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Contemplating the Nature of Adolescent Group Improvisations

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Introduction

Working with adolescents in groups has become a passion of mine over the past five years. Like many of the music therapy students I now teach, I had entered the profession with a desire to work with adolescents because I was so familiar with their issues and their needs - being one myself. However, few music therapists stay this path once they discover the myriad of clinical possibilities open to professionals, and there is a relatively small amount of literature that discusses working in groups with non-disabled and non-psychotic adolescents. Obviously there are unique issues that emerge in work with emotionally and socially challenged adolescents and what literature is available describes music therapy as creating safe and familiar environments for teenagers (Brooks, 1989; De Backer, 1993; Frisch, 1990; Mark, 1988; Ragland & Apprey, 1974; Well & Stevens, 1984); facilitating emotional expression (Aigen, 1997; Frisch, 1990; Mark, 1988; Well & Stevens, 1984; Wooten, 1992); and assisting in identify formation (Flower, 1993; Frisch, 1990; Mark, 1988).

In this contribution, I would like to address a topic that I have not seen discussed previously - the way that adolescents improvise in groups. In doing so, I first need to clarify the philosophical approach I foster in my work, conjointly with the model of group improvisation that I tend to practice. I would also like to offer some details about my clinical experience so that the reader may clearly envisage the young people I am referring to as a great deal of my "evidence" is procured from my doctoral research with bereaved adolescents. Finally, I will offer my observations and thoughts about the unique qualities portrayed in the improvised music of teenagers in groups.

As I have detailed elsewhere (McFerran-Skewes, 2000), my preferred approach to working with adolescents is psychodynamic. My own use of the term psychodynamic means to take a humanist or client-centred approach that focuses on the social, emotional and psychological needs of the client. This emphasizes the provision of opportunities for choice and control, as well as respecting the young people's abilities to interpret their music making, or not, as they choose (as discussed recently by Edwards, 2003). It is not necessarily the same as the American definition of "music psychotherapy," nor is it based primarily on the theories of Winnicott or Stern as is often implied by those undertaking music psychotherapy in Britain or Europe, although similarities can be noted in both cases. This approach is congruent with my personal philosophy, as well as having significant relations with the developmental tasks of adolescence proposed by Erikson (1965) that emphasize the discovery of identity and the beginnings of an attempt to answer the question "Who am I?." Adolescents who are grappling with complex and existential issues do not require the same level of containment provided for those who are coping with the first experience of psychosis; nor do they require the assistance and facilitation provided for those dealing with the implications of intellectual or multiple disabilities. The challenges they face are related to the integration of their personal experience with the emerging self. I would argue that although their ability to integrate these may set the stage for future mental health or ill health, their presenting issues often respond well to a model

that focuses on freedom of expression and empowering opportunities that do not overlap with the roles provided elsewhere, such as parenting or verbal analysis.

Given this stance, it is not surprising that the model of music therapy group improvisation I practice is relatively unstructured and open-ended. In reviewing the literature for my doctoral research, the closest description available to this was found in Bruscia's *Improvisational Models of Music Therapy* (1987), in the chapter detailing the work of Gillian Stephens (now Langdon). Since that time, *Music Therapy and Group Work: A Sound Practice* (Davies & Richards, 2002) has provided a number of relevant descriptions of the musical material generated by clients in group music therapy. In addition, I have published a review of current practice (Skewes & Wigram, 2002), that identifies a number of key features of contemporary practice as discerned from interviews with specialists from the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Of particular interest from that review, was a key dissimilarity noted between specialists, specifically "the level of structure and direction utilised by the specialists varied in accordance with their philosophical stance and the clientele with whom they work" (p. 52).

My work with adolescent clients in groups has encompassed teenagers with a range of skills and abilities, from multiply disabled young people to highly intellectual female clients with eating disorders. However it is the group that falls between these markers that are the focus of the current discussion - those young people who are grappling with loss and grief, with chronic illness, with social isolation and with substance abuse. No less relevant than the problems these young people face is the community settings that we work in. From lounge rooms to class rooms, from front rooms to back rooms, I am the typical Australian image of a load-bearing music therapist - with a drum case full of percussion instruments and the ever awkward melodic percussion, guitar and keyboard. The opening paragraph of my doctorate may help to create this scene in the reader's mind and is drawn from my personal experience at the beginning of 1998.

