Music Therapy and Evolving Sense of Hope among At-Risk Adolescent Boys: A Qualitative Group Case Study Based on Yalom’s Principles of Group Psychotherapy

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Introduction
The evolution of group music therapy with at-risk young men will be described emphasizing the role of the Therapeutic Factors of group psychotherapy, as termed by Yalom (2005). The clients participating in music therapy were residents of Alma’s Place, a homelike facility for clients ages 15-18 with behavioral, emotional, and mental health issues. Some research on mental health and homelessness has shown that being homeless can diminish hope as a life-driving force (Hughes, et. al., 2010). One definition of hope is “...a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)” (Snyder, 2000). Music therapy previously had not been a component of treatment at Alma’s Place. Following an agreement with the University of Dayton, a music therapy practicum site for senior students was established, and music therapy groups were held twice weekly.

Study Focus
1. How were Yalom’s Therapeutic Factors apparent throughout group music therapy?
2. How did group dynamics and functioning support progress toward therapeutic aims and increase a sense of hope among residents?

Method
Design: Qualitative Group Case Study

Participants
10 clients ages 15-18

Variables of interest:
- Common past experiences:
  o Gang associations
  o Drug involvement
  o Abusive and/or neglectful environments
  o Homelessness/Poverty
  o Criminal offenses

Goals
Treatment was client centered and based upon evident and emergent needs of the group. The following became goals of the treatment process:

Intrapersonal Goals
- Increase ability to express emotions
- Increase sense of hope (agency and pathways)
- Improve ability to use music making as an expressive medium

Interpersonal Goals
- Improve social interaction
- Improve sense of universality
- Improve ability to music as a group
- Improve communication within music

Music Therapy Methods
1. Receptive: song communication (Bruscia, 1998)
2. Improvisation: referential and non-referential Instrumental
3. Re-creative: arranging parts in completed composition, percussion rock “groove”
4. Composition: collaborative, free form composition

Yalom’s Therapeutic Factors in Treatment
- "Cohesiveness"
  o Musical arranging of group composition
  o Free form improvisation, clients initiating sharing instruments
- "Universality"
  o Composition of chorus
- "Recapitulation of primary family unit"
  o Facilitation of composition process by SMTs
  o Reliable and predictable presence of SMTs
  o Provision of a safe and accepting environment for expression.
- "Altruism"
  o R offering to teach others the composition and/or how to play an instrument
- "Existential Factors"
  o Considering how his actions would affect future generations, especially his unborn child
- "Catharsis"
  o S’s outburst of crying and revealing of emotions about his sister
- "Socializing Techniques"
  o Group response to B’s interruptive behavior, encouraging positive changes

Procedures
1. Two 45-minute sessions per week
2. Initial sessions were led by two SMTs and supervised by a faculty MT-BC. Eventually, the two SMTs led independently.
3. Typical session structure:
   a. Introduction
   b. Description of music therapy (if needed)
   c. Warm-up experience
   d. Core experience
   e. Summary/closure

Chorus (sung): (shakers play during chorus only)
13. Time to overcome these struggles,
14. time to overcome this life,
15. S’s time to make a change
16. for the wrong or the right,
17. cause it’s my turn to break the cycle,
18. what you put into it,
19. S’s time to change the cycle,
20. to better your life.

Verse 2 (rapped):
21. Life is too short to regret the past
22. “cause it’s me who I am today.
23. I’m not justifying what I’ve done,
24. but it’s helped me change my ways.
25. In this life we live today, you gotta live it day by day.
26. You achieve what you can in this moment of life.
27. Tomorrow’s never promised, yeah there’s no guarantee,
28. I’m blessed for breathing today.
29. and I’m thankful for the struggles that came my way.
30. “cause it’s helped me deal with my problems face to face.
31. struggles still come, but I overcome, and find a way to new heights.
32. “cause it’s my turn to break the cycle, and it’s my turn to better your life.

Chorus: 33 – 40

Bridge (rapped):
41. I’ve already a better dad, yeah, than I ever had, oh.
42. Fulfilling my dreams, what, still achieving it seems, okay.

Final Chorus (sung):
43. “cause I’ve overcome those struggles,
44. I’ve overcome that life.
45. I made a change,
46. not for wrong but for right.
47. “cause it got out of it,
48. what I put into it.
49. I broke the cycle,
50. I bettered my life.

Discussion
During treatment, a few Therapeutic Factors were continuously present as dynamic forces of change: initiatory behavior, interpersonal learning, and self-understanding. However, “...importing information” and “...instilling of hope” were not recognized during treatment. Because psycho-educational techniques were not employed during music therapy treatment, direct learning did not occur. Although sense of hope appeared to increase among group members, instillation of hope, as defined by Yalom was not observed. This factor presents when group members are at varying stages of treatment and members of the group serve as examples of success. Since the group was mostly homogeneous in regard to stage of treatment, this factor was not evident.

Although “...instillation of hope” as a Therapeutic Factor was not directly observed, anecdotal evidence and observations by the SMTs indicated an increase in the overall sense of hope in the group. For example, an increase in sense of agency was evidenced by increased engagement and involvement in music therapy over the course of treatment. An increase in perception of pathways was epitomized by the final chorus of “Our Struggles Come to Overcome” in which the group members display their ability to see opportunities for positive change.

Limitations
Although effort was made to make therapeutic decisions based on client needs, treatment did take place within the context of an undergraduate music therapy practicum. Thus, methods used were somewhat influenced by professional development needs of the SMTs.

Conclusion
Based on conclusions drawn from this study, the authors recommend that further investigation be performed on the topic of group dynamics during the composition process. An additional topic that merits further research is possible unique properties of rap in the therapeutic context, especially in composition.

Literature Cited