APPROACHES

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Mapping queer spaces in music therapy: A conceptual framework

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Abstract

Increasing clinical and academic attention has been given to music therapy with LGBTQ+ clients. As part of this process, we introduce the "Queer Spaces in Music Therapy" (QS-in-MT) framework, a conceptual roadmap designed to address therapeutic challenges encountered by LGBTQ+ individuals in music therapy. Based on previous research, two main themes were found to be typically challenging in LGBTQ+ therapy and were then orthogonally superimposed to form a two-dimensional framework. The first theme refers to the client's queer vs. heteronormative perspectives and is delineated as the x-axis continuum. The second theme refers to the client's feelings of belonging vs. loneliness and is delineated as the y-axis continuum. The framework and the four "queer spaces" that it forms, offer therapists ways to better understand, interpret, and subsequently support clients on their journey. A clinical case study is provided to demonstrate the practical implementation of the QS-in-MT framework. Different pivotal points from the clinical process are presented and then explained using the framework. It is shown how different musical interventions and activities, such as improvisation on various instruments, engagement with familiar and original songs, and vocal exploration, serve as vehicles of change in the clinical process, and how these changes are clearly presented and articulated using the framework. In the discussion, possible uses of the QS-in-MT framework are presented within different contexts, such as in supervision, with colleagues, and with the client. Limitations of the framework are also provided as well as possible directions to further develop it.

Introduction

The journey leading to this article began long ago, during my (first author of this article) personal coming out as gay in the early 2000s in Israel. Since then, many positive changes have occurred for

the LGBTQ+ community, both in Israel and globally. However, many LGBTQ+ people still grapple with stigma, discrimination, and homophobia, leading to loneliness and marginalisation. These challenges arise both during the coming-out process and in authentically expressing sexual and gender identity, meaning coherence with one's sense of self, whether consistent or fluid (Adams, 2011; Callhan & Loscocco, 2023; Drescher & Merlino, 2007; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004; Wilson & Liss, 2020). As a musician and music therapist I asked myself: How can music and music therapy create a balance between authentic queer identity expression and a sense of belonging that can coexist in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals? In this article, the term 'queer' is used to describe the entire spectrum of sexual and gender minority identities, as well as in reference to queer theory, which will be detailed further on. In relation to music, the notion of 'queer' (e.g., "queer music"), will be elaborated later in the article.

The foundation to the current research began over a decade ago with the second author of this article, while we were writing our first article on the role of music in the coming-out process of gay men (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015). Writing about this topic touched on sensitive aspects of my queer identity, and there was a lack of relevant material in music therapy for this population. At the same time, my identity is shaped by other intersecting dimensions—being Israeli, white, male, gay, from a strong socio-economic background, and a musician-therapist—which also influenced the way I approached both research and clinical work. These challenges became opportunities for growth and for giving a voice to both my queer and professional identities. Subsequently, my thesis explored the role of songs in music therapy groups with gay men (Aronoff, 2017), laying the groundwork for my doctoral research and the development of the Queer Spaces in Music Therapy (QS-in-MT) framework and roadmap (Aronoff, 2022) which I will describe in this article.

In the past decade, global research addressing the interface of music therapy with the LGBTQ+ community and queer theory has expanded significantly, especially with the publication of a special issue on the subject by *Voices* in 2019, and then with the publication of the seminal *The Oxford Handbook of Queer and Trans Music Therapy* by Collin Lee in 2024 (Lee, 2024). Various studies have explored how music therapy integrates and expresses queer perspectives, examining how therapeutic musical experiences can reflect and support the complexities of queer identities, address issues of gender and sexual orientation, and create safe spaces for self-expression and identity exploration within the musical therapeutic setting (Bain et al., 2016; Bain & Gumble, 2019; Lee, 2024; Steward, 2019; Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2013).

Building on these foundations, this article presents a framework that can function as a practical tool for music therapists who work with queer clients. The framework charts a possible "roadmap" of what we will term "Queer Spaces in Music Therapy" (QS-in-MT) and then shows how music interventions can be useful in navigating between these spaces, to the client's benefit.

In this "practice-based" article we will first outline the challenges LGBTQ+ individuals face both in their daily lives and within the context of music therapy. Next, we will connect queer theory to music therapy, highlighting the unique therapeutic conditions that might emerge in the context of music and music therapy. We will then describe the QS-in-MT framework and its key components and showcase it with clinical vignettes from a treatment that was conducted by the first author of this article. Finally, we will summarise the article's potential contributions and discuss possible practical applications of the framework, and directions for future research.

Background

LGBTQ+ individuals seek mental health treatment at higher rates compared to the general population, often due to the unique challenges they face related to sexual and gender identity as well as societal stigma (Ball & Lipton, 2011; Garents et al., 1991; Greenan & Tunnel, 2003; Morrow, 2000; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004). According to the APA's guidelines from 2012 and onwards, it is essential for therapists to approach clients' sexual orientation as a natural variation of human identity, while addressing the detrimental effects of homophobia and prejudice, which often manifest as feelings of isolation, marginalisation, and loneliness (APA, 2012). For therapists working with LGBTQ+ clients, it is vital to understand these specific challenges in order to provide effective therapeutic support, particularly in helping clients navigate difficulties in forming relationships and coping with the minority stress they face, defined as chronic stress resulting from stigma and discrimination toward sexual and gender minorities. (Ball & Lipton, 2011; Greenan & Tunnel, 2003; Morrow, 2000).

It is important to remember that homosexuality was historically classified as a mental disorder until its removal from the DSM in 1974 (APA, 2012). This pathologisation led to harmful treatments like conversion therapy (Foucault, 1978). Despite changing attitudes, homophobia and prejudice continue to affect LGBTQ+ individuals (Ching et al., 2021; Herek et al., 2009). Similarly, in 2013, the DSM-5 redefined gender identity disorder as Gender Dysphoria, focusing on the distress from the conflict between sex assigned at birth and gender identity (APA, 2013).