> Walking into the secondary school on the first day of the data collection was terrifying. With ethical approval achieved and participants volunteered, it was finally time to begin working with the young people. The school itself seemed like a scene out of "Gansta's Paradise."
> "Miss, miss - you want me to play your drum?"
> "Hey, watch out for the football!"
> "What are you here for?"
> "Really Miss, can I play a drum . please."
> Smash! Whallop! Crack! Tap, tap, tap!
> "Can I play it some more Miss, please?"
> Ceaseless questions, direct eye contact, young women looking competitive, young men just looking. This was their world and the bravado was well rehearsed and supported by the lunchtime crowd. Their interest was not as much in the stranger, but rather her strange looking drums and instruments. This was both confronting and empowering - amazing and frightening - amusing and concerning - encapsulating the paradox of adolescence - full of the dichotomies of experience (Skewes, 2001, p.1).

The following discussion will draw on the analysis undertaken with this group of young people from my doctoral research (Skewes, 2001, available at musictherapyworld.com), and will be supplemented by insights gained in working with groups of adolescents in the range of settings over the past seven years. The ten group improvisations used as the basis of these proposals are available as downloadable audio in order to offer transparency to my statements and 'evidence' of their foundation.

(Audio clip **Group improvisations.mp3** 13,7MB)

The Nature of Adolescent Group Improvisations

The roles of pulse and rhythm feature prominently in many adolescent group improvisations and I would like to propose that they are often more audibly present than other elements such as melody and harmony. Although I have co-authored a philosophical exploration of the role of rhythm in music therapy (Daveson & McFerran-Skewes, 2003), some very simple explanations seem relevant to this topic in context of adolescence. First, many pop and rock songs

emphasize this musical property, relying on it's ability to stimulate action (as suggested by McNeill, 1995) and to support dancing and rapping. Although this statement may seem obvious, what implications does it have for music therapy? Does it impact on the instruments that we provide for "jamming"? Does it mean that we should "educate" these young people to have a greater respect for the more complex musical elements? Does it mean that we need to have highly developed rhythmical abilities in order to model more complex rhythmic playing, or more commonly in my experience, to hold together a range of tempi that are "nearly" playing together in time?

Second, could this focus on pulse and rhythm represent the need of teenagers to both belong and to be individual? Erikson has postulated that the clannish behaviour of teenagers does exist alongside their need for independence and freedom and this paradox has been eloquently described by many authors specializing in adolescence (see A. Freud, in Malekoff, 1997; Lau, 1990, Malekoff, 1997). In my PhD study I worked with 6 adolescents who had been bereaved, over 10 weekly music therapy sessions. The group improvisations were tape-recorded. Of the 41 improvisations, I selected 10 for close analysis. One of my research questions was "Does playing together in time represent group cohesion?," because "in analysing the interview transcripts, it was discovered that four (of six) participants felt that playing together on the beat was related to positive moments in the group, which could be interpreted as signifying group cohesion" (Skewes, 2001, p. 292). In order to address this question, I compared references to pulse and rhythm from the final descriptions of improvisations from each of the ten sessions, with the following result:

> The first two sessions found the participants unable to share a rhythmic ground, although by the second session attempts were being made. Session 3 sees the beginning of shared pulse playing although the changing speed proves too complicated for some. By session 4, the rhythmic ground is stable and solid, leading the group leader to challenge the group to develop more individual playing. In sessions 5 & 6 rhythmic patterns come to prominence, a significant movement away from the simplicity of straight pulse playing. By session 7 the group is heard playing at a shared speed and using musically developed rhythmic patterns, until some group members are unable to maintain the tempo. Session 8 sees the inclusion of diverse rhythmic grounds, with many participants shaping their own playing; yet a sense of cohesion is present musically. In session 9 the stable ground is successfully combined with individual rhythmic patterns, however this achievement is lost in session 10, possibly because the group is responding to the imminent loss and closure of the group (Skewes, 2001, p. 293).

These cumulated descriptions make it possible to clearly identify the group's increasing ability to play together in a more cohesive way, as well as aspects of the musical material that note an increasing emphasis on individualised self expression. These co-existing properties are not unique to adolescent improvisations and are often considered as fundamental processes in group development, however their nature is unique with this age group. The sounds are unbridled and chaotic, perhaps giving the false impression of psychosis or lack of boundaries. This is exactly the reason that their developmental stage must be given priority in understanding their musical material - paradox is the nature of adolescence, and paradox can sound strange. Yet for adolescents who are suffering bereavement or coping with social isolation, it is the very real and realistic nature of their existence.

