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Melodic-Poetic Representation: Research Sings

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Abstract

Song is a representational form for music therapy research. I support this contention by extending Glesne's concept of poetic transcription to melodic-poetic transcription. I introduce Glesne's original concept and further draw on Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, Laurel Richardson, Ardra Cole, J. Gary Knowles, Max van Manen and Aristotle. I include the song, *We are the Melody*, that emerged during analysis of a qualitative inquiry about the meaning of a music therapy cancer support group for adult cancer patients. This song is an arts-informed means of research representation.

Key Words: music therapy, arts-informed research, cancer support group, qualitative inquiry

Résumé

La chanson est une forme représentationnelle de recherche en musicothérapie. Je soutiens cette affirmation en élargissant le concept de transcription poétique de Glesne à la transcription mélodico-poétique. Je présente le concept d'origine de Glesne et m'inspire aussi de Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, Laurel Richardson, Ardra Cole, J. Gary Knowles, Max van Manen et Aristote. J'inclus la chanson *We are the Melody*, qui a vu le jour au cours de l'analyse d'une enquête qualitative sur la signification, effectuée par un groupe de soutien en musicothérapie pour patients adultes atteints de cancer. Cette chanson constitue un médium de recherche basé sur l'art.

Mots clés : musicothérapie, recherche basée sur l'art, groupe de soutien pur patients atteints de cancer, enquête qualitative

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Introduction

In addition to text, I represent arts-informed research (Cole & Knowles, 2001, forthcoming) about the meaning of a music therapy support group for adult cancer patients with images (Rykov, 2008 in press), poetry (Rykov, 2007 in press) and music (Rykov, 2006b).¹ In this writing I discuss the song that emerged from the research, that represents the research and the contributing influences that shaped it. I first outline the role of song and singing in music therapy, including the research participants' attitudes to singing. I introduce Corrine Glesne's (1997) concept of poetic transcription in terms of arts-informed research. I extend Glesne's poetic transcription to song and call it melodic-poetic transcription. I discuss the song this research sings. I conclude that song is a form of representation of music therapy research.

Song-singing

Song is the most fundamental, immediate and embodied music. It engages us physically, neurologically, emotionally and spiritually (Sullivan, 2003). Songs in music therapy are used to facilitate self-reflection, life review and self-expression:

Songs are ways that human beings explore emotions. They express who we are and how we feel, they bring us closer to others; they keep us company when we are alone. They articulate our beliefs and values.... They allow us to relive the past, to examine the present, and to voice our dreams for the future. Songs weave tales of our joys and sorrows; they reveal our innermost secrets, and they express our hopes and disappointments, our fear and triumphs.... They are the sounds of our personal development. (Brusica, 1998, p. 9)

(p. 162) Singing wells up from deep within and brings joy. Singing necessitates deeper and more regular breathing than speech. When more oxygen is inspired due to increased vital capacity, the blood becomes more fully oxygenated. The oxygenated blood circulates to every cell throughout the body and promotes a relaxation response (Bouhuys, Proctor, & Mead, 1966). Also, song lyrics are a means of self-expression. One research participant said:

There's something really nice about singing the song words that have such deep meaning when you're talking about the cancer experience. (Rykov, 2006a, p. 61)

Joy or comfort experienced by singing is not, however, a universal experience. As another research participant said: "Oh shit, singing!" (Rykov, 2006a, p. 61). For some, using the voice can be uncovering, over-stimulating and frightening (Sullivan, 2003). Singing, for others, elicits unpleasant memories associated with performance, expectations or judgments.

Songs in the music therapy support group were used for their potential to provide support or evoke issues relevant to the cancer experience and as a means of facilitating interpersonal connection and not as diversion or recreational sing-along activity. A small collection of song lyrics was provided in binders. These were added to during the course of the group, and given to participants to take with them when the group was over.