Music therapy with LGBTQ+ individuals: Integrating queer theory

Music therapy provides a distinctive and valuable approach to address these abovementioned challenges. The initial studies on music therapy sessions with LGBTQ+ individuals were published in the early 1990s, primarily focusing on group and individual work with homosexuals coping with AIDS (Lee, 1990, 1992, 1996). During this period, beyond the general guidelines provided by the American Music Therapy Association (2013), there was limited professional literature specifically addressing music therapy for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Whitehead-Pleaux et al. (2013) emphasised the significant gap in knowledge, revealing that over half of the music therapists they interviewed reported a lack of both specific training and awareness for working effectively with LGBTQ+ clients. They stressed the critical importance of understanding LGBTQ+ culture, addressing sexual identity within therapy, and fostering an inclusive and affirming therapeutic environment that prioritises privacy and confidentiality. In particular, they emphasised how music can act as a non-threatening and supportive space for LGBTQ+ clients to safely explore and express their authentic identities, both musically and verbally. The authors highlighted how this musical therapeutic space validates and affirms diverse sexual and gender identities and acts as a powerful tool for fostering self-expression and emotional resilience. Ultimately, it contributes to improving clients' quality of life by offering a space that encourages empowerment and healing. Despite these advancements, Whitehead-Pleaux et al. (2013) pointed out that substantial gaps in professional knowledge remained until recent years, when research in this area began to expand.

As mentioned above, in the last decade, music therapists have increasingly incorporated queer theory in their thought and practice, especially in relation to LGBTQ+ clients (Bain et al., 2016;

Bain & Gumble, 2019; Lee, 2024; Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2013). Queer Theory, emerging in the early 1990s within social studies, sexuality, and feminism, challenges traditional binary divisions such as male/female and homosexual/heterosexual, advocating for a more fluid understanding of gender and sexual identities (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 2005). It critiques heteronormativity, viewing binary categorisations as reinforcing unequal power dynamics (Fansler et al., 2019). Bain et al. (2016) applied queer theory in music therapy, encouraging LGBTQ+ clients to confront societal norms and express feelings such as anger, frustration, and loneliness. Music becomes a medium for exploring queer identities, providing emotional and social support in the therapeutic space. In this context, therapists, whether identifying as queer or not, can incorporate queer theory into their practice to create a "queer-friendly space" for clients (Hudak & Bates, 2018).

The November 2019 special issue of *Voices* marked a pivotal moment in music therapy, as it was one of the first to focus entirely on the integration of queer theory into therapeutic practice (Voices, 2019). It gathered insights from researchers and practitioners, emphasizing the creation of inclusive, anti-oppressive spaces for LGBTQ+ clients to safely explore and express their authentic identities. Music therapy was highlighted as a powerful tool for affirming diverse gender and sexual identities, while also addressing the need for therapists to improve cultural competency. Gumble's (2019) work on vocal therapy further exemplifies this approach by using the fluidity of vocal ranges to challenge traditional gender norms, making the voice not just a means of musical expression, but also a medium for personal identity exploration. Together, these contributions laid a foundation for incorporating queer theory into music therapy on a broader scale.

The Oxford Handbook of Queer and Trans Music Therapy (Lee, 2024) was another significant contribution to this field of thought and practice. By integrating queer theory, intersectionality, and social justice, Lee, et al. (2024) promote the creation of inclusive, anti-oppressive therapeutic environments where clients can explore their identities. Their approach incorporates practical interventions such as music-making, song analysis, and vocal work, challenging traditional heteronormative frameworks and encouraging therapists to reflect on their own identities and biases. They highlight that validating and supporting diverse gender and sexual identities is crucial for the evolution of the profession, pushing music therapy to become more inclusive, culturally competent, and socially just.

In this article, we continue the effort to develop music therapy for LGBTQ+ clients by suggesting a framework that can serve as a practical tool for music therapists. It is not a theoretical article or a practical guide, but rather a conceptual framework that works as a roadmap for navigating the complexities of LGBTQ+ identities in therapy. On the one hand, the framework proposes a clear structure for different "queer spaces" in which the client may reside, and on the other hand, it shows how the client can be encouraged to move freely between these spaces. The music therapist can utilise musical interventions to enable this motion, creating inclusive and affirming environments.

Presenting the Queer Spaces in Music Therapy (QS-in-MT) framework

The Queer Spaces in Music Therapy (QS-in-MT) framework was developed as part of the first author's PhD dissertation under the supervision of the second author. The first stage of this qualitative research was based on in-depth interviews with six music therapists and a speech therapist about

their work with LGBTQ+ clients in Israel. While diverse sexual and gender identities are legally recognised in Israel, social discrimination persists. The participants worked in schools, private clinics, and hospitals, and the interviews explored the basic question of whether there was something unique about therapy and music therapy with LGBTQ+ clients. The interviews clearly pointed at the possibility that there were unique issues, threads, and themes that characterised working with LGBTQ+ clients. The themes fell into two main categories that resonated nicely with queer concepts:

(1) Fluidity (queer perspective) vs. binary framework (heteronormative perspective) – According to the interviewees, many of their clients raised issues that were connected to this continuum and moved between these perspectives, with heteronormativity understood as the social and cultural assumption of heterosexuality and binary gender as the norm. On the one hand, clients attempted to adopt fluidity regarding sexuality and other pivotal issues in their lives; on the other hand, they reflected on how the heteronormative perspective they were brought up with affected their lives and whether it needed to be reconsidered. Importantly, fluidity is not presented here as the goal for every LGBTQ+ individual. The framework allows for multiple possibilities, including a stable gay or lesbian identity, while highlighting the freedom to move among different positions according to each client's experience. The interviewees noted a movement on this imaginary continuum in which clients explored the range of possibilities presented to them, eventually zooming in on those that were best for them. We titled this 'the queer vs. heteronormative continuum' and plotted it as a horizontal x-axis, with infinite possibilities and gradients along it (see Figure 1). Plotting it this way reflects the notion that all points on this continuum are possible, legitimate, and explorable.

