



Re-discovering voice: Korean immigrant women in group music therapy

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses group music therapy work with six older Korean immigrant women residing in New York. The women received weekly group music therapy sessions for a 6-month period. With each client belonging to four major subculture groups (Korean, immigrant, older adults, and women), attention was paid to the impact of subculture on group dynamics and the therapeutic process. Particular focus was placed on the influence of clients' cultural adjustments, their gender role, the types of gender issues which emerged in sessions, and the clients' use of music as a medium to increase their awareness of and to work through social-political oppression experienced during their cultural adjustment phase. The effective management of acculturative stress using music was also discussed. Music therapists are advised to take into account specific cultural considerations and the gender roles of their clients to better serve them. Clinical recommendations are further discussed in the article.

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Throughout Korean history, music has played an important role as a vehicle for healing (Kim, 2006; Park, 2003b). As observed across many cultures (Merriam, 1964), music has been an integral part of human nature and cultural development. Music is particularly engrained in Korean customs, being a fundamental aspect of many Korean celebrations and ceremonies. In addition, Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have had a large part in shaping Korean culture. This eclectic mixture of traditions and beliefs has contributed to the deeply spiritual undertones found in Korean music (Kang, 1999; Park, 2003). For Korean women in particular, the nonverbal, yet expressive and social nature of their upbringings deemed music a natural resource for therapy (Kim, 2006; Noh, 2001). Many traditional folk songs express a collective feeling of "Han", a Korean term for "deep sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression" (Kim, 1995, p. 160). Han is an expression of one's recognition of the challenges of life in Korea, an experience that is almost universally understood and imprinted deep in the memories of these people. Notably, for Korean women, musical and verbal expressions, as well as nonverbal communication, are deeply rooted in Han. Many Korean folk songs "represent the image of traditional Korean women's suffering, pain, and crying, as well as their resilience" (Kim, 2006, p. 127). In addition, there is a strong connection between spirituality and the endurance of societal restrictions and attitudes concerning women (Chung, 1990; Han, 2002). Korean women have a reputation for being resilient

and spiritual, and the struggle for equality is prominent in Korean music (Kim, 2006). As Korean women immigrated to the U.S., Han remained a part of the challenges in adjusting to life in the U.S.

Korean immigrants in the U.S.

The Korean immigrant community is one of the largest groups among the Asian communities in the United States (Min, 2012a). The current census shows it has grown consistently between 1970 and 2007 – from 38,711 to 1,000,000 (Terrazas & Batag, 2012). The motivation for immigration varies: a better education, economic and political opportunities, and a life free from the restrictions of tradition and society. Many Korean immigrants reside in large states such as California, New York, New Jersey, and Virginia; however, they have also spread out to other more suburban and rural areas (Min, 2012a; Min, 2012c; Terrazas & Batag, 2012). As a result, it is not rare to find ethnic Korean radio stations and Korean newspapers, as well as Korean churches throughout the US. As more people experience Korean culture, various religious and spiritual affiliations continue to exist in abundance.

Over 50% of Korean immigrants run small businesses in deteriorating urban centers (Min, 2012a). A majority of these small businesses include dry cleaners, groceries, and retail shops, which are often located in high risk areas, since "immigrants are often disadvantaged to compete against the native-born in the primary labor market" (Pierce, 1995, p. 363). They usually work 6 or 7 days a week, with shifts that last more than 12 hours per day. The long hours are necessary for their families to survive in a new country, and to provide for the children's education. For entertainment,

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Korean immigrant families rely mostly on music and dance performances (Im & Choe, 2001; Min, 2012b), however, since Korean immigrants spend most of the day at work, they lack the resources and time for other activities in which other American adults engage: “While Korean immigrants were preoccupied with the mantra of day-to-day survival, Korean Americans had no vice, no political presence whatsoever in American life” (Kim, 1995, p. 186). Moreover, Korean women are engaged in “often unrecognized labor” and jobs of “gendered hierarchy”, which are can be monotonous and taxing (Pierce, 1995, p. 363). In addition to their jobs outside the home, Korean women are expected to be the primary caretakers of their children and households. The enormous pressures that arise from overworking and maintaining a proper household can be overwhelming for these women, and can lead to symptoms of chronic stress (Bernstein et al., 2008; Bernstein et al., 2011).

Theoretical foundations

Prior to examining the therapeutic process with this group of Korean immigrant women, I will discuss the key concepts of the theoretical foundations that have influenced and have become salient points in my work.

