Exploring my Musicality as a New Music Therapist: A Heuristic Self-Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

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Benjamin Magidson

It is important for music therapists to have musical self-awareness as it helps to ensure that they are not inadvertently imposing their pre-conceived personal and cultural notions of music aesthetics and musicality onto their clients. This research provided me with an opportunity to explore my current beliefs and assumptions about musicality and reflect upon how these might impact my work as a newly certified music therapist. Therefore, purpose of this heuristic self-inquiry was to reveal and examine assumptions that I hold about the concept of musicality and explore how these assumptions may inform my music therapy practice moving forward. As my family members' musicianship has influenced my understanding of my own musicality and what it means to be musical at large, I engaged in an experiential self-inquiry process wherein I used free improvisations and reflexive journaling to explore how I have reacted and responded to three family members within the context of our musical relationships and past musical interactions that we shared. This resulted in four narrative summaries along with a cross case analysis that revealed three overarching themes: musician self-concept, musical traumas, and newly revealed assumptions and biases on musicality. A creative synthesis in the form of a sound collage served as a representation of the personal and tacit dimensions of this research process. Limitations of the study along with potential implications for others' clinical practice and future research are also presented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Significance of the Inquiry

Music therapy is a professional discipline wherein certified music therapists use various facets of music and the relationships that develop through them to promote clients' health and wellbeing within a wide range of clinical and community contexts (Bruscia, 2014a). Although music therapists may work within a variety of theoretical orientations, most hold the perspective that clients do not need to have any formal knowledge of music or extensive musical background to reap the potential benefits of music therapy. This is based on the idea that most human beings have an innate capacity to respond to music in meaningful ways, an idea formally proposed by music therapy pioneers Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins. They coined the term *music child* to describe the inborn nature of music that is specific to each person (i.e., individualized musicality), the universality of musical sensitivity, and the central role that music can play in each person's self-development (Aigen, 2005; Nordoff & Robbins, 1977).

These ideas have continued to evolve within various music-centered music therapy approaches, which will be succinctly reviewed in Chapter 2. However, music-centered music therapy theory, at large, postulates that music exists as a medium for the development of the self and therefore each client's experience in music is primary and not merely a means to achieving non-musical therapeutic goals (Aigen, 2005). In other words, the therapeutic relationship is a musical relationship where the music is "considered as a communal, aesthetic, and/or cultural phenomenon, the creation of which has inherent clinical value" (Aigen, 2005, p. 119).

In a music-centered music therapy approach, it is the therapist's role to support the client in ways that will help to facilitate their engagement in personalized transformational musical encounters (Aigen, 2005; Brandalise, 2004). These musical encounters may not necessarily align with externally imposed aesthetic or artistic standards. They do, however, seek to uncover and develop each client's unique musicality within a broader criterion of artistry embraced in music therapy (Aigen, 2005; Bruscia, 2014a).

A fundamental premise of music therapy is that most clients arrive already having some sort of relationship with music (Bruscia, 2014a), which may evolve in music therapy, as described above. However, music therapists also have their own relationship with music, one that needs to be explored and become highly evolved (Bruscia, 2014a). This level musical self-awareness helps to ensure that they are not inadvertently imposing their pre-conceived personal and cultural notions

of music aesthetics and musicality on the client thereby hampering the client's musical (i.e., self) development (Baines, 2013; Young, 2016). As a new music therapist aiming to incorporate aspects of music-centered music therapy theory into my practice, I realized that my thesis could provide me with an ideal opportunity to conduct a self-inquiry wherein I could explore my self-perceived musicality, explore my current beliefs and assumptions about musicality, and reflect upon how these might impact my work as a music therapist.

Personal Relationship to the Topic

Growing up within a family of professional musicians, my musical development has always been heavily influenced by the musical relationships I have with my family members. Furthermore, the musical experiences I have shared with them have shaped how I perceive the concept of musicality, especially in relation to myself. My father, primarily a jazz guitarist but equally proficient on several instruments and in multiple music styles, set high standards for how much one should practice if they aspire to be a professional musician. He also had set ideas about what skills and abilities define a musically gifted person. Throughout my adolescence, when my father taught me how to play guitar and piano, I found it difficult to live up to his standards and was unable to maintain my focus and energy for the amount of practice that he expected. This led me to believe that I was unable to absorb and apply musical concepts as easily as others in my family.

My sister is an accomplished, professional vocalist who currently specializes in soul, RnB and hip-hop genres. Throughout her musical development, she has worked hard to develop her vocal abilities, and as her younger sibling I often compared my vocal abilities to hers, always feeling that I was far from her level of vocal talent. My mother is a vocalist who specializes in French classics and jazz standards. She is less focused on demonstrating technical ability when performing and I resonated with her musically because of this since I often felt unable to demonstrate technical ability when performing. On the other hand, she always demonstrates comfort and ease when performing on stage, something I still struggle with to this day.

Overall, these interpersonal and musical family dimensions continue to affect how I perceive my own musicality. Despite having all the necessary skills and abilities to play music professionally, I do not consider myself to be a *real* musician because I do not feel that I meet the level of musical ability and devotion required and displayed by my family members. At times, these musical differences have evoked painful feelings of isolation and rejection, something I

know needs to be addressed in order for me to be an effective music therapist. For the reasons outlined above I decided not to pursue a music career and started to study psychology hoping to be inspired toward pursuing a particular area of work in this field. During this time, I was volunteering at a group home where I worked with adults who had various developmental disabilities. I engaged in musical activities with them and began to realize that there may be different ways of understanding what it means to be a *musical person*. This inspired me to seek out information about the profession of music therapy and in 2020 I entered the Music Therapy Graduate Diploma program at Concordia University located in Montreal, Canada. Throughout my 1200-hour internship, my ideas about music and musicality continued to shift and I began to feel that I had found a place where my musical skills and knowledge truly fit. However, I also came to realize that unconscious beliefs and assumptions that I continue to hold about my own musicality may inadvertently have an impact on my work as a music therapist. Therefore, as a new practitioner and master's student, I decided to conduct a first-person inquiry to help identify these unconscious beliefs and assumptions and explore how this can inform my work moving forward.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

As noted above, a music-centered approach to music therapy requires the music therapist to support each client to realize their unique personal musical potentials as a means of self-development. Examining the complexities of my own relationship with music within the context of a research thesis afforded me a unique opportunity to engage in a reflexive process that could greatly benefit my clinical work (and clients) as I start my music therapy career. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to conduct a first-person research inquiry where I aimed to reveal and examine assumptions that I hold about the concept of musicality (i.e., what it means to be a musical person) and explore how these assumptions may inform my music therapy practice moving forward. I also hoped that this research would inspire other music therapists (both new and experienced) to engage in similar reflexive processes. The primary research question was: As a newly qualified music therapist, what personal and professional insights emerge when I participate in an experiential self-inquiry process that examines my assumptions about my own musicality? The subsidiary questions were: (a) How might these insights inform my clinical work? and (b) How might these insights inform my musician and music therapist self-concepts?

Key Terms

There are several key terms contained in the research questions that need to be defined within the context of this research. I currently am a *newly qualified music therapist*, which means that I recently completed (as of 2022) all pre-professional music therapy training and certification requirements as outlined by the Canadian Association of Music Therapists (CAMT, 2016). *Insights* involve a heightened consciousness (i.e., awareness) of oneself and/or of one's experiences. In the case of the current research, the insights being sought are related to musical aspects of my *personal* and *professional self* and experiences (Bruscia, 2015). An *experiential self-inquiry process* involves the use of arts modalities to gain insight and self-awareness (Bruscia, 1998). The specific type of process employed in this research (family improvisations) will be explicated in Chapter 3. *Assumptions* are being defined as unconscious, unverified beliefs that I perceive as truths (University of Louisville, 2023) *Musicality* is being defined as how one characterizes musical talent or sensitivity (Aigen, 2014; Hallam, 2006). *Clinical work* refers to the interactions that I have with clients that fall within my scope of practice as a music therapist. Finally, *self-concept*, is being defined as how one perceives the self, based on a combination of internal beliefs and external feedback received from others (Hash, 2017; Saadon, 2020; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). In the present study, my self-concept will be considered in relation to my identities as a musician, and as a music therapist.

Summary of Chapters

I have organized this thesis into five chapters. The first chapter describes the significance of the study and my personal relationship to the topic. The purpose of the study, research questions, and definitions of key terms are presented. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature in the following areas: (a) musicality at large and its conceptualization in music-centered music therapy theory and practice and (b) reflexivity and its relevance to music therapy practice and research. Chapter 3 describes the heuristic self-inquiry methodology as it was conceptualized for this research. Chapter 4 presents the results that emerged (i.e., that were illuminated) along with explication. Lastly, Chapter 5 describes a creative synthesis which took the form of a 13-minute music collage consisting of musical excerpts that emerged from the data collection process described in Chapter 3. This collage serves as a creative representation of the research results and of my experience of the research process. This final chapter also includes limitations of the study along with clinical implications, and research implications.