(2) Loneliness vs. belonging – According to the interviewees, many of their clients touched upon issues of loneliness and marginalisation and were seeking a sense of belonging. On the one hand, clients grapple with social forces that give them a clear feeling that they are not welcome, and sometimes, these voices are internalised, such as in the case of internalised homophobia. Such thoughts and feelings can hinder the process of self-acceptance and coming out. On the other hand, clients were pursuing a sense of belonging and seeking people or groups that would accept them. Sometimes, this could be a personal connection or a romantic pursuit that can validate one's identity and make them feel that they are not alone. Other times, this can be a matter of finding a group in which one feels welcome and safe. Interviewees referred to the movement that their clients made on this continuum, striving to get closer to the "belonging" point, but then dealing with a reality that often threw them back to loneliness and marginalisation. We titled this "the loneliness vs. belonging continuum" and plotted it as a vertical y-axis, with infinite possibilities and gradients along it. As in the "queer vs. heteronormative continuum", here too, plotting the continuum on a line reflects the notion that all points on the continuum are possible, and can be explored as part of therapy.

As can be seen in Figure 1, when the two continuums are orthogonally superimposed, a two-dimensional layout emerges and it can be used as a conceptual framework, or if one wants to be more practical – as a roadmap used to examine and more clearly understand the work with a client. Most basically, it can be used to assess where a client is at a given moment in time, and also where they strives to reach or where they came from (see the arrow moving from its origin (bottom of the arrow) to its final point (top of the arrow) in Figure 1 as an example, indicating that the client moved from a sense of loneliness to a sense of belonging). Also plotted, are the ways music or music therapy helped the client move from one point to another (see the piano icon, indicating that piano playing and

improvisation were an essential part or catalyst of the movement). If multiple movements occurred during the therapeutic process, or multiple musical interventions were used, they can all be added, and a clear visual representation of that process, and the roles and forms that music assumed in the process, can be revealed.
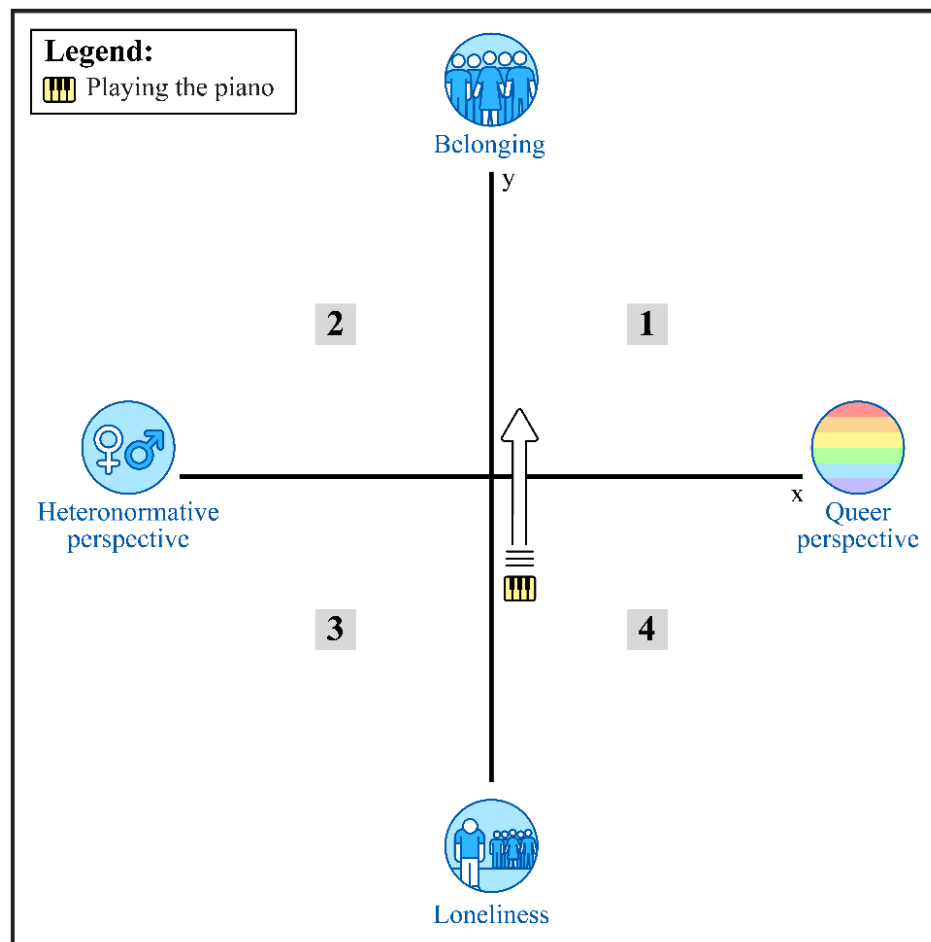

Figure 1: The Queer Spaces in Music Therapy (QS-in-MT) framework

Note that the framework creates four distinct spaces that can be described as follows:

The Queer – Belonging Space (1): In this space, queer individuals who have embraced the queer approach also experience feelings of belonging in their lives. In many respects this can be perceived as an "ideal" space that many clients will strive for and will need our facilitation in doing so.

The Heteronormative – Belonging Space (2): In this space, queer individuals feel a sense of belonging while simultaneously adopting a binary-heteronormative approach. This position potentially puts queer individuals in a less authentic inclination relative to themselves and their queer identity, and so clients who identify with being in this space might want to explore the possibilities of moving toward adopting queer perspectives while not losing their sense of belonging. Importantly, the framework does not prescribe a uniform 'non-binary' position; it acknowledges that authenticity and well-being can be found in both binary and non-binary positions, depending on the client's context and

experience. In multicultural and partly traditional contexts such as are common in Israel, clients may not have previously had the opportunity to engage with these perspectives, so that even a temporarily exposure to them might foster movement, growth, and learning.

The Heteronormative – Loneliness Space (3): In this space, queer individuals feel loneliness and isolation while, and sometimes as a result of, adopting the binary heteronormative approach. Individuals in this space may feel trapped because they must adhere to the rules of the heteronormative game, often remaining in the closet. They may sense that they are navigating a foreign and non-authentic world, leading to feelings of loneliness, marginality, and isolation. In the context of music therapy, they might want to imagine being in other spaces, and seeing how music can help them get there.

