

Expanding music therapy practice: Incorporating the feminist frame

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Abstract

Feminist theorising as a perspective to practice within music therapy has received limited attention to date. In order to examine the opportunities that feminist theory offers music therapy, this paper provides (1) the historical context for contemporary feminism, (2) current applications of feminist theory documented in recent music therapy literature, and (3) a review of gender ratios based on data in the public record. While there are some notable contributions which reflect a feminist consciousness within music therapy, further work is needed to progress a feminist framework for practice.

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Introduction

Feminism has received minimal consideration in the development of a theoretical framework informing professional practice within music therapy until recently (Hadley & Edwards, 2004; Hadley, 2006a). The authors estimate that women may constitute more than 80% of the membership of the music therapy professional body worldwide.¹ However, this proportionally greater number of women within music therapy has not correlated with the demonstrable presence of a critically operative feminist consciousness.

The sheer number of women in the field could have been expected to influence a greater recognition of feminism as a theoretical framing for action. However, only a small number of music therapists have acknowledged feminism as an orientation within their practice to date. In order to examine this under representation of feminist theorising in the music therapy literature, three core foci structure this paper: (1) the historical context for contemporary feminism, (2) current applications of feminist theory documented in recent music therapy literature, and (3) a review of gender ratios based on data in the public record. It is hoped that by providing this overview, music therapy practitioners, researchers, and educators will be able to increasingly use the framework of feminist ideas as a resource by which to inform and critique their work.

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¹ Recent membership data of the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA, 2005) indicated that over 85% of the membership is female. The proportion of female to male music therapists in Europe has not been officially recorded to the authors' knowledge. However, lower numbers of male students than females are studying in European music therapy training programs (Brynjulf Stige, Personal Communication, November 22nd, 2006). Furthermore, the authors are aware of much lower numbers of male students than female in training courses in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.

The context

Feminist theory is by no means a unified standpoint, but rather “contemporary feminism remains a diverse and pluralist enterprise” (Bordo, 2003, p. 216). Feminism has a long and complex history, influenced by a range of diverse theoretical systems. While a feminist sensibility challenges fixedness, universalism, immutableness, and rigidity, it is nonetheless necessary that some of the acknowledged tenets of feminism can be presented here. Therefore, a number of foundational issues are briefly described in order to address one of the stated purposes of this paper; that is, to provide an historical and theoretical context for a discussion of feminism in relation to music therapy. The authors acknowledge the culturally confined nature of their contribution to this discussion oriented within the music therapy writings and practices in the Western world.

The feminist movement is frequently referred to in terms of the three modern feminist waves or movements, although it exists along a continuum or within a spectrum that spans a larger timeframe. These waves became retrospectively identified by the predominant issues addressed. The first wave of feminism has primarily been associated with access and equal opportunities for women, specifically the drive for women’s suffrage. However, in one of the key overview texts in this field the women’s movement that emerged during the 1800s is described as “a more multi-issued campaign for women’s equality” (Hole & Levine, 1990, p. 452).

In the 1800s a number of social reform movements grew with “a philosophical emphasis on individual freedom, the ‘rights of man’ and universal education” (Hole & Levine, 1990, p. 453). This first-wave of modern feminism in the US had its roots in the abolition movement of the 1830s. This movement for emancipation and freedom became the foundation ideology for first-wave suffrage and grew from women’s experiences of pursuing the abolitionist agenda. Although women were actively involved in the fight for the abolition of slavery, there is evidence that they were not respected as equals by their male abolitionist friends. According to Hole and Levine, “the brutal and unceasing attacks (sometimes physical) on the women convinced the Grimkes [Sarah and Angelina] that the issues of freedom for slaves and freedom for women were inextricably linked” (1990, p. 453).

Some of the issues of concern to these early feminists included challenging assumptions about the natural superiority of men, and critically examining the social institutions predicated on that assumption, such as religious dogma, and social and legal aspects of marriage. Early feminists challenged limiting stereotypes of women such as requirements for “proper” female behaviour and talk, and promoted equal pay for equal work. They enacted state legislative reforms on women’s property rights, and women’s rights to divorce, abortion rights, rights to guardianship of their children, and rights within non-legislative partnerships. Many activists promoted temperance, pointing to the physical and sexual abuse that resulted from alcohol consumption by men. They advanced dress reform and women’s suffrage, although some felt that suffrage was less important than some of these other issues (Hole & Levine, 1990, pp. 454–455; Kroløkke & Scott Sørensen, 2005, pp. 5–7).

After the Civil War in the US and the resulting abolition of slavery, women were deliberately excluded in the amendments to the Constitution. Women activists therefore grew to view the vote as the means to achieving other rights and thus suffrage became the main focus of the women’s movement at that time. This focus on suffrage was seen by many as more respectable and conservative than some other issues, and support for the women’s movement grew (Hole & Levine, 1990, p. 458).

The “second wave” of modern feminism in the US during the 1950s and 1960s emerged from the related emancipation movements in post-war Western societies. These included the US civil rights movement, the Black power movement, student protests, anti-Vietnam war movements, lesbian and gay movements, and the Miss America Pageants protests (Kelly, 2000). Women of this second wave of feminism revived women’s political struggles for civil rights. This was prompted from their experience that there was still a gulf between what they had been told about women’s achievements and their private perceptions of their own situations (Kroløkke & Scott Sørensen, 2005).

One critique of the second-wave feminists by feminist women of colour and women who were economically marginal was the lack of attention that white middle-class feminists gave not only to the significance of race and class, but also to age, sexual orientation, and ability. By not recognizing the diversity of the experiential dimensions of oppression, white middle-class feminists universalized their own experiences of oppression as representative of those of all women (Amos & Parmar, 1984). Moreover, given the lack of appreciation for the perpetrators of male oppression along lines of race, differential class positions, and such considerations, these middle-class white feminists were unable to perceive the differences in types of oppression enacted by men other than those who were well-educated, white, and occupied a middle-class position (discussed further in Amos & Parmar, 1984; hooks, 1982).

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