Chapter 2. Related Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to present and synthesize knowledge that is relevant to topics that are contained or implied in my research questions. To that end, I have organized this chapter into two main sections. The first section addresses how musicality is defined in the literature at large and then how it is conceptualized more specifically within music-centered music therapy theory and practice. The second section provides a brief overview of reflexivity, specifically its relevance to music therapy practice and music therapy research.

Musicality

Overarching Perspectives

While academic literature sources frequently refer to the term musicality, it is not always explicitly defined which leaves the reader to make their own assumptions about what this term might mean within the context of a particular publication. Sociological and anthropological publications suggest that musicality can be viewed as a human capacity to engage in music and use it as a means for socialization (Cross, 2008; Hoeschele et al., 2015; Trehub et al., 2015). Bio-medical and neurological perspectives indicate that musicality consists of specific skills and abilities that reflect cognitive and neurological processes, such as recognition of beat, tonal encoding of pitch, and metric encoding of rhythm (Honing, 2018). Music education scholars emphasize musical sensitivity and how that relates to one's ability to recognize and analyze specific musical elements such as melodic contour and time signatures (Costes-Onishi & Caleon, 2018). Music psychologists Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) write about communicative musicality which emphasizes the intrinsic musical nature of human interaction wherein patterns of timing, pulse, voice timbre, and gesture can be discerned. Critical musicality, (as defined in the literature) encompasses four domains including one's personal and group aural cognitive capacities in relation to making music as well as one's capacity to understand and engage with extramusical and affective responses to music (Costes-Onishi & Caleon, 2018; Green, 2017). Innate or inborn musicality refers to individual's natural abilities for perceiving and appreciating musical characteristics (Peret, 2005). In attempts to measure musicality, researchers have created various scales including Goldsmith's musical sophistication index (Müllensiefen et al., 2014), the Musicality interests scale (Blomberg, 2006), and the critical musicality scale (Costes-Onishi & Caleon, 2018).

Discipline Specific Perspectives in Music Therapy

While both the Canadian and American music therapy associations outline specific musical competencies that one must achieve in order to become a professional music therapist, there is no mention or measure of musicality in relation to these competencies (AMTA, 2013; CAMT, n.d.). Furthermore, there is an identified need for these competencies to be re-envisioned beyond western musical norms in ways that allow for ongoing re-conceptualization within a diverse range of social-political-cultural-musical contexts (Young, 2016). While the overarching perspectives presented in the previous section may have relevance for the discipline of music therapy, music therapist pioneers and scholars hold distinct perspectives on the concept of musicality and how it applies to music therapy practice.

As noted in Chapter 1, music therapy pioneers Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins coined the term *music child* to describe the inborn nature of music that is specific to each person (i.e., individualized musicality expressed through receptive, cognitive, expressive, and communicative capabilities), the universality of musical sensitivity, and the central role that music can play in each person's self-development (Aigen, 2005; Nordoff & Robbins, 1977). Aigen (2005; 2014) builds upon this concept through the development of music-centered music therapy theory wherein *"the mechanisms of music therapy process are [believed to be] located in the forces, experiences, processes, and structures of music"* (Aigen, 2014, p. 19) which allows for individualized specificity of musical interventions based on individual clients' unique realizations of their own musicality. Music therapist scholars, Ansdell and Pavlicevic (2004) define musicality as a core human capacity where making music involves social and cultural implications for oneself and one's community. Bruscia (2014a) emphasizes relationships that are cultivated through music experiences including intrapersonal, interpersonal, intramusical, and intermusical relationships. As such, he states the necessity of in-depth understanding of each client's relationship with music which can serve as a comparative baseline for musical developments (i.e., development of aspects of one's musicality) that can in and of themselves be therapeutic outcomes. Dimensions of one's personal relationship with music include: family musical background, musical proficiency, musical aspirations, musical education and training, musical involvement and musical preferences (Bruscia, 2014a). Blind activist music therapist Dr. Cynthia Bruce (2022) highlights the need to support clients in developing their unique relationships to music in ways that do not affirm and perpetuate ableist musical (and non-musical) norms, thus challenging stereotypical definitions of

what it means to be musical and challenging perceptions on how one *should* or *should not* inhabit musical spaces, including music therapy contexts.

Bruce (2022) also emphasizes the need for music therapists to examine their own relationships with music in order to gain a deeper understanding of how music can empower individuals while also perpetuating exclusion and disempowerment when it is used to reinforce normative definitions of musicality and ability (i.e., rejecting disability as an inherent and valuable part of one's identity). Bruscia (2014a; 2015) also argues that if music therapists are to support clients to develop their relationships with music, that they must examine their own relationships with music. This helps to facilitate a deepening of the music therapist's relationship with music (which in turn aids in their ability to support clients in this regard) and heightens their ongoing awareness of musical countertransference. Musical countertransference can be defined as "sound patterns that reflect or evoke feelings, thoughts, images, attitudes, opinions and physical sensations originating in and generated by the music therapist, as an unconscious or preconscious reaction to the client and his/her transference" (Priestley, 1975, p. 185). This is particularly relevant to the present inquiry as my unexplored assumptions about what it means to be musical could manifest in my music therapy sessions in interpersonal and intermusical ways that are not helpful for the clients I am aiming to serve. The following section provides a summary overview of reflexivity in music therapy practice and research.

Brief Overview on Reflexivity in Music Therapy

Reflexivity in Music Therapy Practice

Within the context of music therapy practice, reflexivity can be defined as the ongoing and continual focus of one's consciousness on all aspects of one's work with clients, along with modification of the work as necessary. This helps to ensure that the therapist is working with appropriate goals, is addressing the client's needs and preferences, and is using music effectively throughout the therapeutic process with consideration given to the risks of a therapeutic process being affected by the music therapist's musical background (Bruscia, 2015). Barry and O'Callaghan (2008) speak to "tacit knowing-in-practice" (p.56) which they describe as a process of reviewing one's own actions in practice as a therapist and the identification of the knowledge that inspired these actions. Ruud (1997) emphasizes the need for music therapists to take steps in order to be aware of their own musical identity as "the knowledge of how music may help to construct an individual's conception of one-self may help music therapists choose the right music

for their clients, as well as choosing the proper music to empower people within their own cultural context" (p. 12).

There are various ways in which music therapists may work to maintain a reflexive clinical practice. Journaling can offer the opportunity for analytical thinking and self-analysis and likened to a form of self-supervision (Barry & O'Callaghan, 2014). Self-experiences that are facilitated in individual and group music therapy professional supervision contexts may also be helpful in this regard. The literature contains several examples including a group analytic approach (Ahonen, 2014), peer supervision models (e.g., Austin & Dvorkin, 2014), the use of improvisation (Lee & Khare, 2014) and the use of music and imagery (Bonde, 2014; Bruscia, 2014a; Grocke, 2014). Finally, in a study that examined the musical identities of Danish music therapy students, Bonde (2013) used musical autobiographies as a reflexive tool wherein the participants reflected upon musical skills and traits developed through their personal life story as compared to those acquired through their music therapy training. While it is beyond the scope of the paper to present the details of what the author called "highly nuanced insights" (p.324), Bonde (2013) suggested that musical autobiographical work can help music therapy students to approach music and clinical work with more openness and flexibility, which one might presume could also apply to professional music therapists.

Reflexivity in Music Therapy Research

Reflexivity in research involves "continuous efforts of the researcher to bring into awareness, evaluate, and when necessary modify the research process so as to ensure the integrity of the data and its interpretation and to monitor the researcher's personal contributions to all aspects of the research" (Bruscia, personal communication, as cited in, Wheeler, 2016, p. 598). While this is often thought of as being more relevant to qualitative research methodologies, Young (2013) argues that different types of reflexivity are needed for different types of inquiry. This, in turn, will impact the music therapist researcher's own clinical and/or research practices along with all who come into contact with these revised practices (e.g., clients, students, other professionals, etc.) thus creating a ripple effect. Accordingly, first person-research (i.e., where at least some of the data comes from oneself in relation to the phenomena being investigated) can be realized within various epistemological paradigms (McGraw Hunt, 2016).

The present study was in the form of first-person research realized within a heuristic self-inquiry methodological framework (further described in Chapter 3). This type of inquiry is

particularly useful for music therapy studies that focus on personal, internal, and subjective experiences (McGraw Hunt, 2016). Short (2005–2006) examined clinical materials from sessions she conducted in order to examine her cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competence as a Guided Imagery practitioner and Music therapist. Bruscia (2005) adapted the heuristic method in order to analyze programs of classical music in Guided Imagery and Music and facilitate a deeper personal understanding of these programs so that he (and others) could more fully support their clients' experiences. Various graduate music therapy theses have also utilized a heuristic self-inquiry methodology including Daniel Moran (2017), Andrew MacDonald (2018), Pierrette-Anne La Roche (2021), and Carolyn Neapole (2022). Similar to the present inquiry, all of these projects aimed to delve into the internal world of the researcher via self-experiential creative processes in order to achieve deeper understanding of an identified phenomenon.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Design

The study design was conceptualized within Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry methodology, a systematic process for internal (i.e., self) exploration wherein the researcher intensely explores a phenomenon of a tacit and personal nature (i.e., unconscious assumptions I hold about what it means to be musical) leading to significant insights and culminating in an artistic and holistic representation of the experience. The data collection and analysis phases (described below) incorporate distinct tasks within specific phases that allow the researcher to view the personal phenomenon from multiple angles.

