

A New Music Therapist's Reflections Upon Experiences of Emotional Awareness: A Heuristic
Self-Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

A New Music Therapist's Reflections on Emotional Awareness: A Heuristic Self-Inquiry

Evelyne Arsenault Cooper

The purpose of this research was to examine and reflect upon the researcher's own experiences of emotional awareness when she engaged in free improvisations on the piano. Research and other scholarly literature cite the importance of self-reflective inquiries for music therapist researchers as it allows them to assume a participant role and experience a personal process that may be similar to that of their clients. Research that examines a music therapist's personal experiences of emotional awareness could not only enhance that individual's personal insight but also deepen their understanding of emotion-based interventions as a result of their own lived experiences. The data collection and analysis processes of this research were conceptualized using Moustakas' six stages of heuristic inquiry. Following Neuman's open coding procedures, the data was organized into four overarching categories relating to the primary research question: the researcher's development of awareness; her understanding of musical elements in her improvisations; her rediscovery of the piano; and the roles of her identities within the improvisation context. Themes emerged within these categories using Neuman's axial coding procedures, leading to further interpretations. A creative synthesis symbolizing the research findings emerged in the form of a piano composition, which was performed and audio recorded by the researcher. Personal, professional, educational and research implications are presented as well as limitations.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Significance of Inquiry

Self-awareness practices and self-reflective processes are essential and beneficial endeavors for music therapists (Kondrat, 1999; Pompeo & Levitt, 2014; William & Fauth, 2005). Literature indicates that it is important for music therapists to develop self-awareness because it can strengthen the therapeutic relationship with clients (Camilleri, 2001; Dillard, 2006). Self-awareness may also help clinicians to enhance their authenticity which as a result, may facilitate greater empathy towards clients, help them be more present in sessions, and deepen their understanding of countertransference (Austin, 1998; Camilleri, 2001; Dillard, 2006).

The concept of self-awareness involves several aspects, including the development of emotional awareness (Camilleri, 2001; Kondrat, 1999; Morin, 2011; William & Fauth, 2005). Emotional awareness occurs when emotions are identified, described, perceived, and expressed (Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990; Monti & Rudolph, 2014). Goals related to emotional awareness are common in music therapy, particularly in the mental health field, as they facilitate improved expression and regulation of clients' emotions (Erkkilä, Gold, Fachner, Ala-Ruona, Punkanen, & Vanhala, 2008; Hwang & Oh, 2013). Although music therapists use a variety of interventions to help enhance clients' emotional awareness (Baker, Gleadhill, & Dingle, 2007; Castelino, Fisher, Hoskyns, Zeng, & Waite, 2013; Erkkilä et al., 2008; Ghetti, 2011; Hwang & Oh, 2013; Pellitteri, 2009; Uhlig, Jansen, & Scherder, 2016), improvisation is a music therapy intervention that is particularly well suited for achieving emotional awareness goals (Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997; Bruscia, 2014; Dvorkin, 1982; Lee, 1995; Watson, 2002). Improvisation gives clients opportunities to musically explore their emotions, awaken emotional states, emotionally respond to the therapist through music, and achieve desired emotional affects (Arnason, 2003; Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997; Bruscia, 2014; Watson, 2002). Literature indicates that it is helpful for music therapists to engage in the types of music experiences that they use with clients, through self-reflective research, as it allows them to embody and share experiences which can further develop their approach and knowledge in clinical practice (Bonny, 1993; Bruscia, 1982; Eyre, 2016; Salmon, 2001). More self-reflective research that examines individual music therapists' emotional awareness could contribute to the existing literature, providing unique and in-depth emotional experiences and perspectives to be understood, shared and transferred to therapeutic contexts by clinicians. Given these factors, I decided to conduct a

heuristic self-inquiry in hopes of gaining greater insight into myself and my emotions during improvisations, which in turn could strengthen my clinical work and therapeutic approach.

Personal Relationship to the Topic

In addition to the reasons outlined above, I had personal experiences that further supported the need for the present inquiry. I am a classically trained pianist and have been playing since the age of three. I was born with perfect pitch, and as a result, I started improvising independently at a young age. To me, improvisation represents an aspect of music that is deeply personal and distant from my formal musical training. I taught myself how to improvise by playing popular songs by ear, that I heard on the radio. I would compose musical arrangements based on these songs, which eventually lead to *free* playing. Throughout the years, I have continued to view improvisation as a freeing musical outlet. I had not considered, however, if and how improvisation allowed me to process and express my emotions.

In 2016, I began my pre-professional training as a music therapist. Within this context, I was introduced to the concept of clinical improvisation and ways in which it can be used in music therapy contexts to promote clients' health and well-being. Upon completing my pre-professional training, I decided to pursue a master's in music therapy. It was within the context of my advanced music therapy practicum that I first began to reflect upon the experience of myself and of my emotions when improvising. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to work in a day hospital for adults with mental health challenges. Here, developing one's emotional awareness as a way to facilitate emotional regulation was often identified as a primary clinical goal. Initially, I found it difficult to help patients to identify and articulate their emotions with the music therapy interventions I was using. A search of the music therapy literature revealed that improvisation interventions have been beneficial in regards to addressing emotional expression and awareness (Arnason, 2003; Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997; Bruscia, 2014; Watson, 2002). However, I questioned if facilitating a client's emotional awareness through improvisation would be challenging for me given my own personal history with music and improvisation. As a new music therapist in mental health, I felt the need to deepen my understanding of my own emotional awareness while improvising so that I could better facilitate this type of experience for my clients as well as better understand and articulate the clinical benefits. I believed that conducting a heuristic self-inquiry would permit me to identify and reflect upon my own

emotional responses to improvised music experiences, which in turn would help me to facilitate clinical improvisation experiences for clients with greater intention, knowledge and depth.

Statement of Purpose and Research Question

Seeing how emotional awareness is a common goal area in music therapy that could be addressed using improvisation, I felt that it was important to develop my understanding of this area from a personal perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine and reflect on my personal musical process and emotions, during and after improvisations using the piano, and to gain insight into how this process might inform my clinical work. Heuristic self-inquiry was a suitable methodology for this research, because it permitted me to investigate and utilize my personal process as data. The primary research question was: What insights does a new music therapist have about herself and her emotions when she engages in self-reflective, free improvisations on piano?

Assumptions and Delimitations

There are some assumptions about the concept of improvisation and the use of the piano as an expressive instrument that needed to be acknowledged for this inquiry. Based on findings in the literature regarding improvisation and my own experience using it as an intervention with adults with mental health, I assumed that musical improvisation could promote emotional exploration and expression. As the piano is an instrument frequently used by music therapists, and proficiency with this instrument is required for undergraduate and graduate music therapy students, I assumed that the piano was a prominent instrument that is currently being utilized by many music therapists. Given my history with the piano as a classically trained pianist, I assumed that the piano had instrumental and musical qualities that can portray emotions and images. Given the nature and potentially long and complex process of a heuristic self-inquiry, I delimited the time for data collection and analysis to two months, and improvised using only the piano. Based on this fixed timeframe and my use of Neuman's (2014) open and axial coding for data collection and analysis, I delimited musical notations of audio recordings to selected and relevant passages that emerged from the improvisations. Details on how these passages were selected will be presented in Chapter Three.

Key Terms

Several key terms need to be defined within the context of the present study. This research investigated the concept of emotional awareness through self-reflective experiences that

were examined by the researcher who is a newly certified music therapist. Thus, within the context of this self- inquiry, *emotional awareness* is defined as the capacity to name and identify one's own emotions and the tendency for emotional expression (Monty & Rudolph, 2014). This particular definition of emotional awareness was suitable for this study because it supported the researcher's goals of identifying her emotions and expressing them through musical improvisation. However, outcomes of this research resulted in a more complex description of this term which is presented in the explication phase (see Chapter Four). *Self-inquiry* is defined within music therapy research, as a process in which the learner is engaged in active music therapy, and continuously develops the ability for self-awareness (Bruscia, 2013). *Self-reflection* is defined as a process in which an individual observes, interprets and evaluates their actions, emotions, thoughts, and feelings (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014). A *certified music therapist* (MTA) is defined as an individual who has completed a music therapy training program at a university level which has been recognized by the Canadian Association of Music Therapists (CAMT), as well as completed the requirements for professional certification (CAMT, MTA Credentials & Members, 2017). Lastly, *free improvisation* is defined as a musical creation free of any musical and non-musical guidelines and rules (Bruscia, 2001).

