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Sorry for the Silence: A Contribution From Feminist Theory to the Discourse(s) Within Music Therapy

By Susan Hadley [\[Author bio & contact info\]](#) & Jane Edwards [\[Author bio & contact info\]](#)



Abstract

Feminism and music therapy have been little considered in the development of a theoretical framework or approach to our professional practice. This is curious given the impact of feminist approaches on a wide variety of disciplines. This paper presents some of the issues that arise when considering feminist theory/feminist approaches to music therapy and outlines some of the considerations that will appear in a forthcoming book edited by Dr. Susan Hadley and published by Barcelona Publishers. The authors take a broad approach to this topic recognising that feminism, as indeed music therapy, is not a monolithic enterprise with one key idea stamping out its territory. Rather, consideration of feminism(s) requires critical and reflective capacities in theorists and practitioners in making helpful aspects of this approach 'real' and 'meaningful' for students, practitioners and ultimately clients and patients.

Introduction



Given the contemporary social and political importance of feminist thought both inside and outside of academia, it is not only surprising but also disheartening that in the twenty-first century there does not exist a single book dedicated to demonstrating and exploring the feminist dimensions of music therapy. However, within the next year Susan Hadley will prepare an edited collection for publication on the topic of *Feminist perspectives in music therapy*. It is surprising that it has taken so long for the appearance of such a text, particularly given the insights that feminist theory has brought to bear upon how we understand ourselves and the world. Feminists have brought tremendous critical insights that have radically challenged and changed the (male dominant) assumptions and practices prevalent within such areas as psychology, the history of philosophy, epistemology, aesthetics, the social and natural sciences, ethics, ecology, theology, political theory, and other traditionally male dominant areas of inquiry. Given that the music therapy profession is made up of over 80% women, one might expect that music therapy's "feminist voice" would have emerged by now, that women would have carved out a theoretical space within which the adjective "feminist" would function as a matter of course in terms of modifying "music therapy". Perhaps, however, it is precisely because there are so many women in the profession that many women (and men) have not thematized women's issues or examined them within a specifically feminist framework. What becomes clear is that sheer numbers of women within a given area of inquiry does not necessarily mean the presence of a critically operative feminist consciousness. Perhaps, given women's proportional dominance in music therapy, we have taken it for granted that many of the assumptions operating within the theoretical and practical spheres of music therapy have nothing to do with issues of male power and hegemony. However, often sites of power are concealed through norms that structure relationships as "natural", as a given. In spite of music therapy being predominantly female by virtue of the proportional number of practitioners along gender lines, its literature, and consequently its general theoretical frame, continues to be a predominantly male hegemonic construction, developed and perpetuated by the proportionally

fewer men of the profession, many of whom are situated powerfully. These men continue to present and work from an imprimatur of certainty and authority, arguably with the support and silence of many women who do not challenge the assumptions and frames thrust into the professional rhetoric adhered to within music therapy. Thus, this forthcoming book on feminist music therapy proposes to begin to explore the contribution of feminist theory to the practice and theory of music therapy, partly as an acknowledgement of the lack of contemporary feminist discourse(s) in music therapy, but also as the means by which a challenge can be offered to this situation. Along these lines, James (1985) found that, in the music therapy literature in the United States, women authored 10% more articles than men between 1974 and 1984, and came to the erroneous conclusion that "general parity exists between men and women authors, with a recent trend for more articles to be authored by women." Curtis (1996, p. 3) insightfully turns this conclusion around by stating, "While this is indeed an improvement over the past, this '*parity*' looks quite different if the 90:10 female to male music therapists ratio is taken into consideration." Also, this increase of women authors has not given rise to an "increase" in specific *feminist* theory constructions within the music therapy profession.