The Queer – Loneliness Space (4): In this space, queer individuals who have embraced the queer approach may experience a larger personal breathing space and authenticity. However, they may also feel lonely and isolated due to the expression of their queer approach in heteronormative society. In the context of music therapy, they might want to explore how they can reach spaces that enable them to be both authentic with their queer perspective to life while also finding a sense of belonging.

Clearly, different people can find themselves in different spaces of this framework at different times in their lives, and there can be constant movement between the spaces. However, problems may emerge when a person feels stuck in one or two spaces, and they seek help to facilitate movement. Music therapy can be very useful in enabling such movements since different musical interventions can be used to explore spaces and to prompt movement to other spaces. At this point, it is helpful to distinguish between a queer perspective—as an analytic lens that critiques heteronormativity and emphasises fluidity—and a queer approach, which enacts these principles in practice through clients' musical explorations and the therapist's creation of a flexible, authentic space.

To demonstrate the practical use of the QS-in-MT framework, we will now provide some case examples from the first author's clinical work with Tomer (pseudonym). We will first provide Tomer's background and the reasons he gave for applying to music therapy. We will then give specific examples of significant moments in his therapeutic process and demonstrate how they are mapped on the QS-in-MT framework. We will emphasise how different musical interventions served as catalysts for movement from one space to another, enabling Tomer to develop and grow in his personal life.[1]

Demonstrating the QS-in-MT framework: Examples from Tomer's case study

Background and first meeting

Tomer (a pseudonym) is a 25-year-old man who works in the computer and software industry. He is also a musician who plays several instruments, with the piano being his primary and favourite instrument. Over the course of about six months, we conducted approximately 23 sessions, meeting once a week. Initially, Tomer reached out to me after seeing my therapist profile on a website, and during the first session he shared:

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[1] The research on which the examples of this case study are based was approved by the Ethics Committee of Bar-Ilan University (approval number: EMUS.2018-7).

> I studied music in high school and recently completed a two-year course in musical production and composition. I play the piano and aspire to compose for cinema and theatre. Before COVID, I released a modern-classical album but struggled to promote it. My creativity has stalled, and I'm seeking work in music to reconnect with my passion. Coming out a year ago boosted my confidence, but I still have complex feelings about the LGBTQ+ community and sometimes feel like an outsider. I reached out to you because your therapist profile mentioned your work on music and the coming out experience, which is exactly what I need.

Tomer's coming out story was deeply significant, profoundly influencing both his personal life and his music. In one of our sessions, Tomer discussed the transformative impact of his coming out experience and its connection with his music, noting:

> Each instance of coming out this past year boosted my confidence and authenticity, although I'm still uncertain about my path in music. I've been reevaluating my album, wondering if it reflects who I am now. Coming out changed how I view my music—it's like listening with "fresh ears", noticing new aspects. My music is where I can be myself, like coming out of the closet, even if it's a struggle. It's a dialogue with myself, a moment of peace amid chaos.

Tomer's coming-out journey, reflected in his music, highlights a non-binary progression of self-acceptance rather than a simple "in" or "out" binary. Within the QS-in-MT framework, this represents movement along the x-axis on the "queer vs. heteronormative continuum", specifically toward spaces 1 and 4. As we will see in some of the following examples, his journey shows a shift from heteronormative constraints to authentic queer expression, and music played a significant role in this shift. In addition, there was a music-driven movement along the y-axis on the "loneliness vs. belonging continuum", in which he found a greater sense of belonging as the music therapy process progressed. Let us now give examples from the therapy process and highlight the diverse musical means through which these movements were accomplished.

Tomer's original music album

Tomer's album, which contains music he composed and arranged, played an important role in the therapy sessions, acting as a deep reflection of his personal and musical identity:

> I feel like this music album is me; you need to listen to it several times to really know it. Creating and publishing it made me feel exposed without the response I expected. I am here in therapy to get tools to deal with this. (Tomer)

Throughout therapy, Tomer shared five tracks from his album. Each piece centred our discussions, deepened our understanding of his experiences, and affected our therapeutic relationship even when not played. Its significance became clear in our second session, where Tomer discussed feeling different, lonely, and challenged by social acceptance.

> I usually feel strange and different, not understanding the situation. I still question whether my music album has value and whether my music is good. I can't shake the feeling that nobody cares, and it eats away at me. (Tomer)

Tomer highlighted these themes through sharing a track called *Different People* from his album. We listened to his music together; the composition skilfully integrated clarinet, piano, and flutes in a repetitive pattern, creating a unique sense of movement. A striking cello entrance balanced tension with a calming undertone, capturing Tomer's emotions. Recorded voices whispering "I am so alone" reflected his loneliness, especially relating to his queer identity and experiences in the closet. Tomer explained:

> The whispering of 'alone' turned my personal loneliness into a shared experience, highlighting loneliness's universality. In our therapy sessions, my album sounds more beautiful, and the rhythm works better. However, I've noticed I avoid eye contact with you while listening; it's difficult for me, and I don't want people to feel scrutinised.

Despite struggling with self-promotion of his music album, Tomer found comfort in the honesty of his music:

> I want my music to bridge the gap between who I was in the past (before coming out of the closet) and who I am now, showing my authenticity. But I also feel like an outsider in the gay community, pressured to conform to masculine norms and a focus on sex. I seek genuine connection and wonder how others see me, especially now that I'm living more authentically. How do you see me, Uri?

Tomer longed for others to see him and his music authentically, and expressed a newfound desire for recognition, contrasting with his perception of superficiality in some of his dating experiences. His question to me underscored the link between external and self-recognition and acceptance.

Later in the therapeutic process, Tomer revisited his conflicts about marketing and publishing his music album. I encouraged him to prioritise authenticity over commercial success. In a heartfelt moment, he tearfully expressed his deep desire for the audience to truly see and understand him through his music.