Summary of Chapters

I have organized this heuristic self-inquiry into five chapters. Chapter One described the purpose and significance of the inquiry and my personal relationship to the topic. Assumptions, delimitations and key terms were also defined. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature in the areas of: (a) self-awareness, (b) emotional awareness in music therapy, (c) the use of improvisation to develop emotional awareness, and (d) self-inquiries in the music therapy literature. Chapter Three describes how the heuristic self-inquiry methodology was conceptualized and applied in this research. Chapter Four includes the results that emerged from the illumination and explication phases of the heuristic self-inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Finally, Chapter Five presents my creative synthesis of the results. This final chapter also includes limitations of the study, personal and professional implications of the results, as well as suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2. Related Literature

This chapter is an overview of research related to this self-inquiry, which includes: (a) defining the concept of self-awareness and the role it plays in music therapy, (b) defining emotional awareness and how it is used in music therapy, (c) the use and function of improvisation to develop emotional awareness, and (d) self-inquiries and heuristic inquiries in music therapy.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is a concept that involves being present to one's immediate environment and experience and having an understanding of that experience (Kondrat, 1999; Morin, 2011). Kondrat (1999) explained that "at a very basic level, self-awareness is defined in terms of becoming awake to present realities, noticing one's surroundings, and being able to name one's perceptions, feelings, and nuances of behavior" (Kondrat, 1999, p. 452). She further expanded the definition by deconstructing self-awareness into simple conscious awareness, reflective self-awareness, and reflexive self-awareness. Simple conscious awareness is an awareness of one's immediate environment, with a focus on the "here and now". Reflective self-awareness involves the self taking a "step back to observe and consider its own performance" (Kondrat, 1999, p. 454). Reflexive self-awareness involves having an understanding of how one's self interacts with others, and realizing the impact of those interactions. Morin (2011) emphasized the importance of reflection when defining self-awareness, as it distinguishes it from consciousness. He explained that the practice of self-awareness is not only being conscious of one's actions, but also having the ability to reflect upon one's own experience of those actions.

Self-awareness is also defined within therapeutic contexts (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014; Williams & Fauth, 2005). Pompeo and Levitt (2014) indicated self-awareness as being necessary for counseling professionals, including therapists and clinical supervisors. They described self-awareness as an evolving process of self-reflection. William and Fauth (2005) defined the term in relation to counseling therapists explaining that those experiencing self-awareness are able to identify and connect to their current physical and emotional responses, actions and thoughts.

Self-awareness and the music therapist. Literature indicates that music therapists who become more self-aware may experience better therapeutic relationships with their clients (Camilleri, 2001; Dillard, 2006). In examining how her development of self-awareness affected herself and her work, music therapist Camilleri (2001) explained that she became more in tune

with parts of herself and her music, which allowed her to musically connect with her patients. She found that music enabled her process of self-awareness because it had the ability to concretely reveal and illustrate elements of herself. As she discovered new aspects of herself, she expressed these aspects through music. In turn, she was also able to identify aspects and needs of her patients through their music. She referred to music as a “basic common denominator between people that can unite people and can transcend differences” (Camilleri, 2001, p. 83). Self-awareness practices may also allow a music therapist to be truly authentic, present and emotionally available in sessions. This availability also strengthens the music therapist’s ability to understand and practice empathy towards clients, which further strengthens the therapeutic relationship (Camilleri, 2001). “Empathy from the music therapist is extremely affirming for a patient as feelings are validated and mirrored” (Camilleri, 2001, p. 82). Therapist self-awareness in music therapy can also deepen music therapists’ identification and understanding of countertransference (Austin, 1998; Camilleri, 2001; Dillard, 2006). Working towards achieving self-awareness allows one to “recognize and use countertransference effectively” (Camilleri, 2001, p. 84).

Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness is a reoccurring component within self-awareness practices (Camilleri, 2001; Kondrat, 1999; Morin, 2011; William & Fauth, 2005). Perceiving and understanding emotions is a fundamental domain of the phenomenon that is self-awareness (Morin, 2011). The concept of emotional awareness has been deconstructed, interpreted and understood by researchers in various ways. Emotional awareness is defined as “the ability to identify and label one’s emotions and the inclination to express one’s emotions” (Monti & Rudolph, 2014, p. 377). Monti and Rudolph (2014), also indicated that emotional awareness is comprised of emotional clarity, description, and expression. Emotional clarity refers to a person’s ability to understand how they are feeling, emotional description refers to a person’s ability to describe how they are feeling, and emotional expression refers to how and why a person outwardly expresses their feelings. Lane et al. (1990) further defined emotional awareness through designing the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS). In the context of this study, they described emotional awareness in five levels: “bodily sensations, action tendencies, single emotions, blends of emotion, and combinations of blends” (p. 125). Their findings

revealed that emotional awareness was different depending on the individual, and the cause of these differences was based on each person's unique understanding and perception of emotions.

Emotional awareness in music therapy. As this current heuristic inquiry examined my experience of becoming aware of my emotions, an exploration of the role of emotional awareness in music therapy as experienced by clients and clinicians can further contextualize this research. Emotional awareness is a concept that has been explored and addressed in music therapy research and practice. Developing emotional awareness can help individuals regulate and express their emotions in more productive ways (Monti & Rudolph, 2014). As a result, emotional awareness related goals such as enhancing emotional perception and expression, emotional exploration and emotional regulation are often established in music therapy (Baker et al., 2007; Ghetti, 2011; Pellitteri, 2009; Priestley 1975; Uhlig et al., 2016). Pellitteri et al. (1999) examined a music therapy program for elementary school children enrolled in a special education program. This program implemented improvisation interventions to enhance the children's emotional perception and expression. Priestley (1975) researched the effectiveness of emotional verbal processing following improvisation and receptive interventions with adults with emotional and interpersonal challenges. Her clients' musical improvisations were guided by emotional themes (feelings, events, etc.). She determined that verbal processing following improvisations, as a form of emotional expression, triggered associations, images, thoughts, sensations and memories. Baker et al. (2007) studied the effects of cognitive behavioral music therapy (CBMT) on patients in recovery for substance abuse, who attempted to avoid encountering and experiencing negative emotions. All CBMT interventions in the study integrated emotional exploration as a core process. Participants shared that CBMT facilitated emotional understanding and expression, through identification, labeling and acceptance of emotions. Ghetti (2011) explored potential coping strategies for post-operative liver and kidney transplant recipients. She defined Emotional-Approach Coping as a tool used to address significant life stressors through processes of emotional expression, awareness and understanding (Ghetti, 2011). Uhlig et al. (2016) investigated the use of rap in music therapy. Results of the study concluded that rap music therapy was an effective tool for emotional regulation for adolescents because it encouraged them to become aware of, identify, engage with and alter emotional behavior in sessions.

Challenges with emotional regulation may have “life-long impacts” on one’s mental health (Saxena, Dubey & Paney, 2011). Psychodynamic music therapy approaches targeting emotional awareness issues contribute to reduced symptoms of depression (Erkkilä et al., 2008). Symptoms including anxiety, depression and stress can also be diminished with emotional oriented goals in group music therapy (Castelino et al., 2013; Hwang & Oh, 2013). According to researchers, emotional regulation is an indicator of mental health because it “allows a person flexibility in how he or she responds and reacts to situations and moments of distress” (Sena Moore, 2013, p. 200).

Emotional awareness and the music therapist. The literature surrounding emotional awareness in music therapy largely focuses on clinical applications, interventions, treatments and effects of music therapy. The emphasis on these research studies is also heavily based on the emotional experiences of the participants (Baker et al., 2007; Pellitteri, 2009; Castelino et al., 2013; Erkkilä et al., 2008; Ghetti, 2011; Hwang & Oh, 2013; Priestley 1975; Uhlig et al., 2016). Music therapist Pellitteri (2009) described self-awareness within an emotional context as also being an imperative component for clinicians:

If a clinician approaches treatment with an emotional intelligence framework and the aim is to increase emotional intelligence abilities in clients, then ideally he or she should have developed a notable degree of emotional intelligence. The process of self-awareness should be a central facet in any professional clinical training program for this reason. Recognition of countertransference as well as unconscious bias is essential for therapists to deliver effective treatment. The ability to regulate the emotional tone of the therapy environment as well as the emotional intensities of the client is a hallmark of a skilled clinician (Pellitteri, 2009, p. 2550-2551).