In order to adhere to the length and scope of a master's thesis, some delimitations were imposed. I was the sole participant of the study. The family improvisations (described below) were initially delimited to include three improvisations that would be approximately 20-minutes in duration. However, as the research process unfolded, I found it necessary to initiate the immersion phase with an exploratory improvisation. I also engaged in one more family improvisation than I had planned. Rationale for these decisions is described below. I chose to include audio excerpts from each improvisation in the data analysis in order to ground my interpretations to the music from the improvisations. However, due to time limitations, I delimited the audio excerpts to include only 1 clip per improvisation.

Validity

As is typical in heuristic research, I engaged in a process of rigorous and continual revision of the data and materials to ensure that the meanings emerging from the self-exploration processes related to the purpose of the inquiry served as authentic representations of my perspectives and experiences (Moustakas, 1990). Validity was also addressed through multiple consultations with my thesis supervisor, who helped to ensure clarity and consistency throughout all phases of the research.

Materials

A handwritten journal was used throughout all phases of the research process to document thoughts and ideas in relation to the family improvisations that were constructed to explore the research questions. A piano, a guitar, and my voice were used for these improvisations, because these are the musical mediums I use most often and with which I feel most comfortable. The improvisations were recorded using audio recording applications on three separate devices to

ensure that no data was lost. The creative synthesis was assembled using the digital audio workstation Logic Pro X (Apple, 2023) to organize and layer recordings and create one comprehensive sound file.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data collection and analysis procedures followed the six phases of heuristic research as outlined by Moustakas (1990). In the *initial engagement phase*, the researcher engages in self-reflection and consultation in order to identify a relevant topic of interest. In the present study, I conducted a literature review, created a concept map (see Appendix A), and developed a research proposal. Cumulatively, these processes helped organize my preliminary thoughts related to my own musicality and the concept of musicality in music therapy at large.

In the *immersion phase*, the researcher is to devote every element of their conscious processing to the research topic by actively engaging in experiences as a means of collecting data (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). In the present inquiry, I initially planned to engage in three *family improvisation* sessions using an adapted framework informed by an experiential self-inquiry process described by Bruscia (2015). Family improvisations involve the therapist creating and recording musical portraits of family members or others who have had significant influence in their life. After listening back to these recordings, the therapist then creates self-musical portraits to capture in sound who they are and their interaction in relation to each person (Bruscia, 2015). In the present inquiry, the process was adapted in that each family improvisation served to explore how I react and respond to each indicated family member within the context of our musical relationship and past influential musical interactions that we shared.

As I prepared to engage in this phase, I realized that it might be helpful for me to start by first reflecting upon my own current relationship with music before reflecting upon my musical relationships with family members. Because this was my first experience of engaging in an experiential self-inquiry process, I also felt the need to explore this approach to help me understand how I could engage with it in ways that would lead to authentic introspection. I took some time to reflect upon my current perceptions of my musical abilities and upon my connections with music throughout my life thus far. After a brief warm-up period testing out the three instruments I had decided to use for this research, I chose piano because I believed that I would be better able to capture and translate thoughts and feelings on the piano with authenticity and aestheticism. Afterward, I realized that my choice had also been influenced by feelings of a need for

perfectionism when I play guitar (my primary instrument). I made a note to remain aware of this tendency when engaging in the subsequent family improvisations. This first improvisation lasted 21 minutes and 11 seconds.

As previously mentioned, my family members' musicianship has influenced my understanding of my own musicality and what it means to be musical at large. After this preliminary exploratory improvisation, I engaged in three separate improvisation sessions, wherein each improvisation served as a musical self-portrait where I tried to capture in sound my musical relationship with the relevant family member. At the beginning of each session, I wrote down memories and initial thoughts related to my musical relationship with the relevant family member to help direct the entirety of my thought process onto the improvisation that would emerge. I also explored the instrument options I had pre-selected (voice, piano, and guitar) in order to determine which might be best suited to create a musical portrait of my musical relationship with each family member.

In the second improvisation session I explored and reflected upon the musical relationship I have had with my father. As both the guitar and the piano were important instruments in the development of our musical relationship, I subsequently decided to do two improvisations in order to capture the full breadth of my father's influence. The first improvisation was 18 minutes and 47 seconds long. I used the piano because I recalled many significant experiences of learning music theory on the piano with my father in my early years of musical development. The second improvisation was 18 minutes and 57 seconds long. I used the guitar because I recalled salient moments of my musical development during my adolescence which were characterized by playing guitar with my father.

In the third improvisation session, I explored the musical relationship I have had with my mother. It was 17 minutes long. I decided to use guitar and my voice because the most salient musical interactions I recalled with my mother involved hearing her practice jazz standards on guitar while singing and sometimes scatting.

In the fourth improvisation I explored the musical relationship I have with my sister. It was 18 minutes and 9 seconds long. I used the guitar, but also periodically sang because this seemed to capture the essence of a musicality-based sibling rivalry that we engaged in during our childhoods–my prowess on the guitar and my sister's prowess as a singer.

Immediately after each family improvisation, I wrote down thoughts, feelings, and insights that emerged regarding my musical relationship with that particular family member and how this has influenced how I feel about my own musicality. I also made notes about how these musical relationships have impacted how I perceive musicality in others, including music therapy clients.

In the *incubation phase*, the researcher deliberately withdraws from exploring the research topic in order to let new insights develop "beneath the level of conscious awareness" (Sultan, 2019, p. 97). During this phase, I took two weeks wherein I had no purposeful engagement with this research.

In the *illumination phase*, the researcher re-visits the data collected with a new perspective, which may lead to new revelations (Moustakas, 1990). During this phase, I listened to all of the improvisation recordings, each one in full, one more time. As I listened (sometimes pausing the recording to reflect) I added additional notes to my journal relating to the research questions. Reflecting upon all of my journal entries, I created a narrative summary that succinctly described my own current relationship to music. I also created individual narrative summaries that described my musical relationship with each family member, and the way each relationship has influenced how I perceive my own musicality as well as musicality in others. I then conducted a cross-case analysis wherein common themes emerged that were organized into categories through an open and axial coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Contrasts among the data were also identified.

In the *explication phase,* the researcher must examine what new insights have emerged from the illumination phase and organize the insights into meaningful elements (Moustakas, 1990). In this phase, I again reflected upon the narrative summaries and the coded data, and further refined the categories and themes. Finally, I reflected upon, and subsequently described any further implications that these findings had in relation to my clinical work and in relation to my musician and music therapist self-concepts.

In the *creative synthesis phase*, the researcher translates the findings from the research and the summary of their experience into a meaningful creative product. (Moustakas, 1900; Sultan, 2019). Shortly after the immersion phase I decided that I needed to revisit the important musical passages in each improvisation and extract them into shorter, tangible themes reflecting my inner thoughts and feelings related to the research topic. Sensing that the improvisations provided an accurate representation of my personality in relation to the musical relationships I have with my family members, I felt the need to find *me* in these musical passages which in turn provided

feelings of conclusion and satisfaction in relation to my desire to understand my musicality—the original impetus for this study. I initially wanted to compose a musical piece using salient motifs extracted from my improvisations but I realized that this would require modification of musical elements (e.g., tempo, key, etc.) and that this would make them feel less authentic and not serve as a true representation of the feelings that inspired them. I decided instead to create a *sound collage*, which I consider to be a map of my musical self, that integrates the musical moments that inspired the personal findings of this research process. The sound collage layout was planned over a two-month period and took two days to compile, resulting in a 13-minute recording. It was assembled using the digital audio workstation Logic pro (Apple, 2023) wherein I used cutting tools and volume controls to facilitate smooth transitions between each excerpt.

Ethical Considerations

The emotional demands heuristic inquiry as a form of qualitative research, and the potential impact of the research process on the researcher and the study itself, present the risk of inadvertently using the research processes as a form of personal therapy (Sultan, 2019). Given this, I employed a variety of self-care strategies in order to independently address my own mental well-being, and consequently maintain the integrity of the research. This included bi-monthly therapy sessions throughout the immersion phase, consistent consultation with my supervisor, and frequent discussions with peer support networks. Content from personal therapy and from discourse with peers were not included in the study.