Some "Her-story-cal" Background to these Ideas

Feminist theory is by no means monolithic. It has developed over decades and in many countries and been influenced by a range of thinking modes, and interrelated and diverse theoretical systems. Hence, there are endless theoretical approaches and assumptions available within the rhetoric of what is called here "feminist theory," able to be availed of by the various authors contributing to the book. Exploration of feminine identities within societal norms of power, and access to this power requires ongoing examination and critique in all scholarly discourse, and the proposed book provides an opportunity for ongoing discussion and discovery of these notions relevant to music therapy. During the early periods of the feminist movement, described as the first and second waves, when feminists advocated for the same rights and equalities for women as for men (importantly the vote — first wave — but then also in terms of access to political and professional power — second wave), there was not the same interrogation that is now expected of the proponent's own multiple subject positions. The first and second wave advocates did not critically explore how they were multiply-positioned along an axis, or within a spectrum, of class, race, culture, sexual orientation, etc. If the aspects of race and class are examined, it can be argued that many third wave feminists (a great number of whom are "women of colour") pointed out that earlier feminist discourse did not address the issues and concerns of women who are Black and/or women who live in what is termed the "Third World."

Black feminists (sometimes described as "womanists") began challenging the fact that feminist discourse, which was presumed to address the concerns of "all women," was exclusionary to the extent that such discourse was invested in other sites of power and privilege that had been overlooked; specifically those of class and race. It was therefore logically argued that feminists were not speaking from a "universal" perspective, but were speaking on behalf of white and middle class women, that is, from their own context bound, racial, and economically situated perspectives.

As music therapists, whether male or female, we are challenged to become aware of the multiple locations of our own identities and the inherent presumptions, biases and "standards" that fuel the maintenance of these. We need to be prepared to elucidate our own subject positions, giving attention to what is being presupposed when we call ourselves "feminists" or want to explore our feminist views; or other possible identities for us within that theoretical frame.

Writing from a Feminist Perspective

It can be argued that writing from a feminist perspective, as proposed in this book, can challenge the perspective that all knowledge and research must be immune to personal, subjective input. Feminism challenges the assumption that frames such as "knowledge," "research," and "truth" can be free of influences of race, social position, sexual orientation, cultural hegemony, prejudices, normative assumptions and other "limits." As humans connected to our cultural history and experience we cannot re-experience another identity or perspective, or in fact achieve an "objective" perspective to our own experience or our observations of the experiences of others. We write and think from the perspective of these pre-conditioned "givens," and we recognize that all clinical practice, writing and thinking in our field is similarly framed and informed from a set of pre-existing beliefs and standards. It is the responsibility of every author in our field, not just the feminist ones, to thoughtfully consider their assumptions and biases, and endeavour to make them more explicit, as well as to

challenge the arrogance of the claim of "truth" and "certainty."

It is certainly the case that music therapists have contributed to debate over issues of women as recipients of music therapy service provision, and certainly have continued to be provocative in ideas as to how music therapy might be constructed within a number of different frames, including where the experiences of the personal are explicated and used as part of a chain of evidence to demonstrate how ideas can become central within an individualist position. For example, Edwards (2002) in a response to an article published online in *Voices* stated:

I would argue that music therapy is always a socio-political work — in simple terms, what we do with our clients and their families in turn effects our society simply by being part of the warp and weft of the fabric of our community behaviour. Since the civil rights movement and the movements that followed, including the many strands of feminist theory and feminism, I think it is impossible to live without consciousness of the ways in which our society and community shape our perspective to 'other' whether we understand that in Marxist terms or perhaps even with reference to Kristeva's useful notion of abjection. (¶ 4)

Feminism is by no means an ahistorical notion, but is a construct that is constantly being renegotiated in dialogue between current and historical positions. Some anti-essentialist feminists have argued that the "female body" is itself open to interpretation and has been historically shaped through years of male construction and male abrogation to that which becomes acceptable and normal (Irigaray, 1994). In this way, it is proposed that women have relinquished a range of controls over our bodies. Perhaps the point here is that even something as apparently "given" in its materiality as the body has been subject to critical discussions by feminists, who have contributed to a deconstruction of distinctions drawn between what is given (materiality) and what is constructed (normativity) by pointing out the potential double binds of the female situation as described, or perhaps even *prescribed*, within the patriarchal thinking (which arguably is not *male* thinking but rather a hegemonic, internalized value system that is so normative it is difficult to critique). Arguably, this also occurs to some extent within the rhetoric of the new equality, that by law enshrines all opportunities as equal between men and women, while those who seek the opportunities are not always viewed equally, neither consider that they are "equal" or necessarily seeking to be so (and may not view the "other" as a main category by which they wish to be compared in terms of access to and ways of using power and authority).

