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Lyric analysis research in music therapy: Rationales, methods and representations

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ABSTRACT

Interest in clients' lyrics has burgeoned in music therapy research. Lyric analyses extend understanding of what is important in clients' lives and substantiate song writing's utility in therapeutic and supportive care. A comparison of nine methods of lyric analysis indicate similarities and differences, namely in whether analyses were predominantly inductive or deductive, included numeration, and types of processes used to enable rigour. The postulation that researchers' methods and backgrounds affect findings' representations was also examined through a grounded-theory-informed analysis on lyrics already examined from a phenomenological perspective. Emergent differences illustrate how the grounded-theory-informed analysis uncovered understandings about what the participants expressed, while the phenomenologically-informed analysis uncovered what the lyrics indicated about the participants' lived lives. Analysing frequencies of thematic findings, expressed by individual clients or groups, may also potentiate conceptual generalizations about what comparable clients may express through song writing. As further lyric analyses are conducted and findings compared, grounded theories about lyrical phenomena may emerge, including important insights about clients' lived experiences. These reflections about analytic methods and findings' representations could assist any researcher considering the textual analysis of therapeutic products, such as clients' poetry or story-writing.

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Introduction

Song writing is a widely used music therapy technique, enhancing the life quality of people with vulnerabilities across the life span (Baker & Wigram, 2005). Music therapists have conducted lyric analyses on clients' songs in (a) pediatric oncology (Aasgaard, 2005; Robb & Ebberts, 2003); (b) pediatric (Roberts, 2008) and adolescent (Dalton & Krout, 2006) bereavement; (c) adolescent eating disorders (McFerran, Baker, Patton, & Sawyer, 2006); (d) adult mental health (Grocke, Block, & Castle, 2009), palliative care (O'Callaghan, 1996), and oncology (O'Callaghan, O'Brien, Magill, & Ballinger, 2009); and with (e) people 5–60-years-old living with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) (Baker, Kennelly, & Tamplin, 2005a, 2005b). These lyric analyses reflect how song writing can enable clients to express what is believed to be important when enduring hardship or pathological conditions. Researchers' lyric analysis designs, however, widely vary. Furthermore, the type of analysis affects the final representation of data in research findings (Aldridge, 1996; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). The intention of this article is to discuss the merits of music therapists analyzing clients' song lyrics, and to outline and compare nine music therapy lyric analysis research designs. A grounded-theory-informed analysis on songs, already analyzed from a phenomenological perspective, is also outlined and discussed. It is hoped that the paper will inspire and assist future lyric analysts' decisions about research designs, and that others can extrapolate ideas for analyses of other textual therapeutic products, such as poetry and story-writing.

Why analyze music therapy song lyrics?

Analysis of individual clients' song lyrics can extend therapists' understanding about their lived experiences, which can thereby enhance the therapists' empathy, assessment of clients' conditions (McFerran et al., 2006), and evaluation of music therapy's effect (O'Callaghan, 2005). Examining groups of lyrics provides more general insights into the therapeutic impact of song writing, informing

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justification for song writing's availability to clinical populations. Some of the rationales that researchers use to justify song writing, based on their lyric analysis findings and references to allied theory, follow (please see original articles for extended discussions). To validate song writing for palliative care patients, O'Callaghan (1996) illustrated how lyric thematic findings addressed palliative care aims. For example, 87% of the patients' songs included messages, thereby addressing an aim of assisting communication. Robb and Ebberts (2003) argued that pediatric oncology patients' song themes represented social, family, and individual protective factors which contribute to illness adjustment, personal growth, and life quality. Song writing with patients with TBI (Baker et al., 2005b) was valuable because patients described memories and acceptance of one's new identity involves one's review of the past. Significant therapeutic issues in song writing by adolescents with anorexia nervosa, including identity formation and the maternal relationship, prompted McFerran et al. (2006) to suggest song writing's merit in their treatment. Thematic content in bereaved adolescents' songs led to Dalton and Krout's (2006) illustration of how song writing could help adolescents through the grief process validated as important by bereavement theorists. Aasgaard (2005) associated the humor and expression in the pediatric oncology patients' songs with their well being and ability. Grief, loss, and other life aspects lyrically expressed in bereaved children's songs should also assist their coping (Roberts, 2008). Song lyrics expressed by people with advanced mental illnesses enabled an assessment that, despite vast problems, their human spirit can carry them through (Grocke et al., 2009). And finally, the profound messages communicated by oncology parent inpatients to their children indicated that song writing can enable important yet difficult communication at this time (O'Callaghan et al., 2009).