Chapter 4. Explication and Illumination

The primary research question for this heuristic self-inquiry was: as a newly qualified music therapist, what personal and professional insights emerge when I participate in an experiential self-inquiry process (i.e., self and family improvisations) that examines my assumptions about my own musicality? The subsidiary questions were: (a) How might these insights inform my clinical work? and (b) How might these insights inform my musician and music therapist self-concepts? To answer these questions, the current chapter presents four narrative summaries. The first describes my relationship with music at the time of the improvisation. The next three narrative summaries describe the musical relationships that I have with my father, my mother and my sister, respectively, and how each of these relationships have influenced how I perceive musicality—in myself and in others (i.e., clients).

These are followed by a cross-case analysis of these narrative summaries, which resulted in three overarching categories, each one containing three themes. The first category presents findings related to my musician self-concept. The second category describes interpretive findings related to musical trauma's that affect my current views on musicality. The third category describes in greater details the assumptions and biases I hold regarding musicality that were revealed in the research. In this section, further interpretations are presented to organize and make sense of what emerged. Selected excerpts from my journal (presented in *italics*) and audio excerpts from my improvisation recordings are included throughout this chapter and serve as a measure of credibility to support both my results and interpretations.

Narrative Summaries

First Improvisation: My Relationship to Music

Prior to beginning this improvisation, I asked myself: How do I see myself in relation to music? Immediately, I thought *I am always behind and always trying to catch up*. I have always had a strong connection to music, but this does not seem to translate into musical skill development. I know that I have a good ear for melody and natural understandings of musical patterns (i.e., aspects of a positive music self-concept that I would consider as innate abilities). However, I have not used these abilities toward developing a music performance career. A negative musical self-concept was revealed in the disparity I perceive between my musical potential and my current musical skills and abilities.

I engaged in musical warm-ups using guitar, piano and voice to decide which instrument I wanted to use for this first experiential improvisation. To my surprise, the piano felt more comfortable to me than guitar, my primary instrument. When warming up on the guitar I noticed that I was distracted by my own expectations of how well I should be able to play, especially as a self-described guitarist. Without further reflection, I began the improvisation on the piano and easily got lost in the music. Several unique motifs stood out to me because of particular musical elements (e.g. harmony, dissonance, rhythm, pace, dynamics) and the intense emotions that they conveyed to me (e.g. fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt). It felt as if I was able to briefly visit a part of myself that was scarcely visited but had something to say, and for me, this helped to affirm the potential value of engaging in an experiential self-inquiry process, something of which I had been previously unsure. Immediately after the improvisation I wrote:

> *I am coming down from what I think was a heavy amount of emotion incited by this first improvisation…I am at the present moment, excited to unpack what the music might reveal about how I subconsciously feel I relate with music, but I almost don't want to put what was revealed into words…*

When listening back to the improvisation during the immersion phase, I recognized tension and emotional subtext in the music during the moments when I had been reflecting on past learning and performance experiences. This was characterized by chords and ostinatos that used dissonant intervals (minor seconds and augmented fourths). "*I find it [a musical idea] as I go from a whole tone to a minor melody, as if I am dropping in and out of confusion and fear, maybe sadness… but the music, to me, reads anticipation… negative anticipation.*"

In re-reading this passage, I concluded that these negative emotions were related to self-evaluations about my own musicality. As a result of the disparity I perceive between my musical skills and my own standards of musicality, I experience a level of pressure that breeds challenging emotions such as fear, sadness, and confusion. However, there were also moments during the improvisation when I felt positively connected to the music and to myself, times when I felt I was in control of my state of being and was able to reflect that tranquility through the music. This felt like a state of flow and as I played, I consciously sought out this state, as if I needed to prove to myself that I am indeed as deeply connected to music as I would like to consider myself to be. However, there were also notable motifs that seemed to represent challenging repressed feelings about my musical ability. These included feelings of loneliness, childlike hesitance, feeling

trapped, emotional fatigue, and anger that were conveyed to me by some minor melodies, slower tempos, and low octaves. I also identified an important feeling of perseverance that was associated with my personal motivation to remain connected to music. Towards the end of the improvisation, I heard a musical conversation where I felt like the angry part of myself was saying *you suck at music* while the anxious and self-conscious parts of myself hesitantly agreed. The angry part of myself was revealed in the music by a transition from the high register to the low register, incorporating repeated octaves in a minor scale. Once I established a melody using octaves in the lower register, I alternated with the melody using minor chords in the high register, which I interpreted as the self-conscious side of me hesitantly agreeing (listen to Audio Excerpt 1).

Moving forward in this research process, I realized that it would be important to explore intense and complex emotions in order to answer my research questions. With this in mind, I concluded that my feelings towards avoiding the use of guitar were in fact important to explore and that I could do this by engaging in one or more improvisations on guitar. Therefore, in order to not brush over repressed emotional complexities, I strove to be aware of subtle inner conflicts that might influence my choice of instruments in the subsequent improvisations.

Second and Third Improvisations: My Musical Relationship with My Father

My musical development and understanding of musicality undoubtedly began with the musical influences of my father. As such, I chose to explore this relationship in my first family improvisation. I have early memories of spending time with my father and witnessing him work on music with unbeatable focus. When I was around 6 years old, I observed him closely in his studio and in other contexts. I noticed how embedded he was in his work and how he enjoyed himself when playing music—laughing when he would sneak in *La Marseillaise* into shows during his solos. He was (and is) proficient in a seemingly endless number of instruments and in applications of musical theory (both jazz and classical). My assumptions of what defines a musician were cooked fast by the hot fire of my father's influential work ethic.

At the age of nine, I had a natural and exceptionally strong desire to be like my father and enter that musical world; but, what seemed easy for him was quite difficult for me. Little did I know that my parents also envisioned me as a musician. Prior to my first family portrait improvisation, I noted in my journal: *I remember taking the initiative to ask my father to teach me guitar and my mother telling me later (almost immediately after) you just made him really happy.* Hearing this further motivated me to pursue music and work toward becoming a skilled guitarist,

just like my father, in pursuit of his pride and admiration. I set high standards and would internally punish myself for not practicing every day, for not being able to improvise in an effortless way, and for not having in-depth theoretical understandings of the relationships between improvisational scales and other scales and chords. I still grapple with these same issues. My perceived inability to meet these standards became associated with disappointing my father, which resulted in feelings of rejection, isolation, and guilt. Prior to engaging in the first improvisation related to my musical relationship with my father, I noted in my journal:

> I remember difficult moments where my unpracticed relative pitch wanted to find the note on a piano (through trial and error) instead of reading sheet music to which my father would respond 'Are you guessing? Don't guess. If you don't know, you don't know—a comment that made me feel like I disappointed him. I remember similar moments where my attention span could not keep up with his explanations and hearing 'um…. Is this boring you? Or do you want to stop?' and my brain in the moment thinking 'whatever you do, don't stop. Otherwise, you will disappoint him.'

What my father perceived as lack of endurance made me feel that I lacked the necessary motivation and that perhaps being a musician was not a suitable career for me. At a certain point I stopped learning music for myself and my motivation to continue with music was predicated on the unconfirmed notion that being a musician was the only way for me to really connect with my father, develop a stronger bond with him, and make him proud.

When improvising on the piano during the initial improvisation about my father, the very first musical idea that came to mind was the simple blues pattern that he had tried to teach me on the piano using the left hand to play simple I-IV-V chord progressions and using the right hand to improvise on a pentatonic scale. Playing this revealed a feeling of guilt as I still could not efficiently improvise in this style in the way my father had tried to teach me. I noted in my journal:

> As I noticed the fact that I was, in the moment, struggling to improvise in such a way, the thought that came in my mind was 'wow… all this time went by and I still never learned to do this properly' … This I think makes me feel guilty because I had the opportunity to take my dad's intention to teach me to improvise to heart and could've have mastered it in the decade or so that has passed since, I have thrown that potential to become a great musician out the window.

I also noted:

Listening back to it I feel uncomfortable. Surely this has to do with me experiencing myself struggling to play in this style… This was such a big part of me and my dad's musical relationship and I think failure to play this became so emotionally charged towards frustration that I avoid playing this [style] altogether…Listening to it now I hear a voice in my head thinking 'why did I even try this.'

It occurred to me that in order to avoid ongoing feelings of worthlessness and rejection over the course of my musical development, I have avoided learning or practicing things that I failed to learn from my father, which I interpret as a form of active musical repression where I chose to develop certain skills and not others. When listening back to the second improvisation on the piano, I noticed that the musical elements I employed (e.g., rhythm, pitch, harmonic arrangement, intervals, and melodies) seemed to convey emotions that I was experiencing in response to my memories. For example, in a passage that starts at 15 minutes and five seconds (listen to audio excerpt 2) the music seemed to reveal something to me about my frustrations and perceived failures when trying to learn music, I noted in my journal:

What followed [exploration of major and minor scales in the middle and high register] was a transition into loud, dissonant, chaotic chords with a low register bass, all of which paint a picture of somebody pounding on a piece of machinery desperately, and furiously trying to get it to work. I can tell [that] this image is an important reflection of my relationship to music, but I wonder if I'm the person banging on the machinery (which is my musical self) or if I (subconsciously) picture it as my father banging on it thinking 'why can't he learn music like I could?'"

