

CONFERENCE REPORT

Music therapy and autism

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CONFERENCE DETAILS

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Charlotte Smith graduated as a music therapist from the University of South Wales in 2019. She currently works as a freelance music therapist with a range of children and adult clients. Before becoming a music therapist, Charlotte was a primary school teacher, now with 12 years teaching experience. She currently also gives instrumental tuition on piano and woodwind instruments. Charlotte is interested in continuing and expanding her clinical work with children and young people in educational settings. [charlotte.85.smith@gmail.com]

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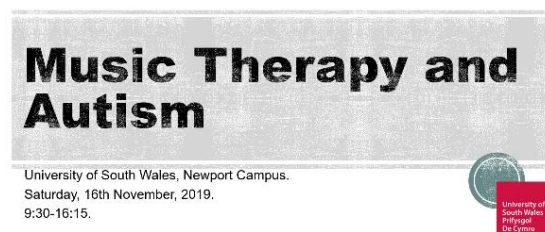
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INTRODUCTION

The *Music Therapy and Autism* conference was the first music therapy conference to be held at the University of South Wales (USW) at the Newport City campus. The university is also home to the newly named, Helen Kegie Centre for Therapies which consists of five one to one therapy rooms, a family/play therapy room, two music therapy rooms and two art psychotherapy rooms.

The conference was hosted by Elizabeth Coombes who is the course leader and senior lecturer on the MA Music Therapy course. The conference evolved from the successful publication in 2019 of the book *Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan: A Spectrum of Approaches*, co-edited by Henry Dunn, Elizabeth Coombes, Emma Maclean, Helen Mottram and Josie Nugent. The book was referenced throughout the day with insightful lectures from some of the authors in the book. The day consisted of four lectures from five speakers with varying perspectives, a panel discussion at the end of the day and poster presentations by USW students and graduates sponsored by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Around 80 delegates attended the conference comprising of music therapists, students and other health care professionals. The day was started with a welcome and introduction from Coombes where she invited delegates to engage in reflective and interactive discussions throughout the day.



Photograph 1: Conference logo

Neta Spiro: Scaling up scaling down: Perspectives on outcome measurement in research with children with autism

The first lecture was presented by Neta Spiro (Centre for Performance Science, Royal College of Music, London). She began by discussing the use of outcome measures in research studies with children with autism and how this has become a relatively established area with many publications in this field. Spiro then put forward the idea of assumptions and expectations when designing a research project and when constructing the research questions. In the case presented, the assumptions were that change was going to happen and that interaction between client and therapist would occur.

Spiro then talked through the process of her study entitled *Analysing Change in Music Therapy Interactions of Children With Communication Difficulties* (Spiro & Himberg, 2016). The purpose of the study was to analyse interaction and change and what drives those changes during music therapy sessions. Five client-therapist dyads participated in the study. The clients were aged 4-5 years old with an autism diagnosis and the therapists were asked to send video footage of a first and last music therapy session from the clinical work. Spiro and Himberg (2016) developed an annotation protocol to annotate behaviours that are observable in the videos. The annotation was completed by people with no background information in order to remain impartial and they were also not from a music therapy background. The aim was to observe the individuality and mutuality of these behaviours during music therapy and to compare the results between dyads and between the two sessions annotated. The behaviours observed were categorised into three elements: facing behaviours, still or moving, pulse. The video footage was also coded by experts with experience in music therapy. The results produced a series of spoke diagrams and bar chart diagrams which can be viewed in the original publication. The diagrams highlight the results, comparing the dyads in the first and last sessions, and show where levels of interaction and changes in the three categories can be observed. The diagrams presented by Spiro helped to give a clearer understanding of the study and the results found. On reading the full article after the conference I was interested to read the full list of results. It was thought-provoking for me to read that the results provided differing perceptions of the therapist and the annotated observations. Spiro discussed the scaling up or scaling down of the research and how this related to her study. It was concluded that in scaling up the study, such analysis of video would not be feasible for huge data sets. Spiro concluded the presentation by stating that when undertaking research, the key factors to consider are: 'What key ideas are driving the research?' and 'What is the purpose of the study?'

Beth Pickard: Autism diagnosis or neurodivergent identity?

Beth Pickard is the course leader for BA in Creative and Therapeutic Arts and a senior lecturer on the MA Music Therapy at University of South Wales. Pickard's presentation offered a perspective on the way society views and interacts with people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC). Pickard has a chapter in the recent publication, "Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan" (Dunn, Coombes, Maclean, Mottram & Nugent, 2019, pp. 297-329), which provides further insight into her presentation.

