

## Conference report

# The First Music Therapy Research Day at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

Gillian O'Dempsey

The First Music Therapy Research Day

19 May 2017

Queen Margaret University  
Edinburgh, Scotland



Queen Margaret University  
EDINBURGH

**Gillian O'Dempsey** trained as a music therapist at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, qualifying in 2009. She worked for five years in the NHS Borders CAMHS service and taught the Introduction to Music Therapy module at Edinburgh Napier University. Since 2014 she has worked in the Child Development Service at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and with children in mainstream primary schools. Gillian is a trustee of the British Association for Music Therapy.

**Email:** [gillian.o'dempsey@nhs.net](mailto:gillian.o'dempsey@nhs.net)

**Publication history:** Submitted 5 November 2017; First published 15 January 2018.

The First Music Therapy Research Day at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh took place on 19 May 2017. Sponsored by The Centre for Applied Social Sciences at Queen Margaret University (QMU), the morning provided an introduction to the new PhD programme based at the university. In the afternoon, in collaboration with QMU, the Scottish Music Therapy Trust hosted a lecture given by American music therapist and researcher, Professor Barbara Wheeler.

Ian McMillan (Head of Division, Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies, QMU) opened the day, welcoming the gathering of music therapists, music therapy students and researchers working both within Scotland and beyond. He celebrated this event, following on from QMU's hosting of the International Symposium for Music and Adolescents in 2016 (see e'Silva 2016), as a further step towards Philippa Derrington's vision of QMU as a hub for music therapy research and education in Scotland.



Photograph 1: Ian McMillan

### WHY RESEARCH IN MUSIC THERAPY?

Giorgos Tsisiris (Lecturer in Music Therapy, QMU) challenged his audience to offer possible answers to the question 'why research in music therapy?'. He suggested that there are three main narratives

in answering this question: advocacy, explanation and exploration. He cautioned against the first approach of advocacy, or the stance of “I know music therapy works, I just need to prove it” and also warned that there can be a ‘discrepancy of assumption’ where a music therapist wants to prove and a researcher wants to test the efficacy of an intervention.

Tsirir stressed the need for there to be research ‘users, doers and leaders’, emphasising that you “cannot become a doer unless you become a good user”. In thinking about practising music therapists’ engagement with research, he referenced a worldwide survey (Waldon & Wheeler 2017) which examined the extent to which music therapists view research as relevant to clinical practice. In the UK, results of the recent British Association for Music Therapy survey showed that only ten percent of music therapists consider that they undertake research as part of their employment (see Carr, Tsirir & Swijghuisen Reigersberg 2017).

Tsirir offered a memorable illustration of the metaphor of evidence as an iceberg, asking, ‘if evidence is the tip of the iceberg, what is it like there?’. Is this pinnacle a place with stories of risk or danger, or a carefree environment? Continuing the metaphor, he suggested the need for a scuba diver to look underneath, at the iceberg, and see what is going on.

Of course, one of the risks of research is that the results might not be what had been anticipated, expected or hoped for. Tsirir suggested that negative outcomes can actually lead to an engagement with the research process and cited the example of the Matisse Trial in Art Therapy (see Hottum & Hewitt 2014). This is perhaps useful for the music therapy profession to bear in mind as the results of the TIME-A study (Geretsegger, Holck & Gold 2012) are made public.

## WHY A PHD?

Having considered why we might undertake research in music therapy, the next speaker, Philippa Derrington (Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader, MSc Music Therapy, QMU) encouraged thinking about ‘Why a PhD?’. Putting this within the context of music therapy training in the UK, she gave an overview of the history of the MSc Music Therapy programme at QMU since it began in 2002. Considering the introduction of a PhD programme as a milestone within the development of a training course, Derrington went on to give a brief survey of the other UK training courses and the development of PhD programmes.



Photograph 2: Giorgos Tsirir and Philippa Derrington

Using the image of a bug which keeps niggling and will not go away, Derrington described the impetus to start exploring PhD study and gave a broad introduction to the early planning stages. She emphasised the importance of talking with potential supervisors and linking with possible partner organisations or institutions (in her own PhD, Derrington collaborated with Anglia Ruskin University and the Institute of Education, London) as well as exploring potential funding opportunities. Listening to some of Derrington’s own experiences it became clear that considerable preparation is needed before even embarking on PhD study. As a guide to this, Derrington provided an overview of what should be included in a research proposal and outlined the process for writing one. She acknowledged the PhD journey may change from what is set out at the start and the fact that there may be many surprises along the way!

## WHY QMU?

Having started the day with a focus on music therapy research, the next two speakers widened the perspective and gave some insight into communities that potential PhD students would be joining at QMU. Lindsey Defew of the Graduate School set out to answer the question, ‘Why QMU for your PhD?’. As she described what QMU offers PhD students, and some of the expectations on

them, it became clear that this is a setting with opportunities for regular, active engagement in a cross-faculty research community. Broadening the context further to the Scottish AHP research community, Judith Lane, Leader of the South East Scotland Hub of the Council for Allied Health Professions Research (CAHPR) and Senior Lecturer in Physiotherapy (QMU), gave a brief overview of the resources and support available through the local CAHPR hub and talked of recent developments including introducing webinars.



Photograph 3: Judith Lane



Photograph 4: Jane Burns

Having considered the wider context, the next speakers moved the focus in and shared their own experiences of undertaking doctoral study at QMU. Niamh Kinsella, an occupational therapist and current doctoral student at QMU, talked enthusiastically about the importance of the peer support she has found within the QMU research community and also of the valuable opportunities to present work, share ideas and attend conferences. Jane Burns, Lecturer in Art Therapy (QMU) looked back on her own experience of doctoral study and took us on an entertaining journey through

'SPACE', using this mnemonic to list elements of PhD research from the Spark of an idea, through People, Action, Curiosity ("you're becoming the expert so the more curious you are, the better your research") to the Endurance necessary to achieve the PhD goal.