This reflection emphasizes a self-inflicted pressure originating from my fear of failing at music and depicts the magnitude of my negative reaction (loud, intense, aggressive chords) in response to my father's frustration when he taught me guitar or piano. Throughout my childhood a relational disconnect would occur between me and my father after these types of moments. However, I associated my feelings of frustration with my inability to concentrate and learn musical concepts rather than associating them with the struggles I was having in my relationship with my father.

Also present in the music (also heard in Audio Excerpt #2) was a sense of feeling lost, reflected through the use of dissonant chord structures and arpeggiations. Trying to live up to my father's standards and my own fear of failing as a musician created a conflicting mindset when perceiving my own musicality. This pulled me in different directions leading me to experience complicated

emotions that were too difficult for me to understand as a child but still provoked a reaction. I still experience this conflict within myself and feel weighed down by my definition of musicianship, as if the standards I internalized are continuing to stop me from moving forward in my own musical development. The low register that I played on the piano conveys a feeling of habitual heaviness which appeared at various points throughout the course of the improvisation. I noted in my journal:

> *Moving forward in the improvisation I seem to try moving to the high register, but I sink back down to the lower register where it feels right, after which I try revisiting blues and decide to make a chord minor as if to express 'It sounds like this but it feels more like this.'*

In the second improvisation about my father I had much less clarity regarding where to begin on the guitar in comparison to the first improvisation on the piano. It seemed that I did not have a clear memory that stood out like the memory of learning blues with my father. As a result, I began the improvisation by playing a series of loosely connected chords and scales, responding to chords with a melodic phrase and vice versa. Listening back to this beginning portion of the improvisation, I construed that I was trying to mimic what my father's playing sounded like when he practiced gypsy jazz songs and scales. There is a subsequent section in which I strayed away from this characteristic approach and instead fell upon a motif based on a minor chord using open strings, which adds an ambient quality. This section seems to convey the salient emotional content of the improvisation, fear and anxiety. The musical elements that reflected these emotions included a brisk increase in pace, the transition to a minor key, the addition of a fingerpicking pattern in an irregular rhythm, accentuation that creates a syncopated meter, and a harmonic progression using an open string as a grounded note. This resulted in the incorporation of 9th degrees in some of the chords, and a bassline that goes up a chromatic scale (listen to Audio Excerpt #3).

> *I start an ambient sounding improvisation that seems to convey concern sinking into it. I finger pick a pattern to make it go faster and I'm thinking that I've accessed the negative emotions associated with that memory which are fear and anxiety, like I'm anxiously trying to catch up to something, maybe a version of myself that I felt would be satisfactory.*

I interpret this part as a coping mechanism that manifested in the moment where I felt emotionally overwhelmed by a guitar improvisation meant to reflect my father's musical influence on me. I was relieved from the pressure of mimicking my father's playing and moved away from what was also an abbreviated representation of our musical relationship. The improvisation as a whole seems to embody a reoccurring theme of negative emotions and pressure I experienced

trying to meet the musical standards I adopted from my father. While I currently consider myself more proficient on the guitar than any other instrument, I continue to hold myself to extremely high standards of musicianship on this instrument which in turn influences how I perceive my own musicality. Throughout my journal, I repeatedly referred to my guitarist self-concept of my "guitar complex."

Both improvisations about my musical relationship with my father helped me to further clarify why I had experienced such pressure and anxiety throughout the course of my musical learning and development. I began to recognize how I had repressed complex emotions and how these can still resurface when I engage in music. I still avoid certain genres and techniques as my perception of failing to learn or play them adequately is too difficult to face. In the shadow of my father's musical abilities and standards, I experience a perpetual feeling of being *behind* in my musical development and a need to catch up.

As a music therapist, I need to further reflect upon how my hesitancy to engage in certain musical genres or approaches may inadvertently impact my ability to provide some clients with the types of tailored music experiences that would be most helpful for them. On the other hand, I feel that my experiences have enabled me to see musicality in clients that I was (and sometimes still am) unable to recognize in myself. It does not bother me if clients sing off key or play out of time. I do not work to *correct* them, but rather work with them to understand their own unique musical aesthetics and how they might engage in music experiences in ways that are enjoyable and helpful for them.

Fourth Improvisation: My Musical Relationship with My Mother

My mother had a subtle, but notable influence on my musical upbringing. She is primarily a singer, and while growing up, I witnessed her sing beautifully on multiple occasions with effortless pitch accuracy, sweeping the crowds away with her talent and charisma. I do not remember her practicing music as often as my father nor does she have his level of proficiency on a large variety of instruments, however, my mother also plays rhythm guitar, and she is one of the best wash board percussionists I have ever seen (not that I have known many wash board percussionists in my life). In spite of not seeing her practice much, she seemed to have mastered her chosen musical pursuits. All in all, I resonated with her level of devotion to music, and I admired the amount of confidence she showed, never seeming to question her own musical abilities or background.

When I would rehearse for shows with my mother and father, I remember the experience as being more amusing than anxiety-provoking. This may have been partially due to the type of energy my mother brought to each rehearsal. Whenever she made musical mistakes, she very rarely became frustrated. In fact, I remember many instances where my mother would laugh at her own mistakes, and that was extremely comforting for me. To witness my mother, a professional musician, make mistakes but humorously accept them, taught me in theory to allow for the idea that mistakes can happen and be accepted, even though I often still found it difficult to apply this rule to myself. It is weird to think that a solution to my musical anxiety might have been as simple as appropriately timed laughter. That being said, my mother's forgiving and flexible work ethic was also always beautifully accompanied by a comforting and forgiving attitude. When I reflect upon current aspects of my musical self, I recognize some aspects of my mother's charismatic energy and forgiving and flexible work ethic, specifically when I play music recreationally and when I conduct music therapy sessions with clients. For instance, I will laugh at any musical mistakes like my mother would or make witty comments and faces while playing songs with clients in an effort to make them smile to communicate that mistakes are accepted. I will also use humor and add excitement to my voice as a way of maintaining clients' musical motivation and enthusiasm, especially when working in groups. I think that I learned to enjoy certain aspects of my musicianship, and even showmanship, through my mother. After listening back to the improvisation about my musical relationship with my mother, I was reminded of music that I had enjoyed composing and I wrote the following passage in my journal: *All in all I think I am starting to see my mother's influences on my musical taste and more importantly her impact on my positive musical self-concept that influences me to write music and play in front of people charismatically.*

I used guitar and voice for this improvisation and imagined myself back in our dining room listening to my mom rehearse jazz standards. I tried to imitate this jazz style by scatting while playing a variation of typical II-V7-I chord progressions. Although I typically feel insecure with regard to my voice, I noticed when listening back that I was not feeling the sense of discomfort I usually do when hearing myself sing. In fact, I found myself feeling unexpectedly pleased by this aspect of the experience. However, I also found myself reacting to the mistakes I perceived in my guitar playing. This was different from my usual response wherein I fixate on my vocal performance and rely on my stability on the guitar to give me a feeling of safety. This led me to infer that the frame in which the improvisation took place (i.e., placing myself in a mental position

of playing music for/in relationship with my mother) relieved some of the pressure I usually put on my vocal performance.

When engaging in this improvisation, I also remembered my mother's emotional investment in both my sister and me whenever we performed. She approached us with encouragement and support after our performances and openly expressed her pride in ways that felt tangible to me. I always had difficulty accepting when people complimented my musical performances, which was almost always followed by much stronger feelings of doubt or pressure. However, my mother's supportive responses to mine and my sister's playing made each performance feel important and valuable whether it was musically impressive or not. As I stated in my journal: *My mother was the only person I never felt judged by musically.*

My mother frequently made efforts to try and relieve some of the stress she saw in me whenever I was worried about my musical performance. For instance, when I displayed anger (usually when struggling to play a song correctly), she often told me to relax and play slower. Once, when I was experiencing stage fright, she said something like: "Visualize the worst possible thing that could happen to you on stage. It will help you accept it and then you will be less afraid of it." I feel I could have taken that advice to heart more often than I did. Pondering on the moments of support my mother has given me, it seems increasingly evident that this improvisation contained unique components (as compared to the other family improvisations) because it was reflective of the unique influence she had on my musical development. One of these unique components was liberal use of my voice from the very beginning of the improvisation. Another component was frequent use of major seven shapes and arpeggios (i.e. major triads with a major seven over the base of the chord). For instance, Audio Excerpt #4 features a ii-V-I cadence and emphasizes a major seven chord on the tonic by arpeggiating it. When listening back to this part of the improvisation and recording thoughts in my journal, I made a connection between my affinity for songwriting and my mother's musical influence:

> *I also noticed motifs or chord progressions that resembled ones I used in songs that I have written, representing some kind of style of music I resonate with, that I attribute to my mother's musicality. A style characterized by the use of major 7 chords as the "home chord" to come back to and end chord progressions with… All in all I think that I am starting to see my mother's influence on my musical taste and more importantly, [on aspects of] my positive musical self-concept.*

It was interesting to find that the music in this improvisation reminded me of songs that I had written in the past – songs where I am proud of my musicality. When writing chord progressions, I often made a habit of ending them with a major seven chord. However, I have sometimes consciously tried to avoid this habit when song writing in order to challenge myself to hold to *higher standards*. In retrospect, this habit seems significant as it relates to my musical preference on a personal level, and also seems connected to my musical relationship with my mother, as I am mimicking an element of her musical style. Immediately after and when listening back to this improvisation, I noted distinct feelings of comfort, safety, and tranquility.