This feminist book to be published within the coming year in the discipline of music therapy seeks to offer a challenge to all of us within the field, but particularly the authors at this stage of proceedings. We attempt to locate our own identity within the rich spectrum of feminist theory, realizing that there are different approaches, assumptions, and orientations within feminism and feminist theory, and with some capacity to problematize and critique all theory with which we engage including that oriented as feminist. We are somewhat privileged, because of the contribution of postmodern theory, to be able to also speak from the informants of our identities within cultural, sexual and social perspectives within this book. It is acknowledged that it is important to be cognizant of at least some of our assumptions within these arenas so as not to make generalizations that exclude and fail to recognize the complexity and multifaceted dimensions of feminist theory and action embedded in contemporary feminism.

At the same time, it is hoped that the challenge to people who are not part of this forthcoming edition of the book, but who also write about theory and about knowledge in music therapy, can likewise be prompted to be more aware of the situated nature of their contributions to the field of music therapy. Their gender, their experiences, their views of other players can impact and change the therapy landscape, especially when they appear in the powerful medium of print. It is increasingly clear that the therapist is not the benign "helper," but rather an active being who is undertaking a social and political work in first believing that they, as an individual, are capable of prompting and supporting change in others, and second in the belief that such interventions are necessary, required and helpful. When we write about these interactions and experiences in music therapy we are not separate from them but rather are actively engaged in their construction, interpretation and consequently their meaning.

In the light of this, the contributors for this book on feminist music therapy might ask, "So, how can I possibly begin?" A statement of one's own subject position is an important part of the beginning of this venture. Attempting to define how feminist theory is observed from an individual standpoint, or what it means for an author to be a feminist *at this moment* is crucial. As a feminist, I might ask myself "How does this show up in my politics, my approach to life, my approach to constructs of maleness, my approach to and use of my own identity, my approach to my students, my interactions with other women, my approach to and use of or

adherence to public policies, and especially my approach to my work in music therapy?" In addition I might question, "Why is being a feminist so important to me?" or "When I say that I am a feminist, can I outline the ways this is evidenced in the theoretical assumptions I adopt, in my actions, my life, my ideology, my teaching, my approach to music therapy and therapy, or even more generally?"

It is also important to consider questions such as "Are there ways of my being a music therapist that conceal anti-feminist, perhaps what might be constructed as pro-patriarchy or at least non-feminist, approaches?" "How do I begin to disentangle what has passed as music therapy (that is, what I've been doing in the field of music therapy up until this time) with what needs to be critiqued as an androcentric approach to research, theory construction, methodology, data collection, music selection, interaction with students, how I interact with my clients, pedagogical assumptions, and supervision in music therapy?" The book, in general, is proposing to ask the important question, "What does feminism have to offer music therapy?" but also to question, "Is there anything that music therapy has to offer feminism?"

Can Music Therapy be Framed Within the Spectrum of Feminism?

It is important to recognize that music therapy is itself an approach to human growth, change, and well-being that is not defined according to a monothematic construct. The important questions for this book should include, "Is there a way of defining music therapy that includes distinctively feminist assumptions as part and parcel of that definition?" as well as, "Is there a way of enacting my feminism in my practice of music therapy?" and "Is there a way of thinking in a feminist mode when I am thinking about clinical practice, doing clinical practice or theorizing about my musical clinical practice?"

