



## An analysis of qualitative music therapy research Reports 1987–2006: Doctoral studies

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a comprehensive analysis of qualitative music therapy research studies undertaken for doctoral degrees and written in English. The review focuses on six areas: demographic information, report attributes, topic and focus, research methods and procedures, research findings, and evaluations of methodological information. Conclusions of the research include the judgment that the predominance of studies are methodologically sound although more attention can be paid to areas such as selection criteria, reflexivity, the evolution of the study, the choice of evaluation standards and procedures, illustrating data analysis, and acknowledging the presence and influence of dual relationships.

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### Introduction

The present study is a comprehensive analysis of qualitative music therapy doctoral research studies<sup>1</sup> that is closely related to another study (Aigen, *in press*) of qualitative music therapy research journal articles and book chapters. It is suggested that readers will benefit from reading the previous study prior to the present one, both because the present article will include statements of comparison to the findings of the previous one and because some methodological issues that relate to both studies were discussed in the prior one.

The first qualitative music therapy doctoral study was undertaken by Carolyn Kenny (Kenny, 1987). Twenty years of studies have now been engaged in and their rate is greatly accelerating (see Table 1). While it has taken 20 years for the 52 studies in the present article to be published, at the current rate of approximately 5 per year, another 50 studies will appear in the next 10 years. Because studies of this type have been undertaken for a period of 20 years, this is a propitious time to engage in their analysis. Sufficient time has gone by so that trends can be identified and the proliferation suggests that a critical analysis will be useful for

future qualitative researchers wishing to further develop the efforts of their predecessors.

As a researcher, my own methodological framework is naturalistic inquiry (Aigen, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The present study is atypical in that it analyzes qualitative research through the use of quantitative data. Although the framework of naturalistic inquiry is more commonly associated with qualitative data, the prime exponents of the approach have observed that quantitative data can be engaged with in a way that is consistent with a naturalistic framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In naturalistic inquiry it is important to include aspects of the researcher's stance (Aigen, 1995). This is composed of beliefs, preferences, and prior experiences that form the context of the study by shaping the gathering and analysis of data. The idea is not to remove bias because this is not possible in a naturalistic framework. It is believed that there is always some interaction between the qualities of the researcher and the research findings. Instead, the rationale for including this material is to allow the reader to discern in what ways the researcher's history has interacted with the field of study to determine the nature of the research findings. This epistemological assumption of naturalistic inquiry means that research reports can contain information about the researcher not typically revealed in other research approaches. And although a researcher's stance would be relevant even if the present study was purely a descriptive one, the fact that there is an evaluative component to the data analysis renders the stance all the more necessary.

Two aspects of the researcher's stance are particularly relevant in this study: these include my commitment to naturalistic inquiry and my relationship to the primary data of the study. Each one will be discussed in turn.

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<sup>1</sup> In doctoral programs in the USA, the term *dissertation* is used for a doctoral level study and the term *thesis* is reserved for master's level studies. However, in other countries, it is not uncommon to see these usages reversed. Therefore, I will use the term *study* in the present article to refer to research projects completed for a doctoral degree.

**Table 1**  
Year and number of qualitative research doctoral studies

Individual year totals				Four-year totals
1987 (1)	1988 (0)	1989 (0)	1990 (1)	2 (4%)
1991 (2)	1992 (3)	1993 (2)	1994 (0)	7 (13.5%)
1995 (2)	1996 (0)	1997 (0)	1998 (5)	7 (13.5%)
1999 (3)	2000 (3)	2001 (4)	2002 (3)	13 (25%)
2003 (6)	2004 (5)	2005 (6)	2006 (6)	23 (44%)

My preference for naturalistic inquiry has influenced the present study in a few ways. First, the content of the template used to analyze the studies (see [Appendix D](#)) was developed as the study progressed. This template was an essential component of the study and the fact that it evolved as the study progressed is not only a permissible strategy in naturalistic inquiry, it is actually encouraged. Any analytic tool developed in this manner is thought to have greater relevance and fidelity to the phenomena of study (qualitative music therapy research) because it is developed from actual engagement with the phenomena.

Second, some of the components of the template were likely included because they reflect important aspects of naturalistic inquiry. These include the sections on presentation, context, epistemological orientation, evaluation standards, evolution of design/method, and impact of research on the researcher and/or participants. In other words, there is no *a priori* reason why these facets of research should be in a literature analysis and it is likely that a researcher operating from a more positivist perspective would not have included them.