He further explained that therapists must have the ability to be aware of, understand and regulate their own emotions so that they can be truly present with their patients. Awareness gives the therapist additional skills that may allow them to empathize with clients, which can deepen the trust between the therapist and the client and solidify the therapeutic relationship. Other benefits of emotional awareness practiced by clinicians include stronger and more skilled applications of interventions; particularly interventions based in emotional goal areas (Pellitteri, 2009).

The impact and use of emotional awareness in music therapy also stems from the ways in which music can be interpreted and expressed emotionally (Bodner & Gilboa, 2006). Pellitteri (2009) examined the commonalities and relationship between music and emotions. He explained that musical elements such as pitch, tempo, rhythm, volume, timbre and harmony could be interpreted emotionally. By making connections between musical elements and emotions, music therapists can help their clients become aware of emotions from a musical perspective. Making emotional associations during musical interventions, such as playing an instrument, can facilitate clients' interpretation of emotion (Bodner & Gilboa, 2006).

The Use of Improvisation to Develop Emotional Awareness

In this present heuristic self-inquiry, improvisation was my selected intervention. The following music therapy research highlights the role of improvisation within emotional awareness oriented contexts. Improvisation is an intervention that gives individuals the opportunity to develop emotional awareness (Dvorkin, 1982; Watson, 2002). Musical improvisation permits an individual to portray an aspect of themselves with sound, which in some cases can be an easier method of expression than verbal expression (Dvorkin, 1982; Lee, 1995). In music therapy, clients' musical exploration occurring during improvisations, represent unique methods of self-expression. Improvised music can also portray an individual's self-image (Dvorkin, 1982). Dvorkin (1982) explored how improvisation can be a tool to help clients identify, express and change negative emotions. Her study focusing on individuals with schizo-affective personality disorder examined the process in which improvisation was used to help clients alter and exhibit more desirable emotional states such as adopting a positive sense of self and a "tolerance of the expression of negative emotion without reverting to past psychotic behavior" (Dvorkin, 1982, p. 54). The unique aspects of live music occurring in improvisations also contributes to emotional awareness. Watson (2002), uncovered the important aspect of live improvisation, "the direct impact of sound and vibration on the body" (p. 106), which promotes a physical awareness of the body. "Through awareness of body sensations, the emotions may be awakened and/or released, as emotions are commonly described through body sensations (i.e. anxiety as the nerves feeling jittery, nervousness as butterflies in the stomach, and anger as a pounding heart)" (Watson, 2002, p. 106).

In music therapy, improvisation often occurs within a framework carefully created and provided by the music therapist (Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997). The creative process gives both the

client and therapist the opportunity to promote emotional responses and expression (Brown & Pavlicevic, 1997; Bruscia, 2014). An improvisation between therapist and client is an expressive musical dialogue. Listening to improvisations permits the music therapist to identify and differentiate their clients' musical responses from their own. This insight can provide music therapists with additional ways to musically respond to clients in sessions, which can enhance their perspective of the musical experience in its entirety. Listening to clients' improvisations also gives the therapist the opportunity to question and self-reflect upon their own musical choices (Amason, 2003).

Self-Inquiries in Music Therapy

Self-inquiries as a form of research in music therapy are relevant as they provide music therapists with perspectives that can deepen their understanding of their clinical work including client experiences and the role of music in therapy processes (Bonny, 1993; Bruscia, 1982; Camilleri, 2001; Eyre, 2016; McGraw Hunt, 2016; Salmon, 2001). A self-inquiry provides the music therapist researcher an opportunity to experience, understand and analyze their work from a personal and intimate perspective (McGraw Hunt, 2016). Music therapist Camilleri (2001) examined her self-awareness process within the contexts of being a musician and a clinician. She first analyzed how self-awareness manifested in her music. Through this inquiry, she determined that self-awareness deepened the quality of her work as a music therapist. She stated that "not only must professional music therapists have clinical, assessment, research, supervision, group and verbal, theoretical, teaching, administrative, and musical skills, but we must also be skilled in the area of self-knowledge" (Camilleri, 2001, p. 10). She further defined self-awareness and knowledge by deconstructing the terms into the following concepts: availability, presence, empathy, connection, meeting needs, countertransference and modeling. She concluded that her personal journey in realizing enhanced self-awareness as both a musician and as a music therapist improved her skills as a music therapist.

Clinicians and researchers alike have used self-inquiries to examine and understand phenomenon present in both their work and their personal lives. Bruscia (1982) engaged in an autobiographical study in order to discover his relationship to music. This self-inquiry approach allowed him to better understand others' relationship to music. In her search to understand Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) on a deeper and more personal level, Bonny utilized a form of self-inquiry referred to as embodied phenomenology, which allowed her to experience recorded

music within her body (Bonny, 1993). Clinicians and researchers have also used self-inquiries to deepen their work, in hopes of sharing similar experiences to clients' experiences. Salmon (2001) used self-inquiry to explore the music therapy experiences of clients in palliative care. She used her personal experience with music therapy as a framework to better understand which music interventions benefited her clients. She found that music therapy in palliative care was a beneficial tool for emotional expression and spiritual growth. Meadows (1995) and Sokira (2007) engaged in self-inquiries to "interpret the world of children with disabilities" (Eyre, 2016).

Heuristic inquiries. A heuristic inquiry is a type of self-inquiry and first-person research, in which the researcher gathers data from personal experience to gain insight into a phenomenon through explication and "discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience" (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). The heuristic inquiry methodology was developed by Clark Moustakas (1990). During a research study on loneliness, Moustakas accidentally conducted a heuristic inquiry by exploring his personal emotions related to loneliness (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic inquiries in music therapy research are slowly emerging. Bell (2016), conducted a heuristic inquiry for her master's thesis to reflect upon the implications of her aboriginal heritage on her work as a music therapist. Borgal (2015) conducted a heuristic inquiry for her master's thesis, to understand, analyze and self-reflect upon the use of her voice in her work as a palliative care music therapist. Moran (2017) published a heuristic inquiry, which examined the insight he gained from experiential self-inquiries during mindfulness meditation training. These heuristic inquiries in the music therapy field, allowed the researchers to explore themselves, their music and their clinical work. In turn, results from their research revealed new aspects of themselves, and their personal and clinical processes, which they connected to both their every-day lives and clinical work in various ways including self-care tools, therapeutic approaches and other music therapy practices (Bell, 2016; Borgal, 2015; Moran, 2017).

Summary

The literature in this chapter was presented in order to provide the reader with an understanding of the topics I am addressing in my heuristic self-inquiry. These topics were: (a) self-awareness, (b) emotional awareness (c) the use of improvisation in music therapy to promote emotional awareness, and (d) self-inquiries in music therapy. Although the literature highlighted the role and benefits of emotional-awareness in music therapy, more research can be done to

explore emotional self-reflections of music therapists, as it could further their insight about themselves as individuals, musicians and clinicians, and be used as comparative emotional experiences to their clients', thus impacting their clinical approaches and practices. In the following chapter, I will describe the methodology used for the present heuristic self-inquiry as well as the data collection and analysis procedures.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Heuristic Self-Inquiry

This study was designed within a heuristic self-inquiry methodology framework. Heuristic self-inquiry is a self-reflection research model which seeks to understand one's subjective experience of a phenomenon, and explain how this phenomenon exists within the realm of human experience. It begins with the development of greater self-awareness and knowledge, which facilitates further methods of inquiry and analysis (Moustakas, 1990). This heuristic self-inquiry focused solely on the experiences and interpretations of the researcher (i.e., myself) who encountered the phenomenon (i.e., reflecting upon my experiences of emotional self-awareness during improvisation). This was a suitable methodology for my research, as it permitted me to partake in deep self-reflection and exploration, which allowed me to gain valuable and personal insight in relation to the topic of inquiry.