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Songwriting

Songwriting is a common technique in music therapy practice (Baker & Wigram, 2005). It can be created from improvisation for a variety of therapeutic intentions (for example, Austin, 1998; Austin, 2001; Turry, 2005). An international study is currently surveying the ways music therapists use songwriting in their work.

I tend to use songwriting when working individually with music therapy clients. In brief, time-limited groups, songwriting is time-consuming and detracts from group music improvisational process. The focus becomes a concerted effort at song production and not the creative, nonverbal process of music making. When, however, a melodic or harmonic song fragment organically emerges during improvisation, I encourage words to describe the images evoked or feelings associated with the experience. The spontaneous singing that emerged during improvisation in the study group² might have developed into a song (p. 163) in subsequent weeks had the life of the group been longer, had participants specifically requested this direction, and had there not been strong resistance to singing from some participants.

Song as Representational Form in Research

A song is a poem set to music. Etymologically, *song* is derived from Middle and Old English as itself, *song* (Webster, 1993); a song, then, is a fundamental entity. In addition to being etymologically linked to itself, the verb, *sing*, is also rooted in the Middle Welsh, *deongl*, to explain, which is derived from the Greek *oomph*, voice, oracle and likely also linked to the Prakrit, *samghai*, to say, teach.

In poetic transcription a poem is created—or arises—from the research data (Glesne, 1997). In melodic-poetic transcription, a song is created—or arises—from the research data. This representation of research is not a one-to-one truth correspondence but reports the probable in the productive ambiguity of poetic license. Glesne (1997) explains:

Organizing a transcript into poetry or poetic transcription imposes particular meaning. Paradoxically, it can also “pull out” meaning, moving into the interpretive realm where the writer (and reader) make leaps ... while staying close to the data. (p. 9)

In addition to research representation, poetic transcription is an analytical tool. Glesne (1997) says that “the process of writing data in different modes of representation pushes us to try out different analytical ideas” (p. 10). Poetic transcription does not always result in a poem but creates a greater likelihood that one will occur. As a tool in research analysis, poetic transcription provides a means of accessing tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1983/1966) that goes beyond cognition. This is likewise the case with song (melodic-poetic transcription).

The Song This Research Sings

The research song, *We are the Melody*,³ is an example of melodic-poetic transcription. This song was written for the participants following the penultimate, seventh session in the life of an extraordinary group experience that was ending the following week. The song arose as I was contemplating how to bring closure to this group experience. It was written for the research participants, not with them.

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(p. 164) The participants did not want the group to end. How like life this is! Like a child being sent to bed wanting just one more glass of water, just one more story, one more song, one more kiss—no matter when it ends, the ending always arrives too soon. The song addresses the despair expressed by participants about the group ending. It incorporates cumulative observations, feedback and journal entries of previous sessions. It furthermore includes “answers” to the research question—the meaning of music therapy cancer support groups for participants.

We are the Melody borrows from three song sources. First, the sentiment from Irving Berlin’s (1927/1951) *The Song is Ended* (But the Melody Lingers On) is clearly evident in the opening lyrics of the last verse, “We are the melody that lingers on/Long after the music has gone.” It is also recalled in the title. Second, the traditional gospel song, *This Little Light of Mine* (I’m Going to Let It Shine), requested in the group, is intentionally incorporated in the mention of light at the close of the third verse; this relationship, however, may not be so obvious. The third source is Stephen Foster’s (1855) song, *Hard Times Come Again No More*, in which the IV-I chord progression (plagal cadence), characteristic of gospel music is figural. This chord progression is intentionally incorporated in *We are the Melody* to recall *Hard Times*. Many cancer patients unfortunately experience financial burden due job loss and/or costs associated with treatments.

Many of the songs in the song binder are traditional spirituals. The Negro spiritual of Foster’s day invokes references to the Underground Railroad and being carried to freedom. Of the songs in the music binders, these spirituals are the most frequently requested during music therapy groups. Perhaps there is an affinity between the oppression of the cancer experience and being enslaved by illness.