In the early stages of my musical development, I think that my ability to connect with my mother and feeling accepted by her both inside and outside of musical contexts freed me from some self-doubt and pressure of having to live up to the musical standards I had adopted from my father and sister. My relationship with my mother, both within and outside of music, gave me some respite from the complicated musical dynamics that existed among myself, my father and my sister. My mother may have been a conduit for the musical self-acceptance and creativity that I aim to embrace in my present roles as a music therapist and, albeit more hesitantly, as a musician

Fifth Improvisation: My Musical Relationship with My Sister

Regretfully, my sister and I did not have a constructive musical relationship when we were growing up, most likely a result of distancing ourselves from each other, musically and socially. I always perceived my older sister as extremely talented and successful in every desirable domain. She was an aspiring figure to look up to, and a very difficult example to live up to. In hindsight, I wish I had been able to see my sister as the positive role model she was, but that was not the way our relationship unfolded. Rather than having cohesion and cooperation within our musical relationship, there was rivalry.

Like me, it seemed that my sister recognized that music was an effective medium through which we could bond with our father. My sister and I competed for our father's affection and our competition brought us to unfortunate moments in which we verbally slandered each other's musical preferences and musical abilities. Additionally, our competitive spirit was a powerful (albeit often unconscious) motivator for practicing and learning specific skills. I do remember feeling a sense of satisfaction when knowing how to do something that my sister could not do. When I think about this now, I believe that our sibling rivalry directed my attention away from musical learning and focused it upon what I am now terming as *musical parlor tricks*, skills

wherein I could showcase certain musical abilities without having to understand underlying musical concepts. Immediately after playing the improvisation about our musical relationship on the guitar, I felt the need to write the following in my journal:

> *Finger picking has been a skill I've found to read [i.e., be perceived] as professional but [I've] known inside that it isn't, sort of like a musical parlor trick… as I say this I realized a potential pattern: All parlor tricks or skills that I used as shortcuts to make it seem like I am skillful or masterful… the parlor tricks all originated from trying to learn guitar skills as quickly as possible to impress my parents and beat my sister in this competition.*

The instrumentation that I ended up using in this improvisation was significant. I initially set out to use guitar and voice because I felt that this combination would best represent our musical relationship, my sister being a vocalist and myself a guitarist. While I had the intention to sing many times throughout the improvisation, I could not bring myself to do it. Whenever the idea came to mind, my body seemed to freeze, and my vocal cords seemed to tighten. This vocal inhibition seemed to be specifically related to my musical relationship with my sister as I had not experienced this same difficulty in the previous family improvisations. As I journaled, just prior to engaging in this improvisation, I recalled a time when in the heat of a sibling dispute, my sister declared I was a bad singer. Despite other hurtful comments having been said in past arguments, I took this comment to heart. I understood this statement to mean "I am no longer allowed to sing because I am not good at it." My fear of singing had always been an issue, and an unforgiving obstacle to surmount when I needed to perform. As I listened back to this improvisation, I wrote the following:

> *I get the image of me finding a chord progression, riffing on it while thinking 'maybe now's a good time to sing' and failing to do so, and sighing, and sighing and scratching my head as if to think 'Oh well… I'm not going to sing to demonstrate my musical ability, but I can fingerpick pretty fast so let me just do that'* (listen to Audio Excerpt #5).

This improvisation demonstrated that this powerful memory of my sister criticizing my vocal ability still unconsciously affects my ability to sing today. I believe that hiding behind my guitar skills helps me to counteract the feelings of shame I feel for not being able to sing to a certain standard. Furthermore, it seems that my musical relationship with my sister has had an impact on my guitarist self-concept. For as long as I can remember, I always had more interest in becoming a guitarist while my sister had set her sights on being a vocalist. With feelings of competition and

knowledge of each other's musical progress always peripherally present, we both seemed to assume that each of these musical domains were spoken for. When I was told by my sister that I was a bad singer and that I should not sing, I felt the line was clearly drawn between our musical domains and I was certainly not allowed to cross it. From then on, the trajectory of my whole musical development had changed, not only in the way I decided to develop my own musicianship, but also in the way I allowed myself to enjoy music. I became so fixated on my sister's criticism that I would ultimately cease to let out even a hum in our household unless I was absolutely certain that no one was home. With these unspoken boundaries well established, my sister and I actually got along much better. I would even go as far as to say that these boundaries allowed us to develop respect for one another's craft. In fact, before engaging in this improvisation I wrote: *I remember seeing my sister perform and thinking 'I am so proud she is my sister…It's hard to believe we're related because I could never do that.'*

Unfortunately, the more my sister excelled in her musicianship, the more self-conscious I felt about my own, further solidifying feelings of isolation and learned helplessness. Recently, it has become clear to the both of us that the aftermath of our sibling rivalry had not been worth the competition for our parents' affection and we have begun taking steps to repair some of the ruptures experienced in our past due to our appraisal of turbulent familial relationships. It is by following my sister's lead that I have found myself geared towards revisiting the difficult moments in my musical development that affect me to this day. In fact, I have realized that my sister is, in part, the inspiration for this research. Through this improvisation process, both the reality and the perpetuity of past musical traumas were highlighted regarding the musical relationship between my sister and me. This process allowed me to tangibly access, and witness myself accessing, my fear of being criticized as a vocalist. While I have always assumed that my fear of vocal criticism was at the root of my reluctance to ever present myself as a vocalist to others, this research has revealed its impact on my music therapy practice. For instance, while I do use songs in my practice, I rarely engage in other vocalization-based interventions such as vocal toning, chanting and mantras. I have also realized that I am reluctant to invite clients to sing early on in our therapeutic process, thinking that it may put them in too vulnerable of a position.

Cross-Case Analysis

Once the narrative summaries were completed, I conducted a cross-case analysis wherein nine themes emerged that were organized into three categories. Contrasts among the data were

also identified and integrated into the descriptions of these themes. The categories and themes are presented below in Table 1. The remainder of the chapter concisely summarizes how insights that emerged from within these categories and themes may inform my musician self-concept, my music therapist self-concept, and my music therapy clinical work moving forward.

Table 1

Categories and Themes

Category 1: Musician self-concept
Theme 1a: Guitarist self-concept
Theme 1b: Vocalist self-concept
Theme 1c: Pianist self-concept
Theme 1d: Composer-songwriter self-concept
Category 2: Musical traumas
Theme 2a: Musical failure
Theme 2b: Isolation
Theme 2c: Learned helplessness
Category 3: Assumptions and Biases Regarding Musicality
Theme 3a: Assumptions about musicality
Theme 3b: Embracing a music therapist self-concept
Theme 3c: Impostor syndrome

Category 1: Musician Self-Concept

Theme 1a: Guitarist Self-Concept

A common factor that instigated deep reflection throughout the whole experiential process was the use of guitar in each improvisation and the consequent analysis of my guitarist self-concept, a term I related to one's musician self-concept which refers to an individual's view of their self in relation to music and musical ability. The use of guitar in my improvisations was interesting because it produced both a sense of comfort and discomfort.

The insights revealed in the previous reflections on my family improvisations suggest that I inherently hold particular, and what I perceive as, high standards in relation to my abilities on guitar and that this is due in great part to the nature of my past musical relationships with my family members. As a result, I inflict a harsh attitude upon myself, often unconsciously, regarding

what I perceive as limitations of my musicianship. I feel a need to achieve the standards I created as a child when observing my father perform and if I do not, I am not comfortable calling myself a professional musician or skilled guitarist. However, my reflections also revealed that I have a connection to the guitar as an instrument, and to the identity of being a guitarist. While I feel that some of these connections are positive, they are also linked to my inner desire to live up to my father's image and receive his approval.

I also have realized that I am much more acutely aware of the guitar competencies that I perceive myself to lack rather than those I perceive to have mastered. As a result, I find it difficult to accept that I could be considered as a skilled guitarist, and adequate musician. As a music therapist however, I find that I use the guitar more often than the piano and I do not experience anxiety or feelings of inadequacy when I tell clients or colleagues that guitar is my primary instrument. It seems that that my combined identity as a music therapist and guitarist is different than that of my combined identity as a musician and guitarist. In fact, the complex insecurity that manifests from my negative musician self-concept might reciprocally contribute to a sense of security in my music therapist self-concept. While I perceive my guitar competencies as not living up to my standards of musicianship, I feel that they are adequate enough for me to be able to provide a music therapy client with a meaningful musical experience. I feel a sense of relief from the idea that clients may focus more on the quality of the musical experience rather than on standards of musical performance.