Validity

The validity of heuristic research is predominantly based on meaning. Moustakas (1990) stated that the researcher is responsible for judging the validity of their research, because meaning is deduced from the lived experience and perspective of the primary subject of the inquiry. Heuristic self-inquiry does not aim to discover generalizable truths; instead, it seeks to produce an honest representation of the researcher's personal and subjective process (Moustakas, 1990). To ensure the validity of the results of my study, I revisited the data multiple times, in order to better assess my perspectives and interpretations and to ensure the clarity and consistency of my work. I also challenged my assumptions as honestly and authentically as I could by carefully reviewing my reflective journal at different moments in time (while being in different emotional states upon review) and by listening to the recordings many times. I also received feedback from my supervisor which challenged me to vigilantly and continuously reflect upon my process, which helped to solidify the trustworthiness of my results.

Participant

I was the sole participant in this heuristic self-inquiry.

Materials

The materials used in this study were a grand piano, audio recording device (ZOOM H2N Handy Recorder), timer, notation paper, self-reflective journal, and a MacBook Pro laptop.

Data collection and analysis procedures

The data collection and analysis procedures were conceptualized within Moustakas' (1990) six stages of heuristic inquiry.

1. *Initial Engagement* represents the research phase of the study. This phase was realized by (a) examining my personal relationship to the topic, (b) reviewing related research and writing the literature review, (c) identifying my assumptions, (d) discussing the topic with professors, supervisors and peers, and (e) writing the research proposal.

2. The *immersion* phase represents the lived experience of the research. During this phase the research becomes “the song into which the researcher breathes life, because the question itself is infused in the researcher’s being” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 43). In my research, this phase was realized by my engagement in a total of eight 30-minute free piano improvisations that took place twice a week, over the course of four weeks. I improvised on the same piano and in the same room each time. Immediately following these improvisations, I documented my emotional experience in written journal form, by attempting to recall what I experienced and how I felt during and after the improvisations. Every improvisation was audio recorded. I also notated relevant musical motives and themes. The musical notation served to enhance the material in my journal. In my journal, I underlined written sections where I specifically described musical elements, finished my written reflections, listened back to the recordings and notated by ear the corresponding musical elements and/or sections that I had addressed. I viewed and treated these musical notations as essential extensions to my journaling, because I felt that they allowed me to recall and depict the musical elements I was describing in their truest form.

3. The *incubation* phase occurs when the researcher takes time away from the study, to allow them to have some distance from the research process in order to experience new reflections and understanding on the material. This phase was realized with a complete physical and mental break from my research, during which I spent ten days at my family cottage in the Laurentians.

4. The *illumination* phase represents the time of conscious awareness experienced by the researcher. The data is organized into tacit knowledge. During this phase, I reviewed my recordings and journal, which included the musical notations, in an attempt to interpret the meaning of my experience with a fresh perspective. I used Neuman’s (2014) first phase of coding analysis, *open coding*, in which I identified and notated relevant passages from my

journal entries. As previously mentioned, I treated the musical notations in my journal as a form of journaling. Thus, I coded all journal material, including musical material, together. During this time, I also sought to identify any potential ethical issues (honest and authentic participation) that emerged during the incubation phase.

5. The *explication* phase represents an examination and comprehensive depiction of the core themes (Moustakas, 1990). During this phase, I used Neuman's (2014) second phase of coding analysis, *axial coding*, in which I grouped and organized selected codes from the first phase into categories and themes. The categories and themes were described and further clarified with the inclusion of selected journal and musical excerpts.

6. The final phase, *creative synthesis*, is a new creative representation of the emergent themes and meaning derived from the research. This phase manifested itself in the form of a solo piano piece that I composed and recorded.

Chapter 4. Explication

The primary research question of this heuristic inquiry was: What insights does a new music therapist have about herself and her emotions when she engages in free self-reflective piano improvisations? To answer this question, I followed Moustakas' (1990) six phases of heuristic inquiry, as described in Chapter Three. The current chapter presents the findings of my research, which as a result of Neuman's (2014) axial coding analysis phase, have been organized into categories and themes. The themes have been distributed into four overarching categories (see Table 1). Excerpts from my reflective journal and some musical notations from my improvisations are incorporated throughout the chapter, in order to better illustrate the results of the data.

Table 1

Categories and Themes

Category 1: Development of awareness

- Theme 1: Relationship between my emotional awareness and musical awareness during improvisation
- Theme 2: My emotional awareness
- Theme 3: My musical awareness
- Theme 4: Relinquishing awareness

Category 2: Understanding the musical elements of my improvisations

- Theme 1: My interpretation of harmonic resolution
- Theme 2: The significance of rhythm
- Theme 3: The role and impact of musical genre
- Theme 4: The pressure to be original

Category 3: Rediscovering the piano

- Theme 1: My exploration of timbre
- Theme 2: My relationship with the piano
- Theme 3: Limitations of the piano

Category 4: Identities

- Theme 1: My dual pianist identity
 - Theme 2: My emerging music therapist identity
 - Theme 3: My authentic identity
-

Category 1: Development of Awareness

Developing insight about myself and my emotions during this research manifested itself in many ways. One of the ways I gained insight was through my experience of developing awareness. The process of self-reflective journaling challenged me to question if I understood

how to be self-aware, and what I considered to be aspects of self-awareness in this improvisation context. I realized that awareness occurred during my improvisation process in both musical and emotional form. My understanding of the notion of self-awareness was deepened when I began to perceive it as an overall experience rather than a specific occurrence. I also began to understand that my self-awareness went beyond my experience of particular emotions and that it could also be present in musical form. The following themes reinforce the unequivocal connection between my musical awareness and emotional awareness.

Theme 1: The relationship between my emotional awareness and musical awareness during improvisation. When beginning this self-reflective journey, I was hopeful that within the proper environment and circumstances, I would be able to easily get in touch with my current emotional state. I anticipated that I would be able to identify a primary emotion that I was feeling in the moments before, during and after my improvisations. During my first improvisation of the data collection phase, I had difficulty doing this. In turn, this blockage impacted my ability to freely improvise. This helped me understand that there was a connection between my ability to be emotionally aware and my ability to improvise. I felt musically constricted because of the demands I had placed on myself to practice awareness. I reflected on this in my journal: *It's hard to feel present. I feel pressure to label my emotions. What lead my music today? Why did I start in C major? Does this mean I'm feeling O.K.? Not feeling authentic enough...what is my music about?* This excerpt portrays the challenges I faced in trying to label my emotions and deconstruct my musical improvisations through a self-awareness lens. As my process progressed, I put less pressure on myself to actively interpret my feelings and music when improvising, and instead I let the music lead me. I realized that improvisation without preconceived expectations is a powerful prompt towards naturally experiencing emotions. By alleviating some of this pressure and engaging in the process in a free and open way, both my emotional awareness and musical awareness emerged together. For example, instead of simply labeling emotions after completing an improvisation, I learned to musically connect to my emotions in moments during my improvisations. I also learned that my emotional states changed based on what I played. This was evident in instances where I noted a contrast in emotions that I was feeling before, during and after improvisations. I noted this in one of my later journal excerpts: *What I'm feeling now, is not what I was feeling before playing. I woke up this morning feeling tired and uninspired, but as I started playing, it felt like my musical decisions were prompting me to feel better, energized,*

warm and positive. My music was the power behind shaping my emotions. This gave me additional insight into how my musical decisions could change my emotions due to musical elements and associations that are further uncovered in the following categories. The result of how my emotional responses and musical actions impacted one another, and my overall experience of self-awareness, is supported by William and Fauth (2005) who explained that the experience of self-awareness includes connection of emotional responses, thoughts and actions.