> I want to tell you something I don't usually share. I made the music album because that's who I am! My album is different, something special, and not something you hear every day, for better or for worse. I believe there's depth in what I create. I've learned to dig deeper into authenticity and truth, but I feel like it's not seen. I feel like I'm not seen! (Tomer)

Moving on the continuum of external and internal recognition, Tomer expressed his longing to be recognised and accepted in both his music and personal life. By the end of that session, he was overwhelmed but preparing for another date with some guy, unaware that it would lead to his first long-term relationship with Michael (a pseudonym). These moments in therapy were transformative, weaving vulnerability, authenticity, and connection into Tomer's therapeutic themes, while introducing another layer of continuity through sound.

To briefly summarise this example, Tomer's music album served as a central therapeutic means for his progression on both continuums. Through sharing his compositions, he expressed his queer identity and could identify with his queer music, making an important move on the x-axis, towards the queer side of the continuum. The 'queer' aspects of his music were reflected in his use of unconventional tonalities, improvisational choices, and expressive elements that departed from normative musical structures, mirroring his unique identity and self-exploration. Concurrently, he was making immense progress regarding the y-axis, as he addressed his feelings of loneliness, and his desire to be seen, recognised, and included. Interestingly, and possibly non-coincidentally, this process was intertwined with his first relationship – Michael, and the intensification of the connection with him.

If we plot Tomer's starting point in music therapy as somewhere in the Heteronormative – Loneliness Space - after presenting his album and working through his emotions, he progressed, at least partially and temporarily, to the more comfortable Queer Belonging Space. By playing his music in the music therapy room he was able to start such movement. He could rehearse playing his music to another (the music therapist), while being accepted and praised for it. This then opened the possibility for him to find more audiences with whom he could be authentically queer and concurrently feel accepted, not marginalised.

Listening to selected familiar songs

During therapy, Tomer listened to familiar songs that inspired him. He shared feelings of confusion and loneliness, struggling to articulate coherent thoughts. However, he found solace in listening to a track by Mogwai, which had implicit connections with his challenges in forming romantic connections (see Track 1):

> Do you know the band Mogwai and their song Fear Satan? I have been playing it on the piano and developed something special from it, which made me feel successful and excited. Yesterday, I had a date with a nice guy, but it didn't excite me as much as this music. (Tomer)

Recording 1

Fear Satan by Mogwai
[Music available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du4JbfK5okA]

We listened together to Mogwai's music, which Tomer regarded as esoteric and unfamiliar to most people. This perspective likely resonated with his self-perception as unique and outside the

mainstream, mirroring his feelings of being different and disconnected. As we listened, the music enveloped us in a trance-like state, profoundly impacting both of us. Tomer felt it reflected the sharp contrast between its intensity and the dullness of a bland person he met recently on a date, highlighting his challenge to connect to people in contrast to his connection with this music. I felt that listening to Mogwai's *Fear Satan* provided Tomer with a profound emotional release, creating a safe space within our therapeutic relationship and enabling him to explore his connections with other gay men. Note how he challenged me by asking me directly what I thought of this piece, perhaps in an attempt to start changing the equation he formulated in which this music was connected to loneliness:

> *Tomer*: I love it when people connect with the music I love. I need the courage to ask, though—did you, Uri, connect with it?
>
> *Uri*: I'm glad you asked. I was swept away by the music and thought about you while listening. I recognised your style and noticed the sculpture above you, symbolizing connection.

Picture 1: Wood carving in the music therapy room

The musical space created in the room, along with Tomer's need for his music—and by extension, himself—to be loved, highlighted the issue of "connection" and belonging in his life. In the reverie moments of listening to the music, my eyes were drawn to the sculpture above Tomer's head (see Picture 1), which I, at that moment, intuitively interpreted as a symbol of connection.

The contrast between Tomer's musical experiences and dating other men, illustrated Tomer's struggles with intimacy and connection. However, the music he selected, along with our relationship and discussions, helped bridge these gaps, articulating his challenges in forming romantic relationships and allowing him to explore his emotions in a supportive environment.

Regarding the QS-in-MT framework, this could be illustrated as movement up the y-axis wherein Tomer was feeling lonely and isolated, his music being an integral player in this isolation. Then, through revealing his music and gaining legitimacy for it from "another" (i.e., the music therapist), he

could start a process of opening up, with his music, but also with his personality at large, feeling more connection with others and, thus, less lonely.

Improvisation on musical instruments

Throughout the sessions, Tomer improvised on various instruments while listening to songs, thus enriching our exploration, and strengthening the therapeutic relationship. During one session, Tomer became captivated by a unique black stone, a musical instrument from southern India, placed at the clinic's entrance. He remarked that its resonance embodied the fusion of diverse elements with fluid boundaries, creating an unexpected sound. Together, we played the black stone, creating a symphony that blended with the sounds of the mosque and the street outside, and with the internal "queer harmonies" of the therapy - harmonies that we refer to as symbolically queer because they transgress conventional tonal boundaries, experiment with unexpected combinations, and disrupt normative structures.

Recording 2

Tomer playing on the stone together with the therapist
[The recording is available as supplementary material: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbVhttMHD7s]

After playing, Tomer said*:*

> Wow, this stone is amazing. It feels ancient and different, and when you touch it right, with four hands, it creates unexpected, pleasant harmonies. We played it together, blending its music with the sounds from the mosque. Every time I come here, the muezzin's music connects with the music in my headphones, and I love how the sounds of the outside world blend with what I'm listening to. By the way, I went on another date with Michael, and it was really good. I slept at his place for the first time, and I really hope it continues.