The song incorporates the research themes directly and indirectly. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) describes her portraiture methodology as a narrative that bridges the realms of science and art. The portrait does “not look like them but somehow manages to reveal their essence” (p. 6). Similarly, *We are the Melody* need not be a precise or accurate portrayal of participants’ experiences and understandings, but a representation of the multiple and possible meanings they might have attributed to the music therapy support group experience. Cole & Knowles (2001) concur: “In research as in life as in (p. 165) art, there is no possibility of completeness, certainty or closure. Representation of life, in research and in art, can only be partial” (p. 212).

Aristotle points out that poetry may be considered more “real” than discursive writing (i.e., history) because poetry depicts what is plausible and universal, beyond that which is singular and particular:

[T]he poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse.... [O]ne describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. (Aristotle, 2001/1941, *Poetics* 9, 1451^b1)

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The poem, Piirto (2002) agrees, gives a particular, specific sense of something being represented as real but, in fact, has a “productive ambiguity” that may be “more evocative than denotative forms, as there is more of a chance for multiple perspectives” (p. 441). Max van Manen (van Manen, 1990/1997) points out that such descriptions have a universal, intersubjective character.

Conclusion

Research is singing. Singing is etymologically linked to teaching and explaining. *We are the Melody* is one arts-informed means of reporting and disseminating research findings. This song is a melodic-poetic transcription that represents the meaning of the music therapy support group experience for the cancer patients who participated in it. It is the song this research sings.

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We are the Melody

Lyrics and Music by Mary Rykov

The musical score consists of six staves of music for voice and piano. The lyrics are written below each staff, corresponding to the chords indicated above the notes. The chords are: Cmaj7, Fmaj7, Cmaj7; Fmaj7, G7, Cmaj7, Cmaj7; Fmaj7, Cmaj7, Fmaj7, G7, Cmaj7, Cmaj7; Fmaj7, Cmaj7, Fmaj7, G7, Cmaj7; Cmaj7, Fmaj7, Cmaj7, Fmaj7, G7, A m7; and Cmaj7, Fmaj7, Cmaj7, Fmaj7, G7. The lyrics are:

We have stayed here a while to - geth - er in this place of
shel - ter a - long the jour - neyed road. We have played here and feast - ed.
Now it's time. It's time, now we must go. Now we must re -
turn to the path. Fare - well to you all, my dear friends. And we
car - ry the bur - den of not know - ing how, or when, or why the jour - ney ends.
Take with you this mu - sic of laugh - ter and tears, lone - li - ness, sor - row and

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20 Cmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 G7
fear, free-dom, re-lease, con - nec-tion and hope. Hold these mel - o-dies

24 Cmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7
dear. May the mu - sic ev - er lin - ger in your souls, May it

27 Fmaj7 G7 Cmaj7 Cmaj7
sweet-en your days and your nights. Al - ways know your mu-sic is a

30 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7
wealth deep with-in you. Lis-ten! Give it space, give it place, give it light.

33 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 G7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7
We leave ev - er changed by the time here to - geth-er, And the

37 Fmaj7 G7 Cmaj7 Cmaj7
mus-sic that to - geth - er we shared. We leave ev - er changed by this

40 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 G7 Cmaj7
new song we sing, All the rich-er for hav-ing dared and cared. We are the mel - o-

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44 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 G7 3 Cmaj7
dy that lin-gers on. Long af-ter the mus-ic has gone. May the

47 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 G7
mus-ic that we make and the mus-ic that we are ev-er bind us to-gether in this

50 A m7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Cmaj7
song. The mus-ic that we make and the mus-ic that we are ev-er

53 Fmaj7 G7 Cmaj7
binds us to - geth - er in this song.

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¹ Visual and audio components of the research may be accessed through the on-line research repository of the University of Toronto at <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/4797>.

² 08Track/08.m4a of research repository in previous note 1.

³ 12Track12.m4a of research repository in previous note 1.