Theme 2: My emotional awareness. The process of becoming aware of my music was instinctual for me. The process of becoming aware of my emotions in the moment was not instinctual at first but became easier due to my self-reflective journaling process. My journal revealed multiple layers relating to my emotional-awareness. As I explained in theme 1, I noticed that my emotional awareness and musical awareness were connected. I learned that an identified emotion is not necessarily an accurate representation of my emotional awareness within an improvisation context. Instead, my *experience* of uncovering and being with my emotions by responding to them and shaping them musically was a more authentic representation of my emotional awareness. This experience is reflected in this entry: *Today I allowed myself to just feel and create. I allowed the music to tell the story, and to reveal what I was really feeling inside. There was dissonance, fragmented chords and rhythms with no direction. I felt a bit lost and uneasy, but I kept playing until I found and felt something different. In this way, I was making a musical decision to keep playing dissonant, fragmented chords etc. as a reaction to a current emotional state (uneasiness). My experience of being rather than seeking to extract an emotion from the music was my authentic emotional awareness. I reflected on my overall self-awareness, which includes emotional awareness and musical awareness, in this journal excerpt: I'm beginning to understand how my self-awareness isn't just one thing. It is a part of something bigger. It is the way in which I choose to react, the way in which I feel, the way in which I realize and acknowledge my perceptions. It has many forms: emotional, musical, literal and reflective.*

Theme 3: My musical awareness. In my journal, I reflect upon the notion of musical awareness as being a primary component of both my self-awareness and improvisation experience. While both engaging in and listening back to my improvisations, I experienced frequent and heightened musical awareness. During my improvisations, musical awareness took on various forms for me. I found myself being aware of specific aspects of my playing like the dynamics, chord structures and phrasing, as well as musical elements like timbre and color. My

experience of musical awareness aligns with Ward (2007) who described the term musical awareness as the ability to recognize and understand rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structures in music. She also wrote that musical awareness can include a “sense of musical coherence” and “music analysis techniques” (Ward, 2007, p. 23). As I improvised at the piano, I was attuned to the music that I was producing in a way that included an awareness of musical structures, coherence and analysis. I found myself frequently questioning my musical decisions during and after the improvisations, I noted: *Interesting that I am drawn to pedal tones. Keeping that continuous open D chord and accented rhythm feels grounding and supportive, which is something I’m needing right now.* In analyzing these musical choices and details, I realize the extent to which my musical awareness is an integral piece of my overall self-awareness within the context of improvisation.

Theme 4: Relinquishing awareness. A reoccurring theme in my journal was my experience of reaching a point during my improvisations where I entered into autopilot mode. I described this in my journal in the following way: *Ironically, for an instance, I didn’t feel grounded in the moment at all, but more lost. I was lost in the music, letting myself go. My hands were moving, and sounds were produced but I didn’t know how it was all happening. It felt like an outer body experience. It felt powerful.* During these brief but impactful moments, it felt like I was relinquishing awareness, which at the time, seemed counterproductive to my research intentions. I thought that losing myself in the music meant that I was not practicing awareness correctly, however upon deeper reflection, I understood that my awareness does not always occur in *real time*. These instances of relinquished awareness during the improvisations allowed for space where awareness could emerge later. In fact, it was almost impossible and unnecessary for me to practice continuous awareness during my playing. My reflections following the improvisations gave me the opportunity to practice self-awareness after these moments occurred. In addition, these instances of *relinquished awareness* were significant in defining the development of my improvisation experience.

Category 2: Understanding the musical elements of my improvisations.

Examining musical content within improvisations permits one to better comprehend the complexities of the process (Lee, 2000). During the immersion phase of my research, I listened to the recordings of my improvisations and notated relevant musical passages. I frequently wrote about musical occurrences, and upon revisiting recordings of my improvisations, I notated

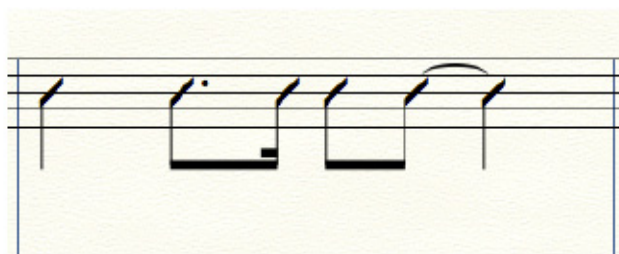
passages related to topics I addressed in my journal to further strengthen my understanding and interpretation of them. The topic of musical elements was one that I easily and often initially addressed in my journal entries. It felt easier to reflect solely upon my musical decisions instead of on the emotions that accompanied them. Yet, as I revisited the recordings, and reviewed both written and notated material, I began to make some links and identify musical commonalities which challenged me to question their significance within the context of my research. As a result, the following themes highlight my process of identifying and interpreting significant musical elements from a self-reflective and emotional perspective.

Theme 1: My interpretation of harmonic resolution. In my journal, I placed a strong emphasis on my need for harmonic resolution. In the case of my improvisations, harmonic resolution means an equal tempered music progression falling under the category of a perfect cadence (V-I), plagal cadence (IV-I), imperfect cadence (I-V, ii-V, IV-V) or deceptive cadence (V-VI). I reflect upon my use of resolution in my improvisations. I wrote: *I seem to be using resolution/cadences in unusual ways. I find myself either resolving frequently, causing the music to repeatedly return to the tonic or improvising for long stretches without any type of harmonic resolution. I also find that I'm thinking a lot during my playing about what my next cadence/resolution should be, and when to play it. It's almost as if I'm planning them unintentionally, which might be disrupting my natural improvisation flow.* This planning reflects my need for harmonic expectancy within the music. However, planning resolutions also frustrated me, because I did not want to have a need for harmonic expectancy. I listened a second time to a section in which I repeatedly play V-I and IV-I resolutions, I was surprised to find myself moved by the music and I noted: *Something about returning to this tonic is beautiful, warm and moving. I'm not sure exactly what it represents but it evokes some strong emotions within. The simplicity of that returning tonic makes listening to this resolution easy and pleasing. I'm glad I listened back to this. I'm feeling more at peace with my musical choices.* This excerpt represents a turning point where I shifted my critical judgment and feelings of frustration about over and under using resolutions. I realized that during my improvisations, I was attempting to identify a singular cause behind my use of resolutions, rather than tune into the emotions that they evoked within. This realization was pivotal for me as it taught me how to interpret musical elements from an emotional based perspective. My insight of *acceptance of emotion* as a key component of understanding my use of harmonic resolution is supported by Meyer's theory of

musical expectancy, in which he stated “generation of expectations underlies not only the comprehension of musical structure, but also the perception of musical emotion and meaning” (Schmuckler, 1989, p. 112). Meyer’s theory suggests that aesthetic qualities found in music can be associated with extramusical associations such as emotional states, actions, concepts etc. (Meyer, 1956).

Theme 2: The significance of rhythm. During this process, rhythm became a tool that facilitated my musical experience. It is an important theme because similar to harmonic resolutions, rhythm was an element that I constantly addressed in my journal entries after each improvisation. Whether it was the presence of a steady meter, accents or rhythmic grounding, rhythm continuously served as a straightforward musical function for me. I understood, upon further reflection, that it represented my musical and inner drive throughout the improvisation process: *I need rhythm to feel like I’m moving forward internally. I also need rhythm to make the music move forward. Even in those moments where my mind wanders off to other places and I continue to play, the rhythm stays with me. It’s always there. It feels like it’s coming from a deeper place beyond the instrument. As obvious as this might sound, it has been the heartbeat of my music. It keeps everything alive and active when sounds are produced. This was a reoccurring rhythmic pattern that I referred to as the heartbeat of my improvisation in week 3.*

Figure 1



It was important for me to acknowledge this *obvious* musical element of rhythm, because taking the time to do so gave a meaningful role to this musical component. This rhythmic passage represented familiarity, because it frequently reoccurred in improvisations. This familiarity provided me with feelings of security which I also associated to feelings of calmness. I questioned if I played it subconsciously, in moments where I was needing to re-center, feel grounded, and regroup. I also understood that my recurrent awareness of this pattern proved that

it was significant to me, and that I wanted to notice when I played it, in hopes of wanting to feel secure internally emotionally and musically.

Theme 3: The role and impact of musical genre. A third theme that emerged from the category of musical elements was the presence and role of musical genre in my improvisations. This was a theme that surfaced after I started noticing musical patterns that reminded me of specific classical pieces, pop songs, composers and music artists. One example of this was my frequent use of 4-3 suspensions.