## MUSIC THERAPY RESEARCH: STRENGTHENING OUR MUSIC THERAPY PRACTICE

Barbara Wheeler (Professor Emeritus, Montclair State University) was guest lecturer for the afternoon. Warmly introduced by Melissa Humphreys, Chair of the Scottish Music Therapy Trust, Wheeler set out to give an overview of the evolution of music therapy research, using the three editions of her seminal text *'Music Therapy Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives'* (1995, 2005, 2016) as markers of some of the changes in research perspectives. Comparing the first edition with the recently published third edition, Wheeler noted a shift from considering qualitative/quantitative to objectivist/interpretivist paradigms, as well as an increase in combining these in mixed methods studies. She remarked on the growing awareness of the relationships between theory, practice and research demonstrated in the third edition and the wider range of international perspectives and approaches to research represented.



Photograph 5: Barbara Wheeler

Wheeler examined some definitions of research.

"[...] a systematic, self-monitored inquiry which leads to discovery or new insight which, when documented and disseminated, contributes to or



modifies existing knowledge or practice” (Bruscia 1995: 21).

From Ken Bruscia’s definition to Kate Gfeller’s (1995: 29) more succinct line of “a disciplined or systematic enquiry”, Wheeler gave an overview of the process of undertaking research which closely linked back to Derrington’s talk in the morning. Highlighting the addition of chapters on methodological issues in the third edition, Wheeler expressed the prime concern as being the challenge of gathering, using and presenting information about music. She surveyed various methodological approaches, citing case examples of each. Included in this survey was the relatively new idea of arts-based research and Wheeler shared the example of Diane Austin’s ‘Grace Street’ (Austin 2015, 2016), which uses the framework of a musical to express the lived experiences of men and women dealing with addiction.

It was fitting that amongst the examples Wheeler chose to illustrate various methodological approaches was Margaret Broad’s phenomenological study of bereaved mothers’ receptivity to music therapy following miscarriage or stillbirth (Broad 2014) as this originated from Broad’s Masters dissertation, completed at QMU.

Identifying some possible areas for further development, Wheeler commented on the lack of ethnographic research in music therapy. She also observed that within the UK literature there are many examples of interpretivist case study research which are often not associated with a research methodology; she encouraged therapists to engage with research methodologies in their thinking and writing about their work and to access resources such as the free online journal, ‘Qualitative Inquiries in Music Therapy’ (<http://www.barcelonapublishers.com/Periodicals>).

## CONCLUDING

The final part of the day offered opportunity for informal discussion and reflection at a wine reception with live music performed by QMU music therapy students. The day had not only provided an introduction to the doctoral level opportunities for music therapists at QMU but challenged all attendees to broaden their thinking about what research is, and why we are doing it. Considering the definition of research as a disciplined or systematic enquiry (Gfeller 1995), the possibility is opened up that much of the information we gather in our day to day practice can be presented as

research, if we rise to the challenge to engage with research methodology and frame our enquiries and findings accordingly.

These are exciting times for music therapy research in Scotland and beyond and I hope this event will be the first of many as QMU gains a growing reputation as a thriving centre of music therapy research.

## REFERENCES

- Austin, D. (2016). Revisiting Grace Street: A retrospective account of and arts-based research study of Alcoholics Anonymous. *Music Therapy Perspectives*, 34(1), 14-25.
- Austin, D. (2015). Goodbye Peter Pan: Excerpt from Grace Street. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoYb7iumoc>
- Broad, M. (2014). Shadow grief: Exploring bereaved mothers’ receptivity to music therapy following miscarriage or stillbirth. *Approaches: Music Therapy & Special Music Education*, 6(1), 28-38. Retrieved from <http://approaches.gr/volume-6-1-2014/>
- Bruscia, K. E. (1995). The Boundaries of Music Therapy Research. In B. L. Wheeler (Ed.), *Music Therapy Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives* (pp. 17-27). Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Carr, C. E., Tsiris, G., & Swijghuisen Reigersberg, M. (2017). Understanding the present, re-visioning the future: An initial mapping of music therapists in the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Music Therapy*, 31(2), 68-85.
- e’Silva, K. (2016). Conference report: “The Third International Symposium for Music Therapy with Adolescents ‘Adolescent development and music therapy: Dialogues in action’”. *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, First View (Advance online publication), 1-6. Retrieved from <http://approaches.gr/esilva-cr20160913/>
- Geretsegger, M., Holck, U., & Gold, C. (2012). Randomised controlled trial of improvisational music therapy’s effectiveness for children with autism spectrum disorders (TIME-A): Study protocol. *BMC Pediatrics*, 12(2). Retrieved from [www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2431-12-2.pdf](http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2431-12-2.pdf)
- Gfeller, K. (1995). The Status of Music Therapy Research. In B. L. Wheeler (Ed.), *Music Therapy Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives* (pp. 29-63). Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Hottum, S., & Huet, V. (2014). The MATISSE trial – A critique. Does art therapy really have nothing to offer people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia? Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244014532930>
- Waldon, E., & Wheeler, B. L. (2017). Perceived research relevance: A worldwide survey of music therapists. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 26, 395-410.
- Wheeler, B. L., & Murphy, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Music Therapy Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). Dallas, TX: Barcelona Publishers.
- Wheeler, B. L. (Ed.). (1995). *Music Therapy Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives*. Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.

Wheeler, B. L. (Ed.). (2005). *Music Therapy Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.

---

**Suggested citation:**

O'Dempsey, G. (2018). Conference report: "The First Music Therapy Research Day at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh". *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy, First View* (Advance online publication), 147-151.