Going forward, there are several issues that I need to reflect upon and keep in my conscious awareness. While I feel a unique sense of confidence in my guitar abilities during music therapy sessions, the Canadian Association of Music Therapists lists advanced musical competencies that I could continue to work on (CAMT, n.d.). I also need to ensure that I am not using clients in some way to alleviate my own insecurities as a guitarist and a musician. If a client were to criticize my guitar playing, I would need to respond in a way that addresses their needs rather taking their critique personally. If I were to work with a client who embraced the guitar as a part of their own identity, I would need to be aware of how my insecurities could inadvertently impact our therapeutic relationship as well as my confidence in the work. These findings call for a need to reflect upon how my past experiences and guitarist self-concept might serve as resources wherein I can help foster a client's musical self-concept in constructive and supportive ways.

Theme 1b: Vocalist Self-Concept

Reflections on vocal components of the improvisation experiences indicated that I hold high standards for how an adequate singer should sound, and as such, maintain a negative view of my own vocal abilities. During the improvisation that centred around my musical relationship with my sister, I wanted to include my voice but was unable to do so. I felt both an emotional, and a physical resistance:

> *I wanted to sing, but I couldn't. Multiple times I noticed the idea of singing popping into my head, but it never felt right. At one point when the idea of singing popped into my head, I physically shook my head and tightened my lips… It was so weird to embody that repression.*

When reflecting upon the musical relationship I had with my mother and listening back to the recording, my improvised singing felt natural, satisfying, and even enjoyable. I did not judge myself and it appears that I am able to enjoy singing in contexts where I do not feel fear of being judged. Even when I sing in a room by myself, I have a sense of my sister listening in. In music therapy sessions, I need to be aware if this feeling of fear arises in relation to singing and take steps to address it so as not to impact clients' sessions in ways that are not helpful for them.

Just as the negative aspects of my guitarist self-concept has hindered my ability to consider myself as a musician, my negative vocalist self-concept (i.e. how I perceive my singing ability) also stops me from wanting to perform vocally on stage. I am more keenly aware of my perceived vocal incompetency and failure to recognize any positive aspects of my *vocalist self-concept.* Although I know that vocalization-based interventions may be useful for clients (and not necessarily dependent on high level singing ability), I rarely use them in sessions, perhaps in some cases subconsciously protecting my clients from being judged by others because I know how hurtful this can be. Moving forward, I need to work through issues related to my voice, perhaps with the support of a vocal coach or even a music therapist. I need to be able to incorporate vocal activities into sessions, focusing on the benefits for clients rather than on my discomfort in using my voice.

Theme 1c: Pianist Self-Concept

The piano was used during the first improvisation exploring my own relationship to music, and in the second improvisation exploring my musical relationship with my father. As stated earlier, using piano surprisingly provided a unique sense of comfort as compared to using the guitar and my voice. The piano improvisations elicited the greatest number of emotional reactions –

reactions that became more evident after listening back to the recorded improvisations. As compared to my guitarist and vocalist self-concepts, it appears that my pianist self-concept is less influenced by family imposed musical standards. I did not experience the same kinds of family expectations in relation to piano when growing up, so I currently experience a level of comfort and freedom when I improvise and express myself on this instrument.

That being said, I am still influenced by my father's musical standards when I perform on piano in front of an audience, feeling much less comfortable than when I am playing the piano for myself. However, when I make a mistake on the piano during a music therapy session, it does not cause me as much anxiety as musical mistakes that I make when using guitar or my voice in sessions. This suggests that contexts relating to musicianship and performance evoke feelings of insecurity in my pianist self-concept while music therapy, or private contexts seem not to include such influences.

Theme 1d: Composer-Songwriter Self-Concept

In each improvisation I heard musical elements that I found emotionally provocative and even therapeutic. These included motifs accompanied by inspiring chord progressions, sung melodies that I found nice to listen to, cadences that I found effectively used, and major seven chords to create a feeling of pleasantness. Coming out of the experiential phase, I experienced a strong motivation to continue working with some of these musical ideas, leading me to recognize the importance of my composer songwriter self-concept. Songwriting and composition have been a positive influence in my development as a musician and a music therapist, and they have helped me gain a sense of agency over my musical knowledge. Currently, I engage in songwriting for leisure and I feel motivated to write and produce music with other musicians. In music therapy, I frequently use compositional experiences with clients as I believe that composition techniques can be therapeutic for those who struggle with their musician self-concept. This study has revealed that I may see myself in others when they struggle with their musician self-concept. The findings from this study also indicate that when I compose music, I am influenced by my past music experiences. Therefore, I need to ensure that I use compositional experiences with my clients in ways that will work for them which may be different than the ways that work for me. Finally, my positive composer-songwriter self-concept might help to foster and strengthen my overall musician self-concept and I have recognized that song writing serves me as an important means of self-care.

Category 2: Musical Traumas

Theme 2a: Perceived Musical Failure

Due to the deeply ingrained nature of my family's connection to music, our interpersonal relationships were (and still are) very synonymous with our musical relationships. As a child, music was not only a mode of self-exploration and development for me, but also a tangible way in which I could engage in interactions with each family member, with my musical development being closely tied to my self-esteem. Failure in music meant failure to prove my self-worth, and this often negatively impacted how I connected with my family members, especially with my father and my sister. I worked hard to achieve musical competencies out of fear of rejection.

Moving forward, I need to consider how I might develop my identity as a musician on my own terms, without seeking family or other approval. Perhaps being a music therapist has given me some distance from my family's world of musicianship while still allowing me to work in music on a professional level. I need to further reflect upon how my musical traumas and perceived musical failures might inform my work as a music therapist and also be aware of how these issues hold potential for negative countertransference. For example, these past experiences may constructively inform or inadvertently impact work that I do with clients who have been told by authority figures (and believe) that they are not musical or have a bad singing voice.

Theme 2b: Isolation

My self-perceived failures in music resulted in feelings of fear. I felt that if I failed as a musician and did not make my parents proud of my musical accomplishments, that I did not truly belong as a member of my family. I never felt that I could be as good a musician as any of them and I did not feel the same motivation as they did to learn and perform music. This, in turn, made me feel alone and isolated. I also felt like I let my family down (musically). These feelings of isolation affected my relationship with my family leading me to distance myself from them during my early adolescence as a way of creating a distinct identity. By choosing to become a music therapist, I have maintained a certain distance from my family members who are all professional musicians and work in a very different musical contexts than I do.

Upon reflection, it may be the case that my lack of motivation to continue developing my musicianship when I was younger was due to the fact that I did not feel that I belonged in the same musical world as my family. This had important implications on my musician self-concept as I continually rejected the idea of becoming a musician and avoided developing musical skills altogether.

I have hopes that going forward my evolving music therapist self-concept will motivate me to work on musical competencies again, perhaps in new and more constructive ways. However, this research has revealed that the way I feel about my competencies as a musician still hinder my musical motivation. Going forward I will need to find pathways to resolving these feelings, in ways that prioritize my own self-care.

Theme 2c: Learned Helplessness

Throughout my musical upbringing, I developed a tendency to believe that I would never be able to learn or retain certain musicianship skills, so at some point I stopped trying, and there are certain styles, techniques and music experiences that I avoid to this day. As I have continued to develop my musicality to work towards a career in music therapy, I have still avoided practicing the same skills that I associated with failure, fearing that I still cannot learn them. I experience this as a sense of learned helplessness where I feel that I cannot change certain aspects of my musicality, so I do not even try. It will be important for me to explore this issue in my own personal work in order to foster self-confidence and motivation to further my own ongoing musical development in constructive ways.

My experience of learned helplessness may inform me on how to support clients who are experiencing similar feelings, whether that be in relation to music skills or perhaps in other areas of their lives. However, I also need to remain aware of how this issue may inadvertently impact my clinical work with clients. For example, the blues styles that I avoided playing, because I could not master them as well as my father, should not be avoided if this is what a client needs.

Category 3: Assumptions and Biases Regarding Musicality

Theme 3a: Assumptions About Musicality

This research revealed assumptions that I hold about musicality. Rather than focusing on musicality as an innate quality, I have assumed that it is characterized by one's dedication and motivation to pursue music. For instance, when I know that someone is spending a great deal of time honing their musical craft (as my father did) I assume that they are a *musical* person, even if that is not immediately evident in their playing. Similarly, I tend to consider those that spend more time on music than me as being more musical than I am regardless of their actual performance capabilities or public success. I also assume I have not fulfilled my own musical potential. As I noted in my journal: *Nowadays, I still feel guilt when I see that motivation to play music in other musicians because it reminds me of my ruined potential when I see somebody else fulfill it.* I also

assume that a lack of knowledge about music is a measure of one's musicality. For instance, if I am asked about a famous artist that I do not know about, I will relate my lack of knowledge to my assumption of how much a musical person should know, and decide that my lack of knowledge indicates that I am less musical than a person who does know this information.