Figure 2



I associate this musical feature to a pop piano style, which triggered memories from my life of when I learned pop style riffs from listening to Elton John on repeat. Another musical element that I related to the classical music genre was my use of phrasing: *I keep noticing how I phrase melodies and motives in my improvisations. Is phrasing something that is characteristic of my style of piano playing? Thinking of it makes me a little anxious because it reminds me of some difficult piano lessons where I used to practice phrasing for hours.* This was an example of the many emotional associations I made in relation to the presence of musical genres in my music. This reflection was necessary in helping me understand the role of my musical identities (discussed in Theme 4), the stylistic impact certain music has on my way of playing and improvising, and the impact of musical genre on my emotional associations.

Theme 4: The pressure to be original. A pressure I have frequently felt as a musician, prior to this research, is the expectation to be original. As I further explored familiar sounding musical elements that emerged in my improvisations (as described in the previous theme), I began to feel insecure about the originality of my musical content: *Am I unable to create something truly original? There seem to be so many...too many moments in the music that remind me of someone else's music.* In feeling insecure about my music sounding too much like others' music, I feared that the authentic credibility of my improvisations was diminishing. This

insecurity is one that I frequently feel in the role of a music therapist, especially when I'm engaging in composition or improvisation interventions. It was important for me to realize that my music is still *my* music even if it encompasses musical elements that are similar to a particular genre or piece. Recognizing the pressure I put on myself to be original has given me insight into my vulnerabilities and emotions that I need to further explore. It also caused me to think about the pressures that clients might experience when faced with a similar and potentially daunting task of creating original music in sessions.

Category 3: Rediscovering the piano

A consistent practice of solo self-reflective piano improvisations over a delimited period of time allowed me to rediscover the instrument in unexpected ways. The themes that emerged within this category were (a) my exploration of timbre on the piano, (b) my relationship with the piano and (c) limitations of the piano. The immersion phase of this research gave me the opportunity to take the time to reconnect to my primary instrument. It is rare for me to grant myself this type of time and space to spend at the piano. Although I have had assignments throughout my music therapy degree where I was asked to practice improvisation techniques and skills at the piano, this experience differed and benefited me in the sense that the goal was not to practice but rather to discover. As I became more comfortable with the improvisation process during this inquiry, I began to realize the benefits of this type of learning and research approach. I embraced the freedom and the unanticipated elements of my musical experience. With this, the following themes provided me with valuable insight, which illuminated both the positive and limiting qualities of the piano.

Theme 1: My exploration of timbre. There are features of the piano that I value as a pianist and as a music therapist, such as the range, the orchestral quality and the accessibility. One element that I had not truly explored, prior to this research, was timbre. Timbre can be described as “the quality of a sound; the quality of musical tone; what makes an instrument sound like that instrument and not another, even though the other instrument may be playing the same pitch” (Artopium’s online art dictionary, 2018). Although timbre can be viewed as a musical element, I addressed timbre in this category because I discovered it and associated it in my improvisations as a characteristic element of how I experienced the piano. In my journal, my reflection aligns with aspects from the above definition: *What makes this instrument sometimes sound so rich? Today, I enjoyed hearing new tones come out of the piano that I hadn’t noticed*

before. I took the time to really think about what they evoked within me. I heard sounds that evoked regret and frustration, while also capturing rich dark colors resonating from the bass register. I also heard light, which evoked hopeful and warm feelings. I feel like I have started to enter a new territory of understanding and becoming aware of my instrument. I felt especially lucky in this improvisation because I experienced some things that I felt went beyond music. I allowed myself to physically and emotionally react and control the sounds, qualities, colors... the timbre of the instrument rather than the notes. Giving myself the space to improvise, but restricting it to the piano, helped me comprehend sonic elements of the piano that I had not previously encountered. Discovering timbre helped me develop a deeper awareness of the instrument.

As I further analyzed and researched the concept of timbre I also gained insight into how my understanding of it was based on my personal perceptions. I acknowledge that my new familiarity of this concept is rooted in elements of how I relate to the piano, my history with the instrument, my intentions and my awareness. Li and Timmers (2017) reinforced a similar approach to how timbre is a concept perceived by the player. In their study examining “pianists’ embodied concepts of piano timbre” (p. 112) they described a core dimension of timbre as interpretive. “In this case, the concept of piano timbre relates to the interpretation of a musical piece and musical expressiveness; the production of piano timbre is affected by the composer’s intention, pianist’s expressive intention, and the musical title and style” (Li & Timmers, 2017, p. 114).

Theme 2: My relationship with the piano. My relationship with the piano is a fundamental theme of rediscovering the instrument. When I began my studies in music therapy two years ago, the piano was a core part of my identity. It was an instrument that I used to learn, to work and which brought me joy. Being a pianist strongly defined who I was at the beginning of my music therapy journey, and as a result, the piano represented a safe object for me. When I started my internships, I was fortunate enough to use the piano as a tool for connecting with people. It became my vessel for communicating, sharing and building rapport with clients. I enjoyed sharing the instrument when improvising with others, and I enjoyed using it as an accompaniment instrument to support others’ improvisations. Prior to this research, I typically associated solo piano with my classical performance past. It was rare for me to play the piano alone unless I was practicing a piece. Prior to this research, I also associated improvisation as a

group activity. My history as an improviser was based on jamming with fellow musicians and band mates, but not often alone. As a result, the first few improvisations of this experience felt somewhat foreign for me, but the piano as an instrument continued to be my safe object throughout this process. As described in the previous category, the improvisation process allowed me to access the instrument in different ways, however, I was surprised to discover that my relationship with the piano expanded rather than changed. I described this occurrence in this journal excerpt: *I was expecting my self-reflective improvisation experience on the piano to profoundly alter my relationship to the instrument, but instead, it enhanced what was already there. It almost feels like I hit a refresh and improve button. I think that musicians and music therapists alike could benefit from taking time to re-connect and re-discover their primary instruments.* The term expanded refers to my new insight of knowing and welcoming what the piano represents for me. Throughout the research process, using my *safe* instrument gave me the support that I needed to conquer the more difficult aspects of my experience. For example, on days where I felt minimally motivated and discouraged to authentically improvise, knowing it was on the piano facilitated the task and motivated me to try. Gaining awareness on the fact that the piano was and continues to be a powerful source of comfort and support for me will also enable me to use it as a valuable self-care tool.

Theme 3: Limitations of the piano. In reviewing my journal entries, an emerging theme that somewhat contrasted the previous ones in this category was *limitations of the piano*. Spending this time using the piano as a source to uncover self-reflective and emotional content also highlighted elements of the instrument that felt like obstacles. One of these limitations was the piano's inability to always capture aspects of my authenticity. I reflected on this limitation: *It's a bit ironic that in one sense, I feel that the piano is the instrument I associate the most with who I am, but today I really needed to use my voice. As much as the piano is an important part of me, it lacks the authentic power and quality of the voice.* This journal portrays my comparison between authenticity achieved with the voice versus the piano. Even though voice is not my primary instrument, my voice still represents the most personal and authentic part of me because it physically comes from me. As much as the piano is a part of my identity, I don't consider it a physical part of me, and as a result, some of my more personal thoughts and emotions during improvisations were difficult to capture on the piano. Discovering how the voice, as an instrument, can potentially be the most personal and honest representation of an individual, is

valuable insight for music therapists and clients. Understanding the role that the voice has in relation to oneself, could facilitate goals like self-expression and communication.

Another limitation of the piano that emerged in my journal was the physical elements of the instrument. I reflected upon how my preferred musical genre and taste are outcomes of my culture and Western ear, and this led me to realize how the piano as an instrument has impacted me. The piano is a diatonic, chromatic, and equal tempered instrument. These elements are limitations in terms of varied cultural music that do not fall within these structures. Thus, it was important for me to realize that limiting improvisation to the piano, and any other instrument for that matter, is limited by the structure of the instrument. Identifying the limitations of the piano also helped me become aware of cultural biases that I hold regarding the universal relevance of this instrument.

Category 4: Identities

In my journal, I reflected upon how my relationship to improvisation is strongly connected to my current identities. The three reoccurring identities that emerged from my reflections were: (a) my dual pianist identity, (b) my emerging music therapist identity, and (c) my authentic identity. As I reviewed my journal entries, I noticed a shift in my ability to self-reflect. In my early entries and improvisations, my reflections mainly focused on musical aspects and emotions. As the process continued, my emotional reflections caused me to dig deeper and to think about my life. Addressing and thinking about my musical past, emerging career, and current life deepened my understanding and awareness of myself. Kondrat's (1999) notion of *reflective self-awareness* is described as a reflection focusing on one's self rather than a self who reflects. This is the only category of my results where myself and my identities are the sole subjects of reflection. Acknowledging and exploring my identities that have had a continuous presence throughout this research, has allowed me to gain insight on the meaning of self-reflection and further develop my reflective self-awareness.

