

Towards a Theory of Improvisation for UK Music Therapy

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The study aimed to gather music therapists' views of improvisation in their work, and whether or not they worked with improvisation via a discrete theoretical grounding. The project was planned to run from October 2019, for less than a year. In reality it ran for 20 months, with a delay due to the pandemic. There was a further delay compiling this report after I sustained a serious burns injury to the hand.

The research questions were:

- How do music therapists describe the way they improvise?
- What is the attitude of music therapists to the use of improvisation in their practice?
- Is there a theory of improvisation that fits music therapy practice in the UK?

The methodology used grounded theory. Data was gathered from music therapists with a minimum of 5 years' experience via semi-structured interviews. There was also a questionnaire that was accessible to all members of the profession in the UK, in order to situate the findings across this broader context. Data was coded for themes, with comparisons made between the data from questionnaires and the interviews.

41 music therapists responded to the questionnaire and six were interviewed. There was a discrepancy of 4 interviewees, due to changes to working conditions as a result of Covid19. The research will continue into the future in a more extended form. I am engaging more colleagues, with a plan to run the interviews over a wider group of music therapists. In addition, interview data gathered within the timespan of the study was richer than anticipated, taking longer to code. This had the benefit of enabling findings across a broad spectrum, providing a solid bedrock for any future study.

Summary and analysis of the results

There is not sufficient space to give detailed responses, but aspects of the findings are given below, with some further information in the Appendix.

Questionnaire

Apart from one respondent, all stated they used improvisation in their work. Most improvised for 2 or more hours each working day. A majority of music therapists used a blended approach to improvisation, comprising both musical and psychodynamic parameters. 65 separate sources of influences on Music Therapists' improvising were given, across the whole gamut of music, personal experiences and training. When asked how improvisation was important, respondents noted improvising included being:

"a means of forming a connection" "[to] respond in the moment [tailored to the client]" "a way to relate & access [what is] deeply held"	"to hold/contain" "to give structure & context" "to meet & match" "to reflect [mood of client]"
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Significantly, when asked if they had a theory of improvisation, less than half replied they did (see Appendix, Table 1). This may relate to music therapy being a profession that grew out of practice, despite the work of Alvin, Nordoff & Robbins, and Wigram being widely available. Significant further work is required for theory-building about improvisation in working practice, in a way that also reflects the diversity of the profession.

Interviews

The interviews broadly agreed with the questionnaire results, but allowed space for much more detailed reflection. Those interviewed were senior practitioners, including some who have or are currently writing or researching the topic of improvisation.

The main outcomes and findings¹

- There is no single agreed theory of improvisation within the UK music therapy profession. (Appendix, Table 6)
- While almost all music therapists improvise, more than half (55%) have no theory of improvisation. (Appendix, Table 1)
- How music therapists learn to improvise is extremely varied, from those improvising since childhood, to those learning within their music therapy training. Thus, their attitudes to improvisation reflect this context, as well as their training, experience and work setting. (Appendix, Tables 2-5)

¹ Please also note the Appendix, with some further detail of findings

The benefits of the research to date

All interview participants stated spontaneously how much they had welcomed the opportunity to dive more deeply into the topic of improvisation, via the questions asked within their interviews. For one interviewee they were able to expand upon their PhD findings, and recontextualize them. Another interviewee was in the PhD research process and found the different context of my study extremely helpful in relation to this.

At the time the questionnaire was available, there was an increased interest in the area within the profession. At the recent national conference (April 2021, where I took part in several roundtables focused on improvisation), interest in different aspects of improvisation across a spectrum of contexts was clear, suggesting plenty of scope for further work.

Benefits for me have focused on the opportunity to think, reflect on and discuss experiences and ideas about improvisation in one's work. This has stimulated new areas of thinking for participants, and I have been able to disseminate initial findings to the profession via my participation in 3 roundtable presentations at the UK national music therapy conference in April 2021. I have also had some interest from the ResearchGate membership, and have had informal discussions with other researchers. This opportunity has given me the confidence in taking my ideas forward into more detailed studies.

Finance:

The funding was to cover my time working on the project (50 hours @ £25 with £250 allocated to register and present findings at a national conference). Inevitably, the work took much longer than anticipated, but having the financial buffer to allow me to focus on the research was a God-send, and allowed the project to flourish, as well as keeping it sustainable.

Any other points for the MTC:

I would like to thank the MTC for its support of my work. This has enabled me to have this unique opportunity to take a deeper dive into an area I have been a specialist in for many years, and to stimulate interest in colleagues, as well as link up with current researchers. I am grateful for this opportunity to form such a solid springboard for further exploration of this important topic.

Future plans for research linked to this small project.:

I would like to continue to research the area and also collaborate with colleagues from different modalities in a larger project in the future. I am working on a position paper and continue to disseminate the progress of my research wider afield. I am particularly interested in comparing the ideas of colleagues across different generations in the professions. I think to recognise that there are now generations of music therapists in the UK is important, and how we can learn from each other across the generations. One additional vein of enquiry is collaboration within the UK psychoanalytic profession, where dialogues about the musical dimension of psychoanalysis are growing. Significantly, no-one has yet fully taken up the aspect of improvisation, suggesting a rich vein to be mined well into the future.

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