Note how Tomer flows naturally between his enthusiastic revelation of the stone and his appreciation of the muezzin sounds blending with the sounds inside. It is important to note here that my clinic is located right near a mosque, and that the muezzin's calls and the street sounds often blend and at times contrast, with what happens inside the clinic. Here Tomer adopts a very interesting perspective when he welcomes the blending of the outside with the inside, reflecting a queer perspective in which dissolution of rigid boundaries is welcome, and fluidity is embraced. By allowing external sounds to intertwine with the therapeutic space, and by choosing to play on a "queer" instrument, Tomer is actually creating a microcosm of queer exploration, where the rigid dichotomies of "inside" versus "outside" or "self" versus "other" are challenged. In regard to the QS-in-MT framework, this example reflects a movement on the x-axis, exploring queer possibilities and moving toward that end of the continuum. While overcoming dichotomies and exploring possibilities can benefit all clients, these processes carry particular significance for LGBTQ+ clients, as they are tied to experiences of difference, the loneliness associated with sexual and gender identity, and the search for belonging. Playing the queer black stone—whose queerness, as noted earlier, symbolically lays in its

unconventional tonalities and fluid, boundary-crossing qualities—and dissolving internal and external sound boundaries became significant markers of Tomer's journey, fostering his creativity and fluid queer expression. In regard to the QS-in-MT this can be seen as a movement on the x-axis, towards a queerer perspective on music and perhaps thereafter on life itself.

In another session, Tomer engaged deeply with the drums, starting with an irregular beat that gradually became steady. I joined in on the gong and djembe, adding my voice. What evolved was a tribal, trance-like rhythm, which felt very significant and connecting. In this context, the term "tribal" refers not to a specific cultural tradition but to musical qualities such as repetitive, pulse-driven rhythms that evoke a sense of collectivity, embodiment, and connection in the therapeutic moment. Indeed, Tomer shared that it had been a long time since he experienced this type of playing, which he perceives as a jam session where a group of musicians collaboratively creates spontaneous and tribal music, emphasizing belonging and togetherness.

Recording 3

Tomer playing on the drum
[The recording is available as supplementary material: https://youtu.be/M3AXqWgUR1w]

Afterwards, Tomer said:

> It's been a long time since I connected so deeply to the tribal and rock rhythms of Africa. I surprised myself and realised I could maintain the rhythm. It's been a while since I experienced such a straightforward jam, I always love when that happens. Usually, I feel restricted when playing the drums, but today I didn't.

Regarding the QS-in-MT framework, the drumming improvisation contributed to movement on the y-axis, enhancing Tomer's feeling of connectedness and belonging. The fact that he could do this through drumming reminded him of the possibility of enhancing this sense of belonging in his life and inspired a desire to implement this type of activity, or its essence, with others.

Tomer's voice
Tomer was not fond of his voice:

> I don't like my voice. It feels empty and hollow to me, and I don't feel depth in it. When I use my voice, I need a melody and harmony. It's hard for me to produce vocals tied to the tribal vibe we just had. My voice never really feels like my true instrument.

However, the musical-therapeutic process and the spaces that it enabled, supported Tomer's exploration of his voice. During the sessions, he expressed his relationship with his voice, deepened his understanding of his musical identity, and navigated self-expression within our therapeutic relationship. Despite his discomfort with his voice, he found it meaningful to explore it. As our sessions progressed, the therapeutic space became a crucible for Tomer's exploration of sound, identity, and

connection. Through playful improvisations and heartfelt conversations, he delved into his relationships and aspirations. In one of our meetings, he shared how he used his voice with Michael:

> The weekend with Michael was good. On Saturday night at my place, we listened to the second half of Peter Broderick's album. It was emotional, something I had long fantasised about doing with someone else. I also sang to Michael while the song played, and we stood and danced together. (Tomer)

Tomer being comfortable with using his voice with 'another', marked a significant step forward. His voice reflected not only his broader musical and personal identity but, within the frame of the therapeutic process, it gained particular significance as an expression of his queer identity. He felt secure enough to share this voice with a representative of the outer world.

Recording 4

Lyrics, melody, and performance: Peter Broderick

[The recording is available as supplementary material: https://youtu.be/pxAf5QGWiZU}

In regard to the QS-in-MT framework, Tomer's continuous exploration of his voice in therapy, and his use of it while singing to Michael in their new relationship, reflected a movement toward belonging on the y-axis, while simultaneously shifting along the x-axis toward a queer perspective. Tomer embraced his authentic voice within the context of a significant LGBTQ+ relationship, thus gaining movement on both axes.

To summarise Tomer's journey within the QS-in-MT framework let's look at Figure 2. We can see that music served as a driving force for movement in various ways and in different directions:

- **Original music album**: Tomer's album became a medium for expressing his queer identity (x-axis) and fostering a sense of belonging (y-axis).

- **Listening to familiar songs**: These tracks highlighted his challenges in forming romantic connections and allowed for emotional exploration (y-axis).

- **Drumming sessions**: The shared rhythms created a tribal sense of togetherness, enhancing his feeling of belonging (y-axis).

- **Playing the queer black stone**: This unique instrument blended internal and external sounds, symbolizing the dissolution of boundaries, and enhancing his creative, queer identity (x-axis).

- **Exploring his voice**: Engaging with his voice deepened his sense of authenticity and facilitated connections in therapy and in his relationship with Michael (x and y axes).

All in all, it is clear that there was much movement in Tomer's therapeutic process, and that much of it was directed towards the Queer – Belonging Space. We can also see that different musical activities had different effects on this movement, and collectively, they were very influential for the process. As seen in Tomer's case study, music therapy serves as a catalyst for change, guiding LGBTQ+ clients in exploring their queer identities by creating inclusive spaces that support diverse gender expressions and self-growth (Gumble, 2019; Lee, 2024). Building on this, the roadmap's framework uses music to drive movement between different spaces along its axes, addressing key themes like queer identity,

isolation, and belonging. Through improvisation, listening, or creating, music not only reflects the client's inner world but actively moves them toward new therapeutic spaces.