Although this forthcoming book is unprecedented in terms of its exploration of approaches to feminist music therapy, it is important that we recognize the feminist work that is already in the music therapy literature (of course, there are also some women utilizing feminist perspectives in their music therapy work). Baines (1992) described a "feminist framing of music therapy" in her unpublished master's thesis, *The Sociological and Political Contexts of Music Therapy: A Question of Ethics*. Baines encouraged music therapists to take a sociological and political perspective on their work in order to become aware of sexist biases and thereby provide safer work environments. She also maintained that music therapists should accept the clients' perceptions as the most valid and that music therapists should establish egalitarian relationships with their clients. Although Baines' approach may be categorized as one that is nonsexist rather than one that is feminist per se (Curtis, 1996), it paves the way in terms of teasing out certain feminist assumptions and their relevance to music therapy. Curtis states that to be feminist therapy more is needed, for example, music therapists must advocate for social as well as personal change for both the client and the therapist herself (Curtis, 1996). In her unpublished doctoral dissertation (1996), *Singing Subversion, Singing Soul: Women's Voices in Feminist Music Therapy*, Curtis developed a model of feminist music therapy for the empowerment of women, specifically for increasing the self-esteem of women who had been abused by their intimate male partners. In her model, she integrates principles and practices of feminist therapy with those of music therapy. In this model she advocates the use of innovative techniques of feminist analysis of power and gender-role socialization through lyric analysis and songwriting.

We recognize that music therapy, as evidenced in part by contributors to papers and discussions in *Voices*, has multicultural layers, with multiple approaches to music and music therapy through issues of healing, transformation, catharsis, and well-being. Within music therapy in the United States, of course, there are a large number of approaches each with a critical mass of proponents whereas in other countries, for example Ireland, there is such a small number of music therapists that it can be more difficult to try to develop and support separate identities of approach as practitioners. So, there are *differences* in music therapy between and within countries and communities where it is practiced. The point to be considered in the book is whether those differences are differences that fall along an axis of what it means to be a feminist music therapist or, if one were to think along feminist epistemological lines as a feminist music therapist, are there feminist lines of thought that inform methods of treatment, approaches to healing, modes of attending to those who are referred to our services, selection of music as a vehicle for change, communication, empathy, definitions of "objectivity," "science," "methodology," modes of music appreciation (or the aesthetic domain of music therapy), approaches to pain management (the ways pain is constructed along the lines of what is acceptable for people to have to bear in terms of physical or emotional pain, and when is it necessary to intervene with "treatment" or support), and approaches to persons supposedly in need of change because of emotional, cognitive, and

physical challenges that may be considered non-normative (in itself a socially constructed, and hence moveable entity).

The music therapy climate is ripe for a fresh decentering, which can be brought to fruition by bringing to it a feminist reflexive criticality. As was recently argued in a reflection on the contribution of music therapist Even Ruud:

We can no longer assume our 'truths' to be self-evident and privileged — our theory as a 'view from nowhere'. On the contrary, music therapy is a view from a local somewhere — a social, cultural, historical, philosophical location. Consequently, a meta-theoretical perspective on music therapy involves an awareness of our situatedness within this larger horizon. (Ansdell, 2003, p. 153)

While in agreement with this emphasis upon the importance of the "reflexive practitioner" which many authors within and outside of music therapy have now promoted as useful to clinical thinking, and the need "to go critical" with respect to the field of music therapy, there are nonetheless some points that are overlooked in this view. Although the importance of deconstruction and post-modernism is conceded as useful in encouraging theorists to be attentive to the conditions of theory construction, it must be noted that the *gendered* aspects of theory construction require further attention. "To go critical" is to recognize that theory is indeed embedded within value-laden assumptions and communities of intelligibility. This cannot be done without talking about gender and power relationships which a feminist theoretical frame is uniquely poised to allow. Attention must be given to uncovering the gendered performances of music therapists within the profession as a whole, and to creating a critical space for feminist voices and stories. If the self is not "within," but exists *between*, what are the implications for a collectively diverse feminist identity *between* women music therapists? From a feminist narrative voice, how would the story of music therapy become reconfigured in terms of its key theorists, modalities of therapeutic practice, constructions of "reality," conceptions of the "self," conceptions of "music," and so on? If we are to provide "a pluralistic, pragmatic, reflexive and critical foundation to the discipline" of music therapy, then what better place to begin than with the critical insights of a feminist approach to music therapy. So, let's talk a different discourse, a feminist discourse, in music therapy, and begin to *do things* differently.