Comparison of lyric analysis methods in music therapy

Nine lyric analysis studies were examined. Table 1 presents summaries of designs used in seven of the studies. Two of the studies are described here. Aasgaard's (2005) lyric analysis occurred within a broader interpretive study on the process and meaning of song creation with five children, aged 4–15 years, with life-threatening malignant blood disorders. The young people wrote 19 songs in individual sessions, while either inpatients or outpatients. Aasgaard inductively reviewed the lyrics and then stated that the lyrics could be described in two "major categories," which were characterized by three and two themes respectively. Inductive analysis means that the analyst develops the descriptive labels as the lyrics are examined: one does not fit the lyrics into predetermined categories. Aasgaard also integrated "verification" by presenting audio examples of the songs to colleagues. Their thoughts about what they heard informed Aasgaard's final categorization decisions (Trygve Aasgaard, email personal communication, 28th March 2009).

Dalton and Krout's (2006) lyric analysis of 123 songs by about 80 (Robert Krout, email personal communication, 3rd April 2009) bereaved adolescents in individual sessions was also conducted within a broader project of developing and implementing a Grief Song Writing Protocol for bereaved groups of adolescents. A "descriptive analysis" was initially intended to inductively analyse the lyrics. As this proceeded, the researchers noticed that emerging themes matched the five grief processes of which they were already aware (understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, and growing). Assignment of the lyrics to themes was based on both their thematic content and the clients' verbal processing, that is, the clients' exploration and discussion of the lyrics (Robert Krout, email personal communication, 28th March 2009). While the lyrics could fit into more than one thematic area, the client's verbal processing clarified the primary concern expressed in the lyrics. Aasgaard's and Dalton and Krout's main findings are in Table 2, alongside main findings from the seven other lyric analysis studies. A comparison of the nine lyric analysis methods follows.

Commencing the lyric analysis

In six studies the lyric data consisted of songs from previous therapy sessions, possibly collected over many years (Aasgaard, 2005; Baker et al., 2005a, 2005b; Dalton & Krout, 2006; McFerran et al., 2006; O'Callaghan, 1996; O'Callaghan et al., 2009). Lyrics in other studies were developed with research participants (Grocke et al., 2009; Robb & Ebberts, 2003; Roberts, 2008). Studies were designed entirely (Roberts) or partially (Aasgaard; Dalton & Krout; Grocke et al.; Robb & Ebberts) for the purpose of analysing research participants' song lyrics. For example, Robb & Ebberts also examined anxiety and depressive symptoms associated with a song writing and digital video production intervention. Dalton and Krout's lyric analysis was also intended to inform the group song writing protocol created for helping adolescents through grief. Characteristics of clients or research participants whose songs were analyzed varied widely, as already indicated. Analyses were conducted on a wide range of song numbers, from 3 (Robb & Ebberts) to 123 (Dalton & Krout). Studies encompassed songs written in individual sessions, except for Grocke et al.'s and O'Callaghan's work. Studies also encompassed from 3 (Robb & Ebberts) to about 80 composers (Dalton & Krout), whose ages ranged from 4 (Aasgaard) to over 80 (O'Callaghan) years old. Analyses were conducted in studies which included at least one therapist–researcher–author, except for Grocke et al., who used a music therapy research assistant to conduct the song writing sessions.

Researchers' analytic approaches were apparently informed by constructivism (Kuper, Reeves, & Levinson, 2008) and content analysis. Constructivist research approaches reflect a belief that perceived reality is constructed by individual, social, and historical contexts. No absolute shared truth can therefore exist. This differs from objectivist research approaches, which are aligned with positivism and reflect an assumption that absolute truth can be discovered. Objectivist approaches are more quantitative in orientation while constructivist are more qualitative in orientation, but may also include quantitative aspects (Kuper et al., 2008), e.g., a "frequency of recurrence" analysis of inductively derived lyrical themes in the analysis of palliative care patients' song lyrics (O'Callaghan, 1996). Aasgaard (2005) noted that his interpretation of the children's song lyrics was relative and potentially alterable, and Dalton and Krout's (2006) interpretations of the lyrics were informed by noting the close match between the songs and existing theories of grief. Constructivist approaches of phenomenology or grounded theory were also applied in Grocke et al. (2009), O'Callaghan's (1996), and O'Callaghan et al.'s (2009) studies. While entire phenomenology (Forinash & Grocke, 2005) or grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) research paradigms were not evident in these works, the frameworks provided inspiration for the researchers' inductive lyric analyses. Although describing their approaches as content analysis, Robb and Ebberts (2003) and Roberts (2008) also incorporated inductively created interpretations of clients' lyrics. Baker et al. (2005a, 2005b) and McFerran et al. (2006) also used "content analysis" to depict their approaches; however, they used predetermined ideas which were largely gathered from the literature and their previous clinical experiences. The researchers then deductively ascertained whether or not the predetermined ideas existed within the lyrics. Content analysis in music therapy research, therefore, can be either inductive and informed by the constructivist paradigm, or deductive, which is arguably informed by the positivist paradigm.

It is important to note, however, that analytic approaches are either predominantly inductive or predominantly deductive: they

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