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Article 57

Members' Experience of Using Music in a Small Group Setting: A Phenomenological Study

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Although the use of creative arts for healing purposes dates back to ancient civilization (Boxill, 1985), the study of the creative arts as a healing force in the counseling profession has become increasingly neoteric. In recent decades, the use of creative arts in counseling has become progressively popular as counselors work to incorporate new methods of helping into their practices. Creative arts that are typically used in counseling may include the use of color, art, movement, or music to express thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Rogers, 1993).

The practice of counseling has traditionally “been known as (a) talking cure” that helps facilitate “changes in clients' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and perceptions” (Mills & Daniluk, 2002). However, counseling itself is a creative process, and mere talking may exclude the multidimensional qualities of the counseling process (Gladding, 2005). Incorporating creative techniques into the counseling process may allow clients to experience the world in a different way, and counselors receive the benefit of seeing different perspectives on problems and possibilities (Gladding, 2005).

One art form that has proven to be particularly salient in the counseling context is music, and its use with clients has many advantages. Music is a cross-cultural mode of communication that gives clients a non-verbal alternative to traditional communication. It can stimulate the senses, feelings, and emotions, elicit physiological and mental responses, energize the mind and body, and influence musical and nonmusical behavior. It is functional, adaptable, and applicable to many populations (Boxill, 1985).

Incorporating music into the counseling context can be especially helpful for assisting clients in accessing their emotions and exploring alternative methods of communication.

There have been several studies conducted on the use of music in counseling (Montgomery & Martinson, 2006; Wigram, Saperston, & West, 1995). However, very few of the available studies pertain to the use of music in counseling groups, and even fewer speak to the actual experiences of participants in such groups. Much of the literature regarding the use of music in counseling is quantitative in nature and presents data gathered mainly from participants belonging to a specific or marginalized group (e.g., autistic clients, students with ADHD diagnoses, adults who have suffered physical trauma, etc.). There is a paucity of literature focusing simply on the use of music as an alternative method of communication and understanding.

Because of the limited research addressing the use of music in an adult group counseling setting, the researchers attempted to narrow the gap in the literature by conducting a study in which master's level counseling students creatively utilized music in a small group experience. The researchers aimed to develop a rich description of the experience of music in a small group experience with these participants.

Research Question

This study intends to answer the question: What is the experience of using music in a small group counseling setting? As mentioned previously, the use of music in counseling settings is covered only sparsely in the literature, and no literature is available concerning the use of music in an academic small group setting.

Qualitative Method

In order to develop a rich description of master's degree counseling students' experience, a qualitative study was conducted. Qualitative research has an emphasis on meaning-making (Neuman, 1997). This study seeks to understand the meaning that students' attribute to the use of music in the small group setting. Researchers who decide to engage in qualitative methods are intentionally making an effort to enter into the participant's world in an effort to push the boundaries of what is known in hopes of providing empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A qualitative method rather than a quantitative one was selected because of its focus on meaning and experience. Because this study was preliminary in nature, future research conducted on the subject could potentially lend itself to quantitative methods.

Phenomenology

To understand meaning, a phenomenological methodology was utilized, specifically a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology attends to description of the phenomenon of study, but also the interpretation of the phenomenon or lived experience. Data gathered from the study has the potential to assist counselors in developing efficacy in using music in the group counseling setting, as well as counselor educators in the instruction of group facilitation.

Data Collection

Research site and participants. The Small Group Activity (COUN 676) is a required eight-week class for first year master's counseling students at a mid-size northwestern university. A letter was sent to the incoming students explaining that this study would be conducted incorporating the use of music in the small group experience. The letter included instructions regarding how to volunteer for the study or contact the researchers for further information.

Initially, six students volunteered to be participants in the study. All six participants made up one section of the Small Group Activity (COUN 676). The researchers, who were also the facilitators of the small group, prescreened all six participants in order to give them an idea of what participating in the small group would entail. All six participants signed consent forms before the small group and the study began. The group of participants was comprised of five white females and one white male, all between the ages of 21 and 40.