As noted earlier, feminist theory has critically impacted a variety of areas such as practical politics, political theory, ethics, and epistemology, philosophy of science, theories of human development, theories of the self, theology, ecological approaches (sometimes called eco-feminism), cultural theory, pedagogy, and historiography. We do not need to answer questions such as "Is feminism necessary?" Feminism is not new. It was introduced by many women in many countries, challenged, and refined, and it has a place within modern consciousness. All of us in the early 21st century have experienced its influence whether consciously or unconsciously. It is difficult to find anyone who would disagree, for example, with the idea that women should be able to vote, or should be paid equal wages for the same work as men, whereas it is almost certain that within your own or, if young, your parent's lifetime, these were the contested sites for the radical changes that were battled for by feminist advocates.

It is acknowledged that there is a great deal of feminist theory in print currently that can be accessed to delineate and support this venture. Arguably, the way in which this book is so radical and new is not because of the contribution of feminist theory - since it has been part of Western scholarship for decades - but rather because little systematic attention has been given to feminism, and the feminist theoretical frame, and its specific impact on music therapy and music therapy practice. In this sense, we lag far behind the work of our sister fields of practice such as social work, psychology and therapy. We are only now beginning to create an entire text devoted to feminism and music therapy, while feminist theory has already interfaced with and created critical spaces within predominately (white) male discursive fields of inquiry for many decades.

While we are late, by any stretch of the imagination, to a commencement of consideration of these themes within a long developed frame of feminist thought, this book is, nonetheless, an important beginning. It is important that we make sure that we are not reinventing the wheel of feminist theory, while we create and identify radically new ground for music therapy practical and theoretical parameters with this text. This is an exciting opportunity to think critically about how the spectrum of theory and feminist thought can importantly inform aspects of our profession, and also to ask ourselves why it has taken this long for so many of us to see that there is even a problem with the notable lack of feminist approaches to music therapy. Is it that we perceive music therapy as so "neutral" and "objective" in its major approaches that we have asked all the questions that need be asked, or that we consider we have exhausted all the epistemologies necessary for understanding the relationship between music and therapy?

It might be considered that we have been led to believe that music therapy constructs are free of specifically male norms and assumptions since so many women practice this art. However, can we remember any of our lecturers or tutors/professors, whether male or female, who dared to attempt to reveal the paradoxical reality that while the profession of music therapy consists overwhelmingly of women practitioners, issues of feminist theory construction and epistemology, methodology and so on, never, or rarely, ever get raised. Should this be questioned? "Of course," we say, "yes." However, we must all be aware that being predominantly female in numbers does not automatically make our profession a feminist one, and so a feminist text is necessary to develop the arguments of this paper within a feminist frame, from the perspective of multiple voices but also drawing on a theoretically rich scholarly tradition.

Some of the Parameters of the Debate

While a feminist sensibility challenges fixedness, universalism, immutableness, rigidity, and so on, it is nonetheless important that the constructions that have formed around tenets directing some ideas proposed in the book can be explored. Therefore, the following construction of the notion of feminism is put forward, as a way to outline or suggest possible directions in the discussion that may ensue for the authors of the chapters, and as a means to think about the question "What do we mean by feminism?"

Feminism is an historical movement, a worldwide phenomenon enacted by women within their own specific cultural, social and political matrixes, against political and economic male oppression, male discrimination, brutality and violence against women. In this sense feminism is reactive and active. Reactive to the extent that women have historically engaged in political praxis *against* male hegemony and domination of our bodies, minds, hearts and spirits. Males, at multiple discursive and non-discursive sites of power, have presented women with a false neutrality - we have been led to believe that how we have been constructed *is how we indeed are*. Feminism is also an *active* intervention into the male construction of the world, of reality, of what is good, what is right, what is power, what is pathology, what is wellness, what is "normal/abnormal," what is love, what is sex, what is knowledge, what is being, what is woman, what is man, what is research, what is the "proper" approach to nature, what is the appropriate approach to our bodies, and so on. Feminism (involving African-American, Anglo-American, European, African, Hispanic, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern women, and others) attempts to theorize and construct a view of the world and reality out of distinctively diverse women's modes of being and knowing. Feminism, then, offers an alternative in the midst of male modes of seeing themselves. Not only interventionist, but also critical, feminism attempts to deconstruct the various ways that the feminine has been constructed. (Susan Hadley, personal communication, July 2003)

Feminism says *no* to the masculinist construction of female as objects, social ornaments, and also *no* to the Freudian description of the female (or girl) as a non-male, penis desiring/absent human. Feminism also attends to the diverse ways that women have had to deal with their own culturally and historically specific forms of male conceptual and physical aggression. Hence, feminism ought to be inherently diverse, and encouraging of difference, plurality of voices, and have a rich and complex imaginary. It is hoped the forthcoming book can do this.