Figure 2 also captures queer moments or processes that different musical activities manifested. These could be termed "queer musical moments" (musical- therapeutic instances in which hetero/binary normative boundaries are disrupted, musical conventions are transgressed, or queer identity is expressed in musically non-normative ways) and "queer musical processes", respectively. These moments and processes embody movement along the roadmap's axes, representing shifts or balances between them. The musical moments with Tomer exemplify this idea, acting as key points that facilitate movement and exploration within therapy. These instances allow music to serve as a means for clients to explore and express their queer identity, providing pathways to navigate complex emotional and identity-based challenges. By capturing the interplay between the loneliness-belonging and queer-heteronormative continuums, these moments underscore the transformative role of music in fostering self-expression, growth, and a sense of belonging in LGBTQ+ therapy.
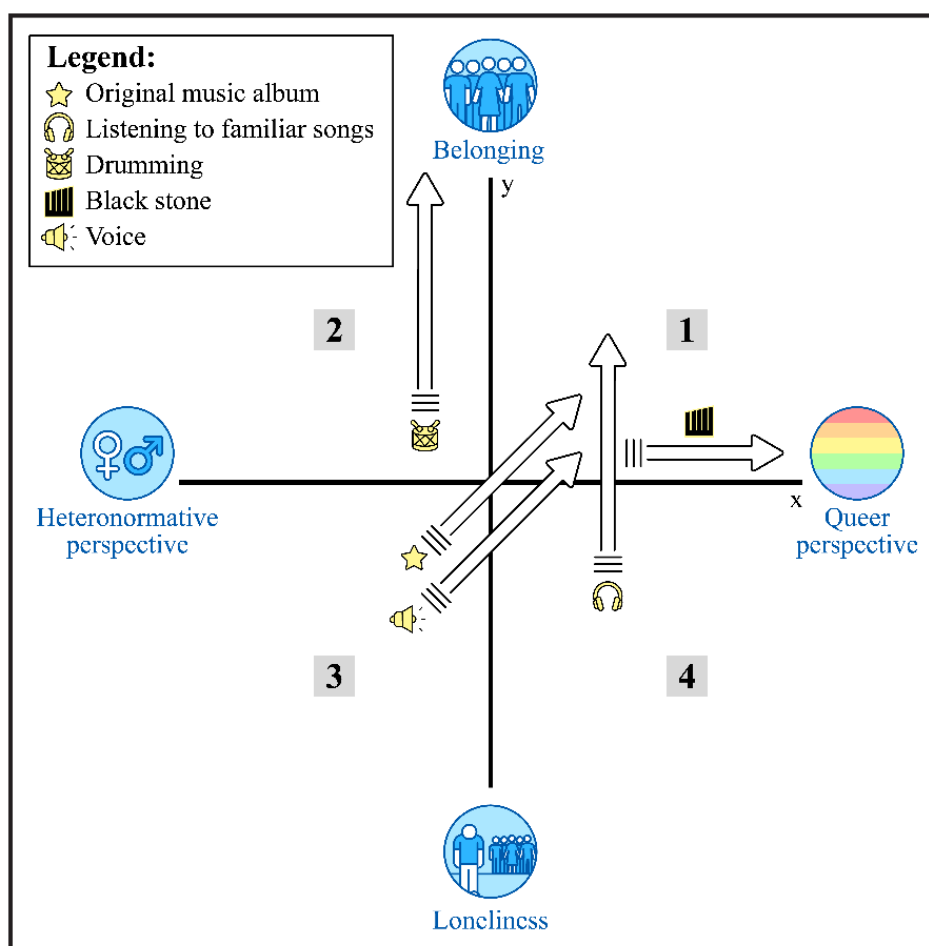

Figure 2: Tomer's movement across the QS-in-MT framework according to the various musical means

Discussion

This article presents a conceptual framework for music therapy, designed to support LGBTQ+ clients by integrating queer theory with music therapy practice. Addressing the question posed at the beginning of the article—how can music and music therapy balance authentic queer identity expression with a sense of belonging?—the QS-in-MT framework gives some clarity and possible leads. By mapping two continuums that are fundamental for many queer clients and juxtaposing them orthogonally, we provide therapists with a clear perspective of the possibilities at hand (the queer spaces), the possible desired and undesired movements within the spaces, and the power of music and music therapy to encourage movement between the spaces (queer musical moments). This is exemplified through the case study of Tomer, whose therapeutic journey illustrates how music and queer musical moments drove him toward authentic queer expression and a deeper sense of belonging.

The QS-in-MT framework outlines a conceptual roadmap that is similar to other well-known models, such as the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), in that it proposes a loose and interpretative perspective on things. A basic structure is suggested and then the "user" can loosely interpret relevant occurrences within the framework. Thus, no "mathematical" or other "accurate" mechanisms are used. On the contrary, it is up to the "user" to decide when to use the framework, with what desired therapeutic occurrences, and how to map them to best represent their clinical interpretation. This loose approach is well suited for describing phenomena in a queer context. It can enable therapists to better understand their clients and their needs and path of growth. It can perhaps eventually enable clients to balance their authentic queer expression with their sense of belonging, a balance that is crucial in heteronormative environments (Bain et al., 2016).

Music is central to the framework, serving as a catalyst for movement and transformation in therapy. It enables clients to explore belonging and queer identity while fostering change and personal growth by creating an expressive, creative, and playful therapeutic space where issues of sexual and gender identity can be brought into presence. Within this space, clients and therapists engage these themes together, encouraging reflection, growth, and the expansion of identity. Drawing on its inherent playfulness and resonance with both heteronormative and LGBTQ+ cultural contexts, music invites experimentation and dialogue, enabling engagement with gender and sexual boundaries and offering a therapeutic language for articulating queer experiences. By addressing internalised homophobia, societal marginalization, and struggles of self-acceptance, the framework incorporates queer theory's critique of binary norms, positioning music as a pivotal therapeutic tool (Bain et al., 2016; Butler, 1993; Ching et al., 2021; Herek et al., 2009; Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2012).

The framework helps to clearly represent the inherent tension between belonging and loneliness, and between queer identity expression and heteronormative norms. This is gained by depicting clear continuums and the resulting four possible spaces. Engaging with this framework, therefore, promotes the evolution of music therapy for LGBTQ+ clients by integrating queer theory into the therapeutic-musical space (Lee, 2024). It does so by translating key principles of queer theory—such as challenging norms, embracing diverse identities, and disrupting dichotomies—into a conceptual framework that allows therapists and clients to experience and articulate therapeutic processes.

