

# Arts-based Analysis of Music Therapists' Narratives

Alison Ledger

## Background to the Study

My doctoral research aims to explore qualified music therapists' experiences of introducing music therapy in healthcare settings. Music therapy is a relatively new professional therapy discipline, which involves the use of music and musical interaction to help people attain and maintain health and wellbeing. Many music therapists are required to introduce an inaugural post in a healthcare setting where music therapy has no history or contextual frame. Little has been written about the challenges and opportunities that arise when a music therapist introduces music therapy to an established healthcare team. I hope to address this gap and to identify strategies that may be useful to student and new graduate music therapists who are developing new work. I began my research by collecting narratives (stories) from eleven music therapists who had extensive experience of developing music therapy services. In working with these narratives, I sought an analytic approach that would enable me to draw out music therapists' subjective experiences.

## Previous Approaches to the Analysis of Narratives

At first I experimented with analytic approaches that had been used in healthcare research previously.

These included:

- Coding or categorizing content (e.g. grounded theory, Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
- Analysing structural components (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997)
- Identifying narrative genres or storylines (e.g. Brown & Addington-Hall, 2008)
- Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM, Wengraf, 2009)

These approaches were helpful, but I sensed that deeper insights were still possible. I looked for an approach in which I could further explore my own experiences and responses as a music therapist.

## Arts-Based Research (Austin & Forinash, 2005)

Arts-based research is an approach that has been used by previous music therapy researchers. In arts-based research, art forms such as poetry, music, visual art, drama, or dance are central to the research process. The arts are used to formulate the research question, to generate data, to analyze data, and to present the research findings.

Benefits of using the arts in research include:

- access to new insights that are not knowable by other means
- communication with audiences who would not read academic publications

## Using Poetry

Although arts-based research traditionally involves the use of the arts throughout an entire research project, I introduced an arts-based approach in my analysis phase. I re-read each narrative, noting words or phrases that seemed particularly significant or meaningful. I then wrote one or two poems in response to those words or phrases.

The poems helped to highlight music therapists' feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and isolation when introducing new services. As I wrote the poems, I began to understand the narratives in new ways and was reminded of my own music therapy service development experiences. I have since shared my poems with research participants and other music therapists, who have perceived the poems to be "powerful" and representative of their experiences and emotions.

## Conclusions

An arts-based approach to analysis enabled me to form rich interpretations that would not have been possible otherwise. The creative process of writing poems helped me to immerse myself in the narratives and to develop more complex, meaningful, and evocative findings.

Strengths of this approach included:

- Playfulness and creativity
- The ability to see the familiar in new ways
- The use of metaphor and simile to gain further insight
- Greater awareness of my own responses
- A novel means of communicating with research participants and sharing findings

I encourage others to explore the possibilities arising from an arts-based approach and welcome further discussion about the advantages and limitations of using the arts in research.

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*Accommodation wanted.*

*Twenty-six year old music therapy professional  
seeks long-term lease.*

*Self-sufficient, though willing to listen  
and learn.*

*Looking to share with similar enthusiastic  
and open-minded people.*

*Piano desirable, but not essential.*

*Am I a founder or am I a fraud?*

*Forging my way through this baffling place,*

*Struggling daily to make some headway,*

*Working hard to impress, doing all to save face.*

*Taking stock.*

*Successful programmes, check.*

*Service expansion, check.*

*Publications, check.*

*More funding, no cheque.*

*I stick up my two fingers*

*To the sceptics in this place*

*And I wonder, is it worth it?*

*Do my efforts go to waste?*

*Development takes patience,*

*It won't happen overnight.*

*You might never feel "established"*

*So just work towards "alright".*

## References

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Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.

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