Culturally-informed music therapy (CIMT)

Since our clientele has become more and more diverse, regardless of the therapist's primary therapeutic approach, CIMT is an approach that many may consider applicable to cross-cultural work. CIMT is a music therapy approach specifically tailored for the client who has experienced living in two or more cultures. CIMT also addresses the client's cultural well-being through music. This approach requires flexibility when applying therapeutic principles and techniques. Various therapeutic interventions involving improvisation, songs, music, imagery, and movement are used. This approach has been developed within various theoretical foundations that come from both Western and the Eastern influences. There are two major theoretical concepts that have greatly influenced my clinical work in this area: Analytical Music Therapy (AMT) (Priestley, 1975, 1994) and multiculturalism (Ansdell, 2002; Dileo, 2000). Although I am aware of the innate conflict between these two theoretical axioms, I believe that both can coexist and be inter-related.

The relationship between psychoanalytic thinking and feminist thinking

Psychoanalytic thinking has been criticized for being contradictory to the feministic perspective (Barrett, 1992; Flax, 1990). This conflict stems from Freud's portrayal of women in biological and male-dominated terms. Such misunderstanding originates from an ignorance of feminist issues. The plethora of perspectives that exist on the subject of feminism have resulted in a variety of approaches towards the subject. The feminist psychological approach and all other psychological orientations have evolved based on Freud's theory. In addition, I believe that while Freud focused on sexuality, feminists focused on gender dynamics. Evidence of this can be found with Horney, a renowned analytical psychologist, who has been credited as a pioneer of feminist thought (Garrison, 1981). Thus, this approach is fully integrative as feminist therapists work on both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. It involves analytical thinking as well as cognitive and transpersonal approaches. Since each woman's narrative is unique, an integrative approach is necessary to treat gender issue. In this approach to feminist therapy, the first step enhances the client's sentience by increasing self-awareness (Kim, 2002). This step helps the client overcome a passive position and induce a change that would re-organize the dynamics of the relationship between men and women (Chang,

1996; Chang, 2000). This first step eventually helps to bring social change.

While some feminists caution against the misuse of transference and counter transference issues, other scholars and therapists consider a deep understanding of the phenomena of transference and counter transference to be essential (Brown, 2001). Stemming from the psychoanalytical approach, Priestley's Analytical Music Therapy (AMT) “is a way of exploring the unconscious with an analytical music therapist through the medium of sound expression” (Priestley, 1975, p. 32). In my clinical experience, applying Priestley's techniques from the psychoanalytic approach (e.g., free association and reality rehearsals) has been effective (Kim & Scheiby, 2005). Social change within cultural contexts can then be accomplished when healing the relationships of the client. Needless to say, working with oppressed individuals such as immigrants involves trauma work and psychoanalytic concepts. In that sense, AMT (Priestley, 1975, 1994) can work with both men and women in a more collaborative way.

Clinical implications of multiculturalism and feminist approach

In addition, my feminist approach comes from a multicultural perspective (Amir, 2006; Funderburk & Fukuyama, 2001; Reingold & Baratz, 2009). While the emphasis may differ, I believe that there is a strong common ground between two schools of thought—multiculturalism and feminism (Mehuron & Percesepe, 1995; Sohng, 1998). Within multiculturalism, “to liberate members of cultural minority groups (ethnic, gender, religious and others) from cultural, political, and social repression (women are after all not only a gender, but also a cultural group) by granting a respectable status to their heritage in the school curriculum and national canon, the feminist ideal is in complete harmony with multiculturalism” (Reingold & Baratz, 2009, p. 62). Thus, we view things in our own unique way and, at the same time, as a group still advocate for our own community.

Acculturation and acculturative stress

For immigrants or refugees, leaving their countries and coming to this new land necessitated acculturation (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry & Sam, 1997). An acculturation process takes place any time when two cultural beings or stimuli interact. During the acculturation process, these people experience a unique form of acculturative stress caused by a clash of cultural values. The outcomes include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and suicide (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). Therefore, taking care of their cultural well-being is an important treatment goal. For a person who encounters a new culture, being in between more than two cultures can be overwhelming. One's acculturation process must be examined and any cultural conflicts need to be resolved so that one can reach a comfortable state of cultural well-being. Music therapy can assist with the acculturation process and help participants achieve a state of cultural well-being (Kim, 2011).

Historical perspective

To understand this Korean immigrant women's group, it is important to consider the culture in which they were raised. Family is an important foundation of Korean society, one that is heavily influenced by the teachings of Confucius, which emphasizes clear distinctions between the roles of males and females (Kim, 2006). Although the male is dominant in many ways, the female is the primary force at home. Further, the extended family is the foundation of family life. Harmony, rather than the public expression of individual needs or wants, is considered ideal. It is also a highly-structured society based on a moral ethic. One consequence of this

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