premises and historical roots of arts-based research. They demonstrated how the arts can be used at every step in the research process to develop rich and expressive findings. Arts-based research was promoted as a legitimate and valuable way to gain insights not knowable by other means (Austin & Forinash, 2005).

Austin’s research on *Alcoholics Anonymous* was the main focus of the chapter. In this research, Austin wrote poetry and rap music to refine her initial research question and created a musical play to analyze and present her findings from *Alcoholics Anonymous* meetings. When undertaking arts-based research, Austin experienced the use of metaphor as helpful for identifying major themes in her interviews and observations. Furthermore, the recursive act of

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