Pickard began her presentation by explaining her own personal positioning and discussed the neurodiversity movement, challenging the medical model of an autism diagnosis (Singer, 2016). The

medical diagnosis of an Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) is assessed using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) criteria (APA, 2013). Pickard highlighted the use of language within the diagnostic tool and drew attention to these words: “deficit, impairments, restricted, fixated, inappropriate, difficulty, misreading, highly sensitive and over dependent” (APA, 2013). The viewpoint put across is that this use of negative language in the medical model does not give opportunity to celebrate autism as part of a person’s identity. As a neurotypical music therapist, when working with clients I feel that it is part of our practice to focus on what the client can do and is doing during the session rather than what they cannot. This has also given me an opportunity to reflect on how much the education system uses this terminology.

Pickard introduced us to a friend and colleague who identifies as autistic. Simon Richards was asked for his perspective in an interview. His overall opinion was that first and foremost it is about knowing the person not the diagnosis. In gaining his perspective Pickard provided the opportunity to critically reflect on how we offer people with ASC a voice when further developing our own understanding of neurodiversity. From this perspective it was suggested that adaptations should be made to the environment, attitudes, systems and society rather than attempting to change the person with ASC.

Pickard also discussed the evidence collated in the Time-A RCT (Bieleninik et al., 2017) and the implications of the results. The Time-A RCT is an example of an outcome measure study in music therapy, however the results showed no significant differences in the reduction of symptom severity before and after the music therapy. The language choices here imply that the purpose of the music therapy is to reduce symptoms, following a medical model where symptoms are something to be cured. “The goal of reducing symptoms is considered by autism advocates to be an antiquated approach to helping individuals with autism live more satisfying lives” (Turry, 2018, p. 87).

Pickard concluded the lecture by encouraging delegates to challenge ourselves, to consider our own personal positioning and to consider the inclusivity of advocates of people with autism. And finally, encouraging delegates to focus on and celebrate the diversity within our societies.

Emma Maclean and Claire Tillotson: How do music therapists share? Exploring collaborative approaches in educational settings for children with autistic spectrum conditions

I was particularly interested to hear Emma Maclean and Claire Tillotson’s presentation due to my clinical interests and experiences. I also found their chapter in the 2019 book of great interest. The main focus of the presentation was to talk about their roles in working with other practitioners. They asked the question, why music therapy and what unique perspectives does it bring to the person and the team? With creative delegate participation and the use of *menti.com*, we created a word mosaic, describing what music therapy can bring to the person and the team. When collaborating with other professionals, it is valuable to share knowledge and to find out what their understanding of music therapy is. Generating aims was illustrated using a triangle to establish three different perspectives about the child’s abilities and needs. The three perspectives are: the child’s voice, staff/family/carer and therapist perspectives. Maclean and Tillotson used case examples to highlight the benefits of engaging in a collaborative approach whether it be with teachers, speech and language therapist or

occupational therapist. Schools want children to be in a ready-to-learn state of mind. Cross-disciplinary thinking allows for a range of approaches to support the child in the music therapy session and in their environment.

The presentation then moved on to thinking about how we share key moments. The use of measurement tools such as *Assessment of the Quality of Relationship Scale* (Schumacher & Calvet-Kruppa, 1999), *Sounds of Intent* (Ockelford & Welch, 2012) and *Nordoff-Robbins Scale* (Nordoff & Robbins, 1977) is discussed in detail in relation to case studies in the book chapter. "Using measurement tools that accurately account for changes in the process of therapy may increase trust and understanding and have a role to play in detailing the approaches that are being used" (Maclean & Tillotson, 2019, p. 223).

Counterpoints for consideration were put forward in considering the use of outcome measurement tools. On producing a set of numbers or a measured scale for each of these tools, what does it mean for integrating the therapy into the multi-disciplinary team and what does it mean for the child? There is also the consideration that in producing a set of data or following set statements on a measurement tool, is there a risk of reducing the complex processes in the music therapy sessions.

Tina Warnock: How non-verbal voicework in music therapy can support intersubjective relatedness for children with ASC

Tina Warnock began her presentation with a breathing and pentatonic singing exercise. The exercise was welcomed by delegates to start of the final presentation of the day. Warnock also wrote a chapter in the 2019 book which is an interesting read and further details the discussion points of her presentation. The presentation began by discussing how ASC can impact on vocal communications, developing a sense of self and experiencing relationships. Vocal communication was discussed by looking at the impact of a non-verbal or absent voice and then a verbal voice for a child with ASC. For a neuro-typically developing child, the emotion and intention within our voices is innate and developed through mother-infant interactions. The role of the music therapist is then to provide a holding space to create dyadic interactions and musical exchanges which reflect those mother-infant interactions for the child with ASC.