In the first meeting of the small group, the researchers incorporated music by playing two songs via compact disc player that for them were representative of the small group experience. The group discussed how hearing the music impacted them, and how they wanted the group to be structured. The researchers encouraged participants to decide how they would like to continue incorporating music. The participants came to a consensus that at the end of each meeting, they would decide as a group who would bring the song for the following week. Each participant was to take a turn during the following six weeks. When a participant volunteered to take a turn, their task was to choose a song to share that represented small group for them that week. The songs chosen by the group over the eight weeks are as follows, with the artists listed in parentheses:

- “Bowl Of Oranges” (Bright Eyes)
- “Trading Air” (Athlete)
- “For Good” (Wicked)
- “River of Dreams” (Billy Joel)
- “Strangers Like Me” (Phil Collins)
- “Be Still My Soul” (Traditional Hymn)
- “Mai” (Josh Grobin)
- “Fix You” (Coldplay)
- “Snow/Hey Oh” (Red Hot Chili Peppers)

Every week, small group was started by whichever participant had volunteered to share a song the previous week. That person was also asked to bring printed lyrics for each member of the small group. The person who brought the song would discuss the song, the lyrics, and the song's meaning to them personally and why they had chosen to share the song that week. The group would then listen to the song and discuss any subsequent thoughts, feelings, or reactions. Eventually, the conversation would shift into typical small group discussion. The group proceeded and engaged through the typical stages of group development including forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

Interview questions. A phenomenological approach was used in collecting data. The purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the lived experience of several

individuals experiencing the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researchers used Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach to capture the lived experience of group members using music in a small group experience. Van Manen's approach is a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology. Essentially, hermeneutical phenomenology attends to describing the phenomenon of study and also interprets the phenomenon or lived experience. Van Manen proposes that using language to describe the phenomenon is an interpretive course of action. This approach utilizes a lengthy interview to obtain rich, descriptive information.

Data was collected through two rounds of qualitative interviews. The first round of interviews took place halfway through the eight-week small group activity. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit reflection on group member's experience of incorporating music into their small group activity. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses to the initial interview questions. Participants were interviewed individually and asked to answer the following inquiries regarding their experience in the small group activity:

- What has been your experience in exploring music as a means of communication in group?
- Describe any personal changes you attribute to the experience.
- What thoughts and feelings have been most prevalent for you as you use music in group?

After the first round of interviews was complete, the researchers transcribed the interviews, then analyzed and coded the data for themes that captured the collective experience of participants using music in the small group setting. Once the data was analyzed and themes were identified, researchers compiled a second round of interview questions.

The second round of interviews took place after the small group activity had concluded. One participant left the program during the latter half of the small group activity; consequently, only five participants were interviewed in the second round. They were asked to respond to the following inquiries:

- Please discuss the themes that emerged from Round 1 as they pertain to you. Can you connect with them? Why or why not?
- Do you have any lingering thoughts or feelings about the Round 1 themes? Was there anything we left out?
- What has changed for you since group ended?

Each individual interview was audio and video recorded. The interviews were held in confidential clinic rooms, and all recordings were kept in a confidential locked drawer when not in use.

Data collection was ongoing, and involved a variety of data collection techniques. As recommended by Maxwell (2005), the group leaders maintained analytical memos, while group members were required to turn in weekly reflective journals over the course of the eight weeks of the small group activity. By utilizing these methods, both researchers and participants were able to stay connected with the experience of the small group

throughout the entire eight weeks. At the end of the eight weeks, each participant was given an audio CD which included recordings of all of the songs played during the small group activity.

Role and Position of the Researchers

In order to perform valid qualitative research, it is necessary that the results of the research capture the essence of what the participant as well as the researcher shared during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is unreasonable to assume that the researchers were bystanders, completely unengaged in the research experience. It stands to reason, that personal bias and desire to learn more about the process of using music in counseling provided motivation to complete a rich, accurate research study based on the participants' lived experience.

First Round Analysis

After the first round of data was collected, the following themes emerged across all transcripts.

Music as a Facilitator/Inhibitor of Communication

Participants discussed how they felt communication was affected as a result of incorporating music into the small group experience. Some participants thought that music facilitated communication in group, while others thought differently. One participant remarked,

I have seen through four meetings how we have grown. If we were expected to do that in the first week, I would have probably clammed up because it's not normal or second nature to be open. It provided an opportunity to come in and share right off the bat.

Another participant seemed to feel more alone as a result of the music, recognizing that the experience of music was very individual: "I felt like the point I was trying to get across didn't quite make it, which is part of realizing that everyone experiences songs differently, depending on their perceptions and where they are coming from." Still another participant relayed how vulnerable it would feel to share a song that is the perfect representation of feelings in that moment.

For me, I have been through six years of counseling, so it wasn't hard for me to hear songs. For me, if I were to bring an emotional song that nails it, that would be nerve wracking for me, and that is a step that I want to take eventually.