Theme 1: My dual pianist identity. The first identity theme that emerged in my journal was my pianist identity. While listening to my improvisations, particular musical elements and my style of playing prompted me to reflect upon my classical training and performance past. From a young age, I received classical training in the world of performance based and competitive piano. I spent hours learning standard repertoire. From phrasing to touch, I would meticulously deconstruct and rehearse every aspect of musical interpretation. I also, however,

had a contrasting pianist identity. I played in pop and folk music bands, arranged songs and improvised with fellow musicians. This combination of the classically trained and the pop pianist identity is apparent in my improvisations in both a musical and emotional sense. I make a connection in relation to this combined identity in the following journal excerpt: *I'm feeling like the old music me and the new music me are both trying to be heard. The old is my classical performer, the new is the improviser. Sometimes, it feels safe and natural to play in a classical way. I am careful with how I deliver notes, wanting it to be aesthetically pleasing in a traditional style. Other times, I think why does it matter? This is about feeling free, not over thinking, being creative and letting how I feel guide my music. It is hard for me to decide and control these contrasting mentalities and styles. How can I embrace both?* Reflecting upon and realizing my dual pianist identity has given me insight into how it consciously and unconsciously affects my approach and emotional reactions to music and improvisation.

Theme 2: My emerging music therapist identity. My emerging music therapist identity is one that I was hoping to uncover over the course of this self-inquiry. Gaining insight into myself as a music therapist and musician was part of my motivation behind this research. Throughout this process, I would reflect upon how and why I used improvisation as an intervention in sessions. I have come to better understand that my own experiences of improvisation are unique to me as an individual, and this has allowed me to gain knowledge into how I could potentially approach improvisation as a therapeutic tool with others. In the following journal entry, I wrote about my experience improvising, and I pondered the value that this awareness has given me as a music therapist. *It has proven to be a challenging and vulnerable experience. It has allowed me to gain awareness through both a musical and emotional lens. Improvisation has also allowed me to reconnect with myself, by stirring up life experiences, which have given unexpected depth and meaning to some musical moments. I am surprised by my own vulnerabilities, and how hesitant and scared I was to think about how I was truly feeling in certain moments. The uncertain and free nature of improvisation can be scary for myself and probably for others too. I'm coming to understand that if I use improvisation with clients in sessions, I need to expect the unexpected and be ready to support or give freedom when needed. I'm learning that one of the potential challenges with using improvisation in sessions is the unexpected outcome of the experience. As it's an unplanned and sometimes unstructured experience, the outcome will always be unique for every person. Acknowledging this is an*

important realization for me as an MT. I wrote this in the fourth and final week of my data collection phase. It is noticeable in my reflection that I am acknowledging a shift in perspective and interpretation from my earlier reflections. This journal entry is one of many where I address my emotional vulnerabilities, which was something I was not able to do in the early stages of my process. Embracing the emotional vulnerabilities that were revealed by this experience has now become part of my music therapist identity.

A second aspect of my research experience that has shaped my music therapist identity is my experience of authenticity during improvisation in the role of a music therapist. A few months into my research process, I was asked to replace another music therapist at a foundation for adults with mental health challenges. The primary intervention used with the participants in the music therapy groups was improvisation. In contrast to my research however, this time, the improvisations were done in groups, and piano was not the only instrument I used. The groups that I was facilitating played a large role in my reflections of my music therapist identity during my research. In turn, my evolved understanding of improvisation and newfound emotional awareness from my self-inquiry undoubtedly affected the way that I improvised with clients at work. This emotional awareness allowed me to have authentic experiences as a therapist, which I was able to also share with the participants. Ultimately, this authenticity allowed me to better connect with the participants when we improvised together.

Theme 3: My authentic identity. My authentic identity is one that I rediscovered during this process. In this case, authentic identity is defined as my *true* self; a self that encompasses all musical and non-musical identities. It includes my emotions, perceptions, thoughts etc. Throughout this self-reflective journey, this identity was shaped by my interaction with my immediate environment and space, as well as my relationship to others around me. At times, improvising was emotionally draining. Other times, it was energizing. In my journal, I took note of my immediate experience from the music, as well as aspects and events in my life that were happening simultaneously. I understood that my environment, mood and interactions affected my improvisations and more importantly my ability to be present and practice emotional awareness during improvisations. So instead of trying to separate my non-research life from my research life, I embraced and recognized their connection. This excerpt depicts the moment where I realize the scope of my authentic identity within my research context: *I'm starting to understand how essential all the aspects of my life are in relation to my research. The people I see and the*

things I do each day are part of the essence of me- they make up who I am. My life is the context of my experience, including this improvisation experience.

Chapter 5. Discussion

The last stage of Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry is the creative synthesis, which is a concluding representation of the researcher's process and findings from the explication phase. This final chapter includes a description of my creative synthesis process and product and limitations of the research. It also contains personal, professional and education implications as well as suggestions for future research.

Creative Synthesis

For the creative synthesis component of this inquiry, I composed a solo piano piece. The process was natural and enjoyable for me. It was a relief to be able to transfer fresh insight from my research into an expressive modality that did not involve writing text.

I chose to compose for solo piano, to highlight the role that the piano played throughout my research process. My awareness of the notion of the piano representing a *safe* object for me in both an emotional and physical way was an aspect that I wanted to address in this composition. I also wanted the piece to contain opportunities for improvisations, because it felt counter intuitive to my musical experience from this research, to create an exclusively pre-composed work. Thus, I included twenty-four bars with a singular ostinato bass line to give myself the space and freedom to improvise on the right hand. I intended for this improvised section to be played based on the player's (i.e., my) current emotional state, causing the piece to sound differently each time. This unpredictable musical element represented the personal and unexpected experiences of my improvisations from my research.

Figure 3

ostinato in bass



The title of the piece “Pendulum in D” was inspired by the free but also endless nature of self-reflective research, as learning about oneself can be a life long journey. *Merriam-Webster* defines a pendulum as “a body suspended from a fixed point so as to swing freely” (“pendulum”, 2019, def. 1). I found this definition to be relevant to my role as the researcher throughout this process. The melodies emerging in section A, were melodies that I extracted from one of my improvisations. I had notated them at a time when I was having difficulty practicing and understanding emotional awareness. At that time, rather than embracing their beauty and staying with the warm and comforting feelings that their beauty naturally evoked within me, I felt trapped by an obligation to extract concrete emotional meaning from these melodies. I am thankful that I was able to incorporate them into this piece. They represented a challenge for me from which insight emerged.

Figure 4

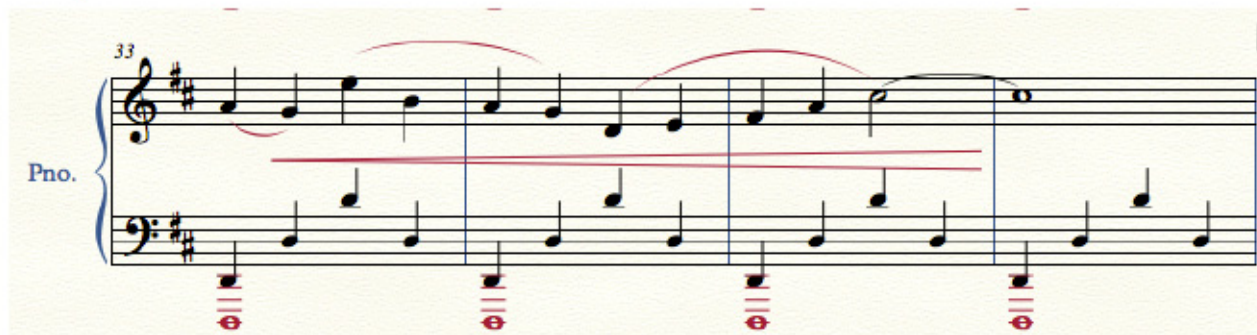
Melody 1



Musical score for Melody 1, measures 29-32. The score is for Piano (Pno.) in D major (two sharps). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The melody consists of quarter notes and half notes, with a dynamic marking of *mp*. The bass line consists of quarter notes. The score is marked with a 29 at the beginning of the first measure.