Last, it is possible that my preference for naturalistic inquiry has led me to overstate its significance in some of the analysis and discussion. Because of this possibility I have exercised caution wherever I have made claims in this area.

In terms of my relationship to the data of the study, it is relevant to note that of the 52 doctoral studies that were analyzed I have been involved with 20 of them, primarily as a committee member but also as a peer consultant and external examiner. Moreover, I have been a faculty member at New York University (NYU) where 20 of the studies were completed, and I am currently a faculty member at Temple University where an additional five of the studies were completed.

Although I have not undertaken any specific procedures to mitigate these influences, the research findings suggest that the potential conflicts have been successfully managed. In the related study described above ([Aigen, in press](#)), none of my own projects were rated as exemplary. I have excluded my own doctoral study from evaluation in the present study (not on principle but based on the application of my selection criteria), and of the five doctoral studies that I have rated as *exemplary* none are from the two universities where I have held formal positions. I have only been associated with one of them and this was as an external examiner who rated the study but who had no role in its implementation.

It is also relevant to note that in my professional activities I am very committed to assisting in the development of qualitative methods in music therapy: this is the prime motivation behind the study. Some readers may speculate on how this motivation might impact my analysis, thinking that it may lead to overly positive evaluations. However, because of my commitment to the approach I have no interest in putting forth an unrealistically positive portrait that would inhibit doctoral programs and journal editorial boards from developing enhanced standards. In fact, one of the primary uses of the findings of both the present study and the previous one is as an aid to doctoral faculty and journal editors.

My immersion in the phenomena of interest for the past 20 years not only leads to potential conflicts but offers advantages as well. It

has helped me to more easily focus on the salient aspects of these studies relevant to their overall success as research documents. My various forms of involvement with qualitative music therapy doctoral studies have given me insight into their construction, the difficulties researchers have in assembling the documents, the difficulties readers and examiners encounter in reading the studies, and the novel joys and areas of inspiration that qualitative studies provide.

## Method

### Selection criteria

Three basic criteria for inclusion were identified: (1) the study addressed music therapy in a way that music therapists would identify as a legitimate application of the term; (2) the study had to employ qualitative research methods and/or procedures of the type described in the study related to the present article;<sup>2</sup> (3) only studies written in English were considered.

Studies were located primarily through electronic means. A large number of doctoral studies were located in the electronic searches for the articles and chapters in described in [Aigen \(in press\)](#). In addition, the Proquest Digital Dissertation Database was also searched. A total of 70 studies were located and this number was narrowed down to the final list of 52 appearing in [Appendix A](#).

I started out broad in my inclusion criteria and then became increasingly selective. I have included a list of excluded studies (see [Appendix B](#)) to illustrate how my selection criteria were implemented and to provide a service to readers who would benefit from being aware of these related studies. The excluded studies fall into four categories:

- (1) Studies in the first excluded group were all clinically oriented but their claim to be music therapy studies was questioned. These included studies that (a) were not carried out by music therapists; (b) involved clinical work that was primarily based on psychotherapy principles with little or no awareness of theories and practices of music therapy; or (c) only included awareness of music therapy in their related literature but not in actual practice. Many of the excluded studies in this category were written as clinical case studies without an overt research component.

However, I did include studies that did not contain the term *music therapy* in the title but whose content was clearly applicable to music therapy. An example of this is [DiRaimondo \(2002\)](#) who interviewed equal numbers of music therapists and psychotherapists in her study, although it was called the “use of music in psychotherapy” rather than “music therapy.” One important observation was the generally poor knowledge of music therapy literature among non-music therapists doing research in this area. Professionals from related disciplines doing research in or related to music therapy seemed to be largely unaware of prominent literature sources and common practices.

- (2) A second group of studies relegated qualitative analysis to a minimal role such as only including it in an appendix rather

<sup>2</sup> In [Aigen \(in press\)](#), it is described that the term *qualitative research* “is not being used to describe all forms of scholarly research – such as biographical, historical, or philosophical inquiry – that use nonnumerical data. Instead, it should be understood as referring to forms of research that originated in academic disciplines such as anthropology, education, music studies, philosophy, psychology, and sociology and that have been developed as autonomous (if related) approaches to inquiry, such as grounded theory, hermeneutics, heuristic inquiry, naturalistic inquiry, and phenomenology.”

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