In all cases, participants were keenly aware of how music was affecting their abilities to communicate in a group setting. One of the reasons that participants seemed to find music to be facilitating and/or inhibiting is that they all saw their musical choices as extensions of themselves.

Music as an Extension of Self

Because each participant had only one chance to share a song in group, choosing a song became increasingly important. They felt they were expressing themselves more

clearly through music and showing a part of themselves that could not necessarily be expressed through words. One participant appreciated having music as a medium of communication, saying “there is part of me that gets lost through normal communication. Music provides another way for me to be better understood.” Another participant talked about the importance of music as a means of expression in everyday life. It was surprising for that person to find that self-perceptions differed from others’ perceptions.

For me, music is a constant in my life. You can tell what’s going on for me by the music in my life. It is a means of communication for me. To open up and have people express what they took from my song has been surprising and insightful for me.

This person was interested in using the insight gained from sharing a musical choice with the group. As participants came to realize that music was acting as a facilitator and inhibitor of communication in group, and that using music was an alternate means of expressing one’s self, they began to see that music was highly connected with the emotional experiences they were having in group.

Music as an Emotional Experience/Connector

One participant shared that music helped group members to learn *how* to share in group. “Music laid a foundation for sharing emotions in a safe way. Then, as we shared more intense emotions, we knew how to do it with care and respect.” Another group member felt more connected to other group members through the simple act of experiencing a song together. “When fellow group members brought in their songs, it brought insight into how they were feeling at what time, and how they are feeling about the group experience.” Still another participant noted that because of music, the group was able to shift into emotional experiences rather than staying on an intellectual level.

Music brings up emotions for me. In listening to a song in group, it brings up emotions for me, both good and bad. It helps bring up emotions to process, instead of dissecting a song, we were able to go into an emotional processing mode.

Overall, participants seemed to recognize that music was a reliable means of accessing emotions. Some group members realized that music helped them to access their own emotions, while others realized that by hearing another person’s song, they were able to understand that person’s feelings in the moment. Music acted as an alternate means of communicating and sharing emotion.

Second Round Analysis

After the first round of interviews was coded and the above-mentioned themes were identified, researchers wrote the second round of questions based on the themes that had emerged. In the second round of interviews, initial themes were discussed with participants in order to ensure the accuracy of the first round of coding. As the small group activity had ended by the time the participants were interviewed a second time, participants were also asked to talk about any thoughts they’d had since the conclusion of group. The following themes emerged from the second round of interviews.

Music as a Definition of Self

Many of the participants expressed in the first round of interviews that they had come to see music as an extension of self. When participants brought in their songs, they relayed that they were showing a part of themselves to the group. Group members felt they had more insight into individuals who shared their songs. In the second round, participants took their thoughts even further, expressing that music was not only an extension of self, but also a personal definition.

Participating in this group gave me a different awareness of myself that I already knew but maybe wasn't aware of in the sense that I am now. The music that I shared defined who I am and why I am that way, and I can use that to show other people.

Participants found that sharing their song choices was a quick and accessible means of sharing themselves with others.

Music as a Catalyst to Facilitate the Shift Between Content to Process

Oftentimes, people new to the small group experience have difficulty grasping the purpose. New members are uncomfortable and unsure of themselves. The participants in this study were no exception; coming into small group on the first day was scary to them. They eventually 'figured out' what they thought they should be doing in group as we the facilitators initiated discussions regarding content, process, and working in the here-and-now. The participants quickly realized that music in our small group was acting as a bridge between content and process. One participant liked having music available to help make that shift, stating, "it was better for me – I was the person who said 'What do we do now?' I don't know. As we better understood the process, music helped us jump into content a lot easier. It was more comfortable." Another participant saw a direct link between music and the content/process shift, remarking, "I think with the help of music we were able to discuss more emotional topics. The music provided the group with process information so we could move more easily into content."

Songs as Representatives of Shared Meaning

As the small group activity progressed throughout its eight weeks, participants began to recognize that they were becoming a cohesive and functioning group. Many of them attributed this group cohesion to the presence of music in the group. By using music, they were able to create a shared meaning. Although many groups develop shared meaning and group cohesiveness, this particular group saw their songs as concrete representations of the meaning they had created together. By going through the experience of sharing songs that defined them as people, group participants were able to connect with each other's experiences.

I am connected to my song. Once I shared my song, I realized the emotional connection I had to that song, and how difficult it was for me to share it. I better understood everybody else's risk. And that point is what brought it all together. We're sharing this as a group.