I would also propose that rhythmic features are not the only distinctive features of adolescent improvisations - verbal interactions are another. Within my thesis, I developed a model for analysing the musical material generated within the context of a music therapy group experience, which led to the descriptions from which the material presented above was drawn. This phenomenological model was multi-layered, with one level observing the musical material, another the inter-relational dynamics, and a further exploring the group leader's material. Within the musical analysis, I was compelled to include a musical element called "verbal interactions." Taken literally, verbal interactions are not musical, however they were intrinsic to this group's musical improvisations, and to most of the adolescent group improvisations which I have facilitated. The group often resorted to verbal measures when musical communication was not effective. An illustrative example was found in Session 8, where communication failed first at a musical level and a natural ending for the improvisation was ignored; then at a verbal level, where some participants politely asked the persistent group member to stop playing. As the "individualizing" group member refused, the verbal interactions increased in both volume and in their critical nature. Finally, after a further 6 minutes of persistent playing by one participant, with other group members joining in sporadically, the improvisation came to an end. Verbal

interactions were often resorted to when the group members did not feel that their musical communication had been heard, thus they moved to more familiar communication strategies. I believe that these verbal strategies are accepted as useful, viable and acceptable "semi-musical interactions," as teenagers move between concrete and abstract ways of thinking and relating. These are the moments of empowerment that any group leader would recognise, where the group is out of control but are left to find their own way to resolution. However, the relationship to identity formation needs to be understood as age appropriate and healthy, rather than regressed and mildly psychotic.

In addition, the expectation that adolescents should be able to use verbal interactions in a "deeper" way is also open to challenge based on my experience. It is common to expect that an important level of achievement within improvisation-based group work with verbal clients is that the clients are aware of the relationship between music and self (see Skewes & Wigram, 2002). However the naturally defensive state of adolescence does not typically lead to self-disclosure and therefore this goal does not appear to be achieved within groups. Yet within the interviews with participants in my research, some young people expressed real insight into this relationship, with one young man clearly noting the closeness of match between repetitive pulse playing and his life. He stated that "when I had control, I'd just basically play a steady beat and that's what I want to do with my beat 'cause the music was repetitive and basically that's life - you just do the same thing till something happens" (Skewes, 2001, p.101). This level of insight was not expressed within the confines of the group by any participants, and although this could also be interpreted as a "failure" of the group to trust the environment sufficiently, I would like to propose that this is actually a natural state of affairs. As Martin (1972) states, it is no illusion that teenagers are cautious about what they confide, as "the intolerance of this age group towards diversity and their delight in making an issue over those who are different" (p. 190) is no exaggeration. Musically, this'safe' adolescent self-expression can be communicated in typically adolescent ways. For example, in the research data there was a subtle and brief 'question and answer' section included in the improvisation from session 8, powerfully communicating the level of listening and flexibility within the improvisation, but lasting only 30 seconds. In session 9, the group's music for the first time included sweeping melodies and strong partnerships, but again this was subtle and made up of nuance rather than clear and open musical statements.

Conclusion

My experience in working with groups of adolescents has frequently evidenced this emphasis on the musical properties related to rhythm and an equivalent use of verbal interactions. Although my opportunities to study and analyse these interactions at such depth has been infrequent, I have carried out some small scale studies into my work with groups of socially isolated teenagers and young people who misuse substances. In each case, the importance of freedom and control (another paradox) has been primary, and the use of rhythm has been notable. In brief interventions, I frequently use this information to provide strong rhythmic structures in the initial improvisations, quickly drawing back and allowing the more chaotic-sounding expression to unfold. I will always ask for verbal consolidation of the musical material, but frequently it is not forthcoming and this is normalised. In community practice, I often move from improvisation to song writing in order to solicit 'safe' verbal testaments where I emphasise that musicians who don't 'keep it real' sound superficial and that music is an important place for honest expression that doesn't have to be overly literal. Whilst these strategies may be common and obvious to some, perhaps they are useful for those just adventuring into the confronting world of adolescent group work. As Malekoff states, teenagers need adults who can "hang in there and not lose hope." Adults who allow them to have fun, to explore their identity and to prove to them that it is possible to survive the paradoxical and confusing years of adolescence.

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