It is important for me to be aware of these assumptions that as they could impact my clinical work in unhelpful ways. For instance, if a client displays a deep interest in jazz, I may feel compelled to impress the client by sharing my knowledge and expertise in this area, thus proving to myself and to the client that I am in fact musical. Alternatively, if a client expresses a desire to explore classical music, I might feel discouraged by my lack of knowledge and expertise in that domain and see this as a lack of musicality on my part. While I will need to continue to reflect upon how I need to address these assumptions in my personal life, awareness of them will help me to avoid inappropriately projecting them onto clients and help me to stay focused on developing authentic therapeutic musical relationships.

Theme 3b: Embracing a Music Therapist Self-Concept

Letting go of the musical expectations (which could also be labelled as assumptions), I tried to live up to as a musician and as a son has brought me much relief and allowed me to more fully embrace a music therapist self-concept. I feel empowered and a sense of independence knowing that I can specialize in a music profession that falls outside of my family members' areas of music expertise. However, I still need to ensure that I do not avoid learning musical skills and abilities that would serve me well in my music therapy practice and I need to be aware of instances that may arise in sessions where I feel the need to prove my musical abilities to myself or to my clients. I might even avoid engaging in certain kinds of music experiences with clients if I do not feel musically adequate. Moving forward, I will need to reflect upon how I can make peace with and perhaps even embrace my own musicianship both within and outside of music therapy contexts.

Theme 3c: Impostor syndrome:

The term *impostor syndrome* describes the failure to internalize accomplishments despite objective achievements and results in perpetuating self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as a fraud or impostor (Bravata et al., 2020). Throughout my childhood, I felt the need to show a high level of musical proficiency for several reasons. Today, I continue to focus on perceived (i.e., assumed) musical weaknesses, and I experience impostor syndrome in both my roles as a musician

and as a music therapist. The use of parlour tricks, mentioned earlier in the narrative summaries, is an example of how this impostor syndrome has manifested into my construction of musicality, and because my standards for musicianship imply skills and abilities that I do not possess, I feel anxious when others assume that I am a musician and label me as such. The pressure from these standards was present throughout each improvisation and suggested that I still rely on the use of parlor tricks for comfort. Therefore, I need to become aware of the skills that I have considered (i.e., assumed) to exhibit musical proficiency so that I can avoid having the need to show these skills dictate what musical experiences or what songs I choose to present in session.

Another example includes the tension I feel when improvising. When I listened back to my improvisations, I can hear motifs that I wanted to be played, but I hear myself being held back by my perceived lack of musical knowledge. This continues to negatively influence my musician and music therapist self-concepts I am still self-conscious about sight reading; my limited experience in classical music styles, the need for extensive knowledge of music theory, and the need for advanced clinical improvisation skills. Not being able to demonstrate these skills in the ways I would like to leads me to fixate on my perceived weaknesses as a music-therapist and musician, which in turn may lead to avoid certain musical experiences. I will need to be especially mindful of this issue when working with clients whose musical needs may lead to certain musical avoidances and/or trigger feelings of musical inadequacy.

Chapter 5. Creative Synthesis and Implications

The final phase of Moustakas's (1990) heuristic methodology is the creative synthesis, wherein the research process and/or results are represented through creative means. The present chapter describes the process and rationale for the creative synthesis along with an accompanying audio file. Limitations of the study are also presented. As personal and professional implications for me (the researcher) have been presented in Chapter 4, they will not be presented again here, and this chapter will conclude with potential implications of this study for other music therapist researchers and clinicians.

Creative Synthesis

When considering how to best represent the personal and tacit dimensions of this research through artistic media, I decided to create something that reflected my personal experience of the study, and something that would provide me with a sense of closure to what ended up being a charged emotional process. This experience opened me up to many new ideas and considerations, many of which I am still working through. When listening back to the improvisations, I identified several motifs that seemed to represent my unique experience of inner personal discovery about my own musicality. I extracted these important moments from each improvisation and compiled them together to create a sound collage (see final audio file). I considered musical elements such as key, instrument use, dynamics and pace, in order to create continuity and cohesiveness and added some additional excerpts that also helped to fulfill this same purpose. I was able to take time and sit with moments from the improvisations I had listened to many times, taking care to preserve them but at the same time create a new aesthetic quality.

The sound collage begins with multiple audio clips from the improvisations layered on top of one another. This creates an erratic and chaotic feeling and represents something I did in each improvisation to release frustration and clear my mind before finding a melody or chord progression to work with. The rest of the sound collage proceed as follows:

- 0:18 features a motif I associated with the image of somebody pounding on a piece of broken machinery which I felt was metaphorical representation of my musical relationship with my father when I was growing up.
- 0:41 presents a musical idea reflecting "negative anticipation" and attributed it to feelings of fear, confusion and sadness
- 1:15 presents a melody which I deem to be a representation of my inner child.

- 1:29 features a minor chord progression that I feel represents a sense of loneliness and eventually leads to a motif in a major key that I feel represents a sense of hope.
- 2:32 presents a short musical idea characterized by fast play without a clear direction and is used to clear the mind and start fresh with a new idea.
- 2:46 features a motif representing an inner dialogue between a part of me that holds extremely harsh standards for musical ability saying, "you suck at music" and a softer, susceptible voice acknowledging every criticism willingly.
- 3:40 presents an ambient motif that expresses a feeling of being lost and concludes the emotional content of the previous musical segments.
- 4:17 features a new motif fades in representing a confident but anxious style of playing; originating from a more mature version of myself that continued to develop my craft while still carrying negative perceptions about my musicality.
- 5:38 starts a new segment representing an attempt to sing and communicates an uneasiness towards demonstrating what I perceive as my weaker musical abilities.
- 6:49 features a segment symbolizing and reflecting the eventual retreat into a fingerpicking rhythm that is comfortable and reflects confidence
- 8:47 reflects new-found confidence in my musicality through the use of familiar chord progressions, representing moments that I felt confident about my own musicality through the development of my composer/songwriter self-concept.
- 9:54 a new segment fades which I attributed to underlying feelings of concern and doubt, meant to contrast the previous segment reflecting confidence.
- 10:25 The final segment is introduced continuing an earlier theme associated with a sense of hope. This theme represents resolution, acceptance of doubts and fears, and continued hope towards acceptance of myself as a musical person

Listening to the collage after its completion I was reminded of the moments from my musical upbringing and memories of this self-exploration process that resulted in realizations. I felt a sense of satisfaction with this end product and the process that lead me to it.

Limitations

This study contained some limitations. The time constraints of a Master's thesis impacted the duration of the data collection and analysis phases which may have been enhanced by more

time for in-depth reflection. As a new music therapist, I am still developing my professional identity and this research methodology was also new to me. My perspectives may evolve as I gain more experience in both of these areas. Finally, more in-depth analysis of the music improvisations might have enhanced, changed, and/or further verified the results and my interpretations.

Implications

Clinical Implications

Though the research questions explored in this study are grounded within my own experiences, this study also serves as an example of the relevance of reflexive research and practices for all music therapists. Each music therapist is tasked with creating shared musical spaces with clients that have their own unique, and dynamic relationships with music (Bruscia, 2014a). This research may inspire other music therapy clinicians to explore their own relationships with music and examine their own, musical assumptions and biases, which in turn could greatly enhance their practice with a diverse range of clients who also hold their own unique musical assumptions and biases.

Research Implications

The research methodology used in this study produced a high volume of data potentially offering additional trajectories for continued research. These include: (a) music therapists examining and comparing their relationships with the various instruments that they play (e.g., primary versus secondary instruments); (b) exploring how musician self-concepts may inform the decision to become a music therapist, and (c) further examining the relationship between how one's pre-existing musician self-concept can help and/or hinder that development of one's emerging music therapist self-concept during music therapy training.

Concluding Remarks

When beginning this project, I was deeply inspired by the idea of using first person research to improve my own music therapy practice. I also sought to study musicality as a concept, having long struggled to accept my identity as a musical individual. Using music improvisation as an experiential tool for introspection, I was able to safely explore emotionally provocative content that I would have been reluctant to address otherwise. Some insights were extremely challenging to process, heavily impacting the experience of the research as a whole but also rendering it extremely meaningful for me. Coming to the end of this process, I feel that I have experienced a significant transformation, and I am left with the pleasure of having experienced growth, both as

a music therapist and as a person. I am grateful that this heuristic self-inquiry enlightened my understandings in so many ways and I am hopeful as I move forward on this journey of fostering self-acceptance of my identity as a musical person.

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Appendix A