Although there are many approaches to feminism and enactments of feminism (socialist-Marxist, postmodern, positivist, standpoint, cultural, radical, liberal, queer, lesbian, heterosexual, Christian, *mujerista*, First-wave, Second-wave, Third-wave and so on), perhaps we can agree that feminism is an embodied, flesh-and-blood, socio-cultural, political, philosophical movement predominantly created by, and for women's liberation/emancipation from various forms of male hegemony. This mainstream feminism seeks to locate forms of male hegemony at various sites (in the home, workplace, academy, the street, doctor's offices, within academic and non-academic professional settings, in the bedroom, in the area of theory construction, research, methodology, epistemology, ontology, aesthetics, religion, theology, sexuality, identity formation, interaction with the earth, interaction with other human beings, and so on), and attempts to reveal them as having been parading as neutral and/or objective when in fact they hide profound levels of male interest, male normative constructivism and male value-laden assumptions.

Feminism, then, is praxic in its orientation, creative in its imaginary, and constructive in its development of theory. It may have a role to reiterate and elucidate what is paradoxical and exciting within music therapy practice, and to illuminate for each of us what it is that brought us

Conclusion

While feminist theorists have sought to create a world within which women are free of hegemonic assumptions, and all forms of oppression and unjust exclusionary practices, this theory is revolutionary in that it also seeks to free men of their own misconstructions of themselves as men, creating dialectically liberating forms of respect and mutual recognition for all citizens. Feminism, therefore, seeks to transgress, transform and liberate spaces of being that engender retrogression, existential fixedness, and to deconstruct any theories that have reduced women to simple rather than critical ways of thinking about themselves, and their experience in the world. Feminism offers alternatives to thinking and doing, feeling and emoting, theorizing and practicing. It is this passion for revolution and change that we can use to illuminate the story of our own engagement with music therapy. The political rhetoric of feminism is not just about identifying the powerlessness of women, but rather deconstructing the problems of power, and consequently their problematic embeddings within a Western patriarchal straightjacket.

In using a feminist voice to write the chapters in this book, a voice that is informed by a liberationist philosophy, and one that honours woman as an important site of knowledge, a word of challenge is spoken to the ubiquitous yet so easily accepted, and arguably cosily familiar to the point of being unrecognizable, hegemony of masculinist thinking in our field. We have the opportunity with this book to ask what music therapy might look like from a feminist perspective. In what ways can we contribute at both the theoretical and clinical levels (both of which of course inform the other) of music therapy, and music therapy research with these feminist theories? In what creative and new ways can we innovatively approach music therapy (theory, clinical practice, pedagogy, ethics, assessment, research, supervision, and music) to allow debates about issues presumed neutral and objective (which, as they stand currently, potentially conceal male hegemony and contribute to female erasure) by using our feminist epistemologies?

It is important to conclude with the reassurance, as perhaps it is needed for some readers new to the language of this theoretical frame, that the central idea that informs the need for this book is not an anti-male perspective, but rather a pro-feminist perspective; one that will help music therapy as a profession to openly question and elucidate some of its own hidden assumptions, as well as retain and consolidate its identity as radical, anti-normative,[1] and as a creatively re-inventive professional practice within a range of clinical, community and professional environments. We promise that this endeavour can only be exciting and invigorating for our profession and its practitioners.

Notes

[1] By the term "anti-normative" we do not mean to imply that feminist theory or feminist music therapy practice does not operate under certain normative assumptions. That is, it is not normless. The point here is that we recognize that all normative assumptions are context bound and subject to critique and deconstruction.

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