Another group member communicated that the songs shared in group acted as connectors between people, both in the group and outside of the group. Songs came to be recognized as the connectors that offered a shared meaning.

It's not the song itself. I can hear the songs and create new meaning – I can still connect with the song and the experience, but I think it was really connecting with the other person. As I listen to the songs, now going forward, I create new meaning. An example is with my kids. They like one of the songs shared in group. So I can connect with the experience here in group, and I can connect with my kids loving the song. And it's not the song, it's just the song acting as a facilitator for both meanings and both experiences.

Music as a Promoter of Self-awareness

Some participants had difficulty connecting with other group members. They felt the shared meaning, but did not necessarily understand where it was coming from or what part they were playing in it. They communicated about their thoughts in group and were unable to 'figure out' what they were missing. Eventually, these participants were able to use music to help them to understand themselves. With music, they were able to recognize patterns and behaviors that they wanted to change. One participant exemplified the experience by saying, "am I experiencing music or am I sitting here thinking and analyzing everything that's going on? I realized I was analyzing. I saw others experience music and I thought 'I want to do that too.'"

Music as a Foundation of Lasting Change

Self-awareness is, of course, the first step necessary for change. As group participants developed more self-awareness as a result of their use of music in group, they reported that they were able to use that self-awareness to promote lasting change in their lives. They saw music as connected with those changes. Many participants are unable to listen to music anymore (especially the songs used in group) without thinking about the group and the learning that took place for them during the activity. One participant reported,

Music by itself wouldn't hold the same meaning for me (before the group). If I hear a song later, I connect with it because we've had the opportunity to talk about it in more depth. And as I go back and listen to our CD, it's a way to go back and relive – reconnect – with each individual group member when I listen to their song.

Another participant remarked that without the experience of using music in group, the learning that took place in group may not have been lasting.

In the beginning, I didn't see myself connecting the way I do now. This time of year is the best time to listen to music – all the different kinds of Christmas music give an opportunity to try out what I learned in group and how I can connect with those things.

Discussion

As this research project was started, the researchers anticipated that the members who participated in the small group activity utilizing music would enjoy the experience. Their classmates were all also enrolled in small group activities, but their groups did not

include the use of music. During prescreening, many of the participants remarked that they thought using music in small group would be “fun.”

As time progressed, however, group participants began to report that music was helping to promote such concepts as self-awareness, shared meaning, and lasting change. The data collected asserts that the presence of music in the small group experience simply helped to facilitate the processes that typically take place for members of any small group. However, with music, the processes seemed to be more acute, emphasized and underlined by the presence of music. Music gave participants a concrete means for grasping the changes that were taking place for them during group. Their learning seemed to be more overt and more a part of their conscious awareness than the researchers have observed from members in other groups.

Limitations

One limitation to this particular small group is that one participant left the group after the fifth week. The absence of the participant temporarily interfered with the direction of the group’s process and also with the researchers’ ability to collect data from that individual. Second round interviews took place with the five remaining participants.

A limitation that the researchers observed during the course of the group is that group members began to rely on the presence of music as though it were another living entity in the room during group meetings. It began to look as though the group was being inhibited from real connection or change because of the presence of music. However, as the weeks progressed, group members discussed how they had been using music to ‘hide’ in the group. By the end of the group, they had more actively used music as a means of connecting to themselves and one another. The researchers warn that group facilitators who choose to use music in their small groups be cognizant of this potential drawback, so that they may aid group members in using music to connect with rather than detract from other group members.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study produced some interesting outcomes; however, the researchers recognize that the findings are preliminary and warrant subsequent studies. The findings imply that music may in fact be a facilitative factor for small groups. However, the participants of the study were all adult students in a master’s counseling program; therefore, it can be assumed that they came into the small group activity with a willingness to learn. Although the participants played the roles of clients in their small group activity, the researchers recommend doing similar studies in clinical settings with clients rather than students. The researchers also recommend repeating similar studies with varying age groups.

Conclusion

Utilizing music in this small group setting proved to be an effective means for participants to learn self-awareness, develop shared meaning, and create lasting change. These factors, though typically present in small group settings, were made overt for participants through the use of music. Participants overall seemed to be more comfortable

in the group setting on account of the presence of music. Participants also reported being able to connect what they learned in small group to learning outside of the small group activity. The researchers suggest using music in a variety of small group settings for future study. Overall, the use of music in a small group setting was perceived by the participants and researchers as a benefit to the small group experience.

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