Warnock referred to Stern's (2010) *Forms of Vitality*. Stern describes the dynamic forms of vitality as the five key qualities of movement, time, force, space and intention (Stern, 2010). Warnock discussed the developing sense of self as a circular process, describing sensory processing difficulties as being at the centre for children with ASC. This circular process was developed from theories of Stern (1985) with layers built upon each other. Warnock discussed the impact of ASC on building meaningful relationships and how building these meaningful relationships relies on the child's capacity to develop a sense of self and to perceive and share the emotions of others and on the caregiver's emotional availability.

This led to an interesting discussion for a child with ASC. If there is an impact on their capacity to relate then this will in turn affect the dyadic interaction between mother-infant. Due to the reduction of reciprocity from child and primary caregiver, the parent well-being can also be affected and the musicality in their voice may change or decrease. The role of the music therapist is to provide the experience of relationships through voicework, relating to the mother-infant forms of communication.

Warnock discussed a case study over a period of years in which she discussed matching the tone and timbre of vocal expression. She used shared pulse and Voicework which consisted of using consonant sounds, repeating them back, and developing question/answer dialogues. The aim of these techniques during music therapy was to strengthen the client's emergent sense of self and in doing so, develop his capacity to relate to others and build meaningful relationships.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel discussion provided an opportunity for the differing perspectives to come together to share some commonalities and to discuss the variety in ways of working. And in the middle of it all, a commonality of trying to ensure to give the client their voice.

The panel welcomed the opportunity to revisit theories such as Stern through a new lens. The panel discussed actively involving the service user and carers in the delivery of education. Also, the use of the word 'conditions' rather than 'disorders' opened up a discussion and language use. Further to the discussion were the reflections of an autistic music therapist working with an autistic client. The discussion asked; What would be the impact on the therapy process itself of an autistic music therapist working with an autistic client? How would the training process for the music therapist be experienced? Would the music therapist have further understanding into the client processes, perceptions and self-identity? Since we each experience everything differently and subjectively, is this an area of future research?

POSTER PRESENTATION AWARDS PROVIDED BY JESSICA KINGSLEY PUBLISHERS

During the lunch break, delegates had the opportunity to read the poster presentations from USW students and graduates. Delegates were invited to vote for two winning posters. The categories were; most creative/innovate poster design and most engaging poster design. The prize-winning posters were Sally Holden (poster title: 'The Kernow effect') and Erin Williams-Jones (poster title: 'Rewiring Our Thoughts').

HARMONI CYMRU

We were delighted to be provided with music by Harmoni Cymru. Harmoni Cymru is a not-for-profit company who have developed a ward residency programme of weekly interactive music sessions in hospitals across the Cardiff and Vale Health Board. They have recently expanded their work to include other therapeutic interventions, including the creation of an aphasia-friendly choir in the Stroke Rehabilitation Centre and Llandough Hospital. In photograph 2, Vicky Guise playing the Flute and Lynnsey Coull Gwynedd playing the Harp, both are qualified music therapists from the University of South Wales.



Photograph 2: Lynnsey Coull Gwynedd (harp) and Vicky Guise (flute)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The day provided a rich and diverse range of topics, materials, discussions and reflections. The varying perspectives and approaches heard throughout the day were refreshing and reassuring. Most of the day focussed on working with children. My own work as a freelance music therapist has led me to be currently working with children and adults with a range of conditions including autism. I wondered about the approaches and perspectives of working with adults and if the outcome measures discussed throughout the day would be used in the same way. The panel opened up this discussion when looking at the wide and varied contexts in which music therapists could potentially work.

As a neurotypical music therapist working with clients with ASC, I was able to reflect on the relationships experienced by my clients. I thought about the ways in which my own practice is related to the mother-infant interactions and I wanted to revisit Stern (1985, 2010). On reflection of the day, I was left to wonder what could we do to be more inclusive as a society and to promote inclusivity of people with ASC's? I thought about my own personal positioning as a neurotypical music therapist and our intentions as music therapists when working with people with ASC. It is important to maintain our own identity in our knowledge of building and establishing the therapeutic relationship. A reflection point to conclude: Is the importance of the therapeutic relationship relayed to other professionals in collaborative working and do others involved in the child's care see this as important? I ask this question because for me the therapeutic relationship is the fundamental building block of the clinical

work, reflective of the mother-infant relationship. I wonder about any challenges faced by music therapists in explaining and discussing the music therapy work to other professionals.

The discussions throughout the day shared their varying perspectives, professional viewpoints and research in the field of music therapy and autism in the context of identity, outcome measures, collaboration and relationships.

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