Figure 5

Melody 2



Musical score for Melody 2, measures 33-36. The score is for Piano (Pno.) in D major (two sharps). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The melody consists of quarter notes and half notes, with a dynamic marking of *mp*. The bass line consists of quarter notes. The score is marked with a 33 at the beginning of the first measure.

Lastly, the inclusion of phrasing and dynamics in the piece symbolized my identities that emerged in the research. Phrasing was a musical element that I connected to my classical pianist identity, which I associated to feelings of anxiety. However, having awareness of this anxiety allowed me to develop my authenticity, which I also wanted to portray in this composition. The following is a recording of the creative synthesis (see Appendix for a copy of the complete score).

LISTEN TO MUSICAL EXCERPT ONE – PENDULUM IN D (5:26)

Limitations

As this study was conducted in partial fulfillment of my master's degree, my research process was limited to a designated academic time frame and the thesis manuscript was limited to a specific length. Given the exploratory, self-reflective and potentially long nature of the heuristic inquiry methodology, these constraints might have limited the scope of my data collection and findings. Additional time and length could have potentially expanded and altered the categories and themes of my results. Another prominent limitation of this study was my status as a first-time researcher and emerging music therapist. My limited experience in collecting and coding data, as well as my ability to authentically self-reflect and interpret my results from personal and clinical perspectives might have affected the validity of the research, as defined within a heuristic paradigm.

I also delimited my improvisation process to only be played on the piano, which presented some limitations, as discussed in Chapter Four (Category Three). The tonal and equal temperament Western tuning system of the piano imposed limitations of specific cultural assumptions that I had not previously considered, which might have impacted my interpretation of musical material. Lastly, during my research, I started my first professional music therapy job working with adults at a mental health foundation. Improvisation was the primary intervention method used in these groups. Thus, my experience facilitating these group improvisations might have affected my perceptions of my solo improvisations and experiences from this study.

Implications

Personal. This research gave me an opportunity to take the necessary space and time to develop reflective skills within a musical framework. Up to this point, I had spent many hours at the piano practicing pieces and working on specific musical structures, but I never took the time to reflect upon my emotional musical experience. This research process has enabled me to access

music from a deeply personal and emotional place. It has taught me how to deconstruct and interpret musical elements that were present in my improvisations in an honest and meaningful way. I hope to be able to apply this newfound interpretive approach to my clients' music as well, by helping them experience connection with their sense of self during improvisations. I also think that this insight will facilitate my understanding and use of a more music centered approach in my clinical work. "The therapy lies in the variety, complexity, depth, spontaneity, and honesty of the musical expression. These experiences of oneself in music contribute to a fuller sense of self and meet essential human needs" (Aigen, 2005, p. 94).

Professional. As the intention of this research was to provide me with insight into myself, my emotional experience and awareness, I was able to develop my awareness by adopting an honest and at times vulnerable perspective rather than a critical one. This is a perspective that I hope to transfer to my musical life and future clinical work. Letting myself feel, sit with, and embrace my vulnerabilities helped me uncover and resolve some inner turmoil that I did not know I was experiencing. As a music therapist, I plan on continuing to acknowledge my vulnerabilities as a form of awareness, which could potentially reinforce my accessibility and authenticity as a clinician.

The process of examining my own music, emotions, thoughts and experiences during this research prompted me to have both a critical but accepting attitude towards myself. This type of self-examination process could also be a constructive tool that could be utilized by clients. Recalling, questioning and taking the time to dig deeper into reactions and emotions occurring in musical experiences through journaling (or another method) could help clients develop a stronger sense of self and identity.

Potential Implications for Music Therapists. This study could also be beneficial to other music therapists. It may inspire them to reconnect to their primary instrument. As I indicated in my findings, my research also served as an opportunity for me to rediscover the piano. Thus, the process of solo improvisation could potentially reveal new ways in which music therapists could access their primary instrument as well as strengthen their connection to their instrument. This type of research is also a helpful reminder for fellow music therapists to schedule some alone time to make music. Solo improvisation can serve many purposes like being a creative outlet, a self-care tool, or like in this research, an opportunity for self-reflection and awareness.

The results of this study revealed my process about my musical awareness and my emotional awareness. It became clear to me that the two were connected and impacted one and other in the context of improvisation. Examining this relationship taught me how to better musically connect and respond to my emotions as I played. Music therapists may find this discovery useful for both personal and clinical reasons. The practice of musically responding to one's own emotions in the moment can provide one with a deeper understanding of their own musical decisions and emotions and potentially with a better understanding of others' musical decisions and emotions. Also, as I experienced in this study, this practice could improve one's ability to respond to and shape their emotional states. Understanding how to musically respond to and/or shape emotions could be valuable for clients with emotional and expressive based goals.

I also learned to put less pressure on myself in relation to my musical decisions. Understanding that the product of my music was worthy, regardless of what it sounded like, permitted me to fully immerse myself in the improvisation process. Recognizing this pressure is a practice that could be transferable by music therapists. Working towards identifying, understanding and resolving potential preconceived musical pressures that clients might have related to improvisation or other original music making interventions, could facilitate better musical experiences and participation for clients.

Education. This study could serve as a beneficial tool and example for students who wish to develop their self and emotional awareness within the context of a creative musical experience. An opportunity to engage in and examine free solo improvisation within a specified framework (emotional or other) could provide students with insight that could be useful for specific client goal areas, approaches or general clinical practice. It might also motivate students to engage in similar heuristic-inquiries that could be used to help them develop and generate new and personalized self-reflective systems and analysis methods, that they may be seeking at this stage of their emerging research careers. Students might also find this type of self-reflective musical experience to be a constructive learning tool from both a musical and personal standpoint.

Research. In this study, I considered my musical notations as a part of my journal, so I did not analyze my musical notated data separately. It would be interesting, however, to conduct supplementary research on possible musical analysis methods from a self-reflective perspective.

Existing music analysis methods in music therapy, such as indexing, are successfully utilized for analyzing clients' improvisations (Lee, 2000), and exploring ways to adapt them for self-reflective analysis could contribute to these existing practices. Additional self-reflective research on experiencing musical awareness, emotional awareness, and the connection between the two could help further define these concepts within a music therapy framework as well as provide more material on how to develop, refine and apply these types of awareness experiences in clinical settings.

Closing Thoughts

In the early stages of this research process, I had particular ideas and predictions on the outcome of this experience. My understanding of self-reflection, self-awareness, emotional awareness and emotions were all challenged during this study. I learned that these terms are complex and personal and that my understanding of them is rooted in my experiences and unique interpretation. This is the beauty of the self-inquiry. The collection of insights that a person gains will always be unique to that individual.

The insight I gained from this self-inquiry helped me grow on a personal, musical and professional level. I have learned to be less critical about my musical approach. I have learned that my vulnerabilities are an integral part of my authentic identity. I have learned that any type of emotional related musical experience (improvisation or others) can be deeply personal for the individual partaking in it. I believe that the awareness I gained about myself and about this musical experience will allow me to access emotional needs with clients in a more honest, authentic and compassionate way.

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Appendix
Score of Pendulum in D

Score

Pendulum in D

Evelyne Arsenault Cooper

$\text{♩} = 60$

mf *mp* *Freely*

Simili

6

11

16

Pendulum in D

2
A

Pno. *mf*

26 *mp*

31

36 B 24 measures of improvisation on theme

41

Piano score for "Pendulum in D", measures 46 to 67.

Measures 46-55: Repeating rhythmic pattern in the bass clef with a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the treble clef.

Measures 56-66: Repeating rhythmic pattern with a *rit.* (ritardando) marking in measure 64.

Measure 67: **C** *slower, rubato*. The piece concludes with a *p* (piano) dynamic and a *rit.* marking.

46

Pno.

51

Pno.

56

Pno.

C *slower, rubato* 1 2 3 repeat 3x 4

Pno.

67

Pno.