In doing so, it advocates culturally competent approaches (Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2012) and fosters a shared professional language, solidifying music therapy as a specialised field for LGBTQ+ needs.

Different ways to use the QS-in-MT framework

The QS-in-MT framework can and should be applied flexibly and in different possible contexts. Here are several examples of how the framework can be applied in practice:

1. **As a roadmap for the music therapist** - The framework can serve the music therapist from time to time when queer musical moments seem to have occurred, and a deeper understanding of the moment is needed. Such understanding can help to further adapt to the client's therapeutic needs.

2. **Designing musical interventions** -The framework can inspire therapists to design musical therapeutic interventions tailored to the client's needs, facilitating movement from one space to another within the framework (e.g., vocal improvisation inviting fluid expression, performing songs by LGBTQ+ artists, or using patterned playing and dichotomous contrasts in voice or instrumental improvisation).

3. **Evaluating therapeutic progress** - Therapists can use the framework to assess the therapeutic process along its axes and adapt strategies to the client's evolving needs.

4. **In collaboration with the client** - The framework can become part of the open dialogue with the client, enabling shared interpretation of what movements have occurred in the sessions and whether further goals can be set.

5. **In supervision and case discussion** - The framework can be used in the context of supervision wherein the clinical work and its queer moments and processes can be discussed and graphically presented.

6. **As a shared professional language** - The framework can establish a shared professional language, enabling music therapists worldwide to collaborate, share insights, and develop inclusive practices for queer clients across diverse cultures.

7. **In training and education** - The framework can serve as an educational tool for students and music therapy training programs, offering a structured approach to exploring LGBTQ+ dynamics through music-based interventions.

There are other possible versions of the QS-in-MT framework that can be developed. One possibility is reimagining how movement is represented. Rather than using an arrow as demonstrated in this article, future iterations could explore fluid metaphors like waves or spirals, reflecting the non-linear and iterative nature of identity exploration and belonging. These alternatives might better capture the dynamic and evolving aspects of queer experiences. Another idea is that the framework's axes be refined to encompass additional dimensions of identity and expression. For instance, the queer-heteronormative axis could be reconceptualised through constructs such as authenticity versus conformity, visibility versus invisibility, or uniqueness versus normativity. Such modifications would enhance the framework's applicability, broadening its relevance across diverse

contexts and client experiences. These adjustments would maintain the framework's inherent flexibility while deepening its capacity to address the nuanced complexities of LGBTQ+ clients' therapeutic process.

In addition, while the QS-in-MT framework focuses on sexual and gender identity, it is important to acknowledge that identity encompasses many other aspects and that music therapy always unfolds in an intersectional context. Factors such as socio-economic background, culture, language, and gender roles, as well as the therapist's own identity, inevitably shape the dynamic. Highlighting these dimensions strengthens the framework's applicability and resonates with Lee's (2024) emphasis on intersectionality in queer music therapy.

Limitations of the QS-in-MT framework

There are several notable limitations of the QS-in-MT framework. First, its reliance on two axes—queer-heteronormative identity (x-axis) and belonging-loneliness (y-axis)—can overlook other critical dynamics and meaningful issues, such as internalised homophobia, sexual minority group pressures, and other challenges that frequently arise in therapy with LGBTQ+ clients (Ching et al., 2021; Herek et al., 2009; Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2012). While these axes address essential aspects of queer experiences, they may oversimplify the richness and complexity of LGBTQ+ clients' lives, necessitating the integration of additional approaches to provide comprehensive support. Furthermore, the framework's two-dimensional structure risks portraying therapeutic journeys as linear, which rarely reflects the fluid and dynamic processes involved in identity exploration and belonging. Transitioning to a multi-dimensional framework and model in future iterations could better capture the essence of queer theory, which resists boundaries and embraces fluidity. Another limitation lies in reconciling queer theory's boundary-defying philosophy with the structured nature of the framework. While the QS-in-MT framework strives to honour the values of fluidity and dynamism, its formalised axes may inadvertently constrain these qualities. Therapists must therefore approach the framework flexibly, treating it as a guide rather than a rigid tool, to ensure it remains aligned with the fluid nature of queer experiences. Finally, the framework's adaptability places a significant burden on the therapist's interpretive and practical skills. Without sufficient training and supervision, there is a risk of misapplication or superficial use, which could limit its impact. Addressing these limitations through continued refinement can help the framework balance structure with the fluidity it aims to reflect, ensuring it remains both accessible and true to the core principles of queer theory and music therapy.

Conclusion

The QS-in-MT framework, grounded in doctoral research, offers significant potential for the future development of music therapy with LGBTQ+ clients. As a shared professional language, it creates opportunities for enhanced communication and collaboration among therapists, enabling the development of best practices and fostering innovation in addressing the unique needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Integrating the framework into music therapy training programs provides a forward-looking approach to equipping future therapists with culturally competent and inclusive methodologies, preparing them to work effectively within this specialised area.

Future research can also focus on field-based evaluations to refine the framework further, assessing its strengths, limitations, and therapeutic impact. Additionally, future directions might include exploring dimensions such as queer identity, sense of belonging, and other pivotal aspects of LGBTQ+ clients' lives, along with how music therapy can integrate these elements into clinical practice. We also acknowledge that other dimensions of marginalization—such as race, gender, and language—can significantly shape therapeutic experiences of authenticity and belonging, and future development of the framework should engage these intersectional perspectives. These efforts will expand the framework's applicability and ensure its relevance across diverse contexts, solidifying its role in shaping inclusive and impactful therapeutic environments for LGBTQ+ clients.

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage
ChatGPT and OpenAI were used to assist with the translation of selected interview content from Hebrew into English. All translated content was reviewed and finalised by the authors.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Χαρτογραφώντας τους κουίρ (queer) χώρους στη μουσικοθεραπεία: Ένα εννοιολογικό πλαίσιο

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Μετάφραση: Ευφροσύνη Ευθυμίου

Περίληψη

Αυξανόμενη κλινική και ακαδημαϊκή προσοχή έχει δοθεί στη μουσικοθεραπεία με ΛΟΑΤΚ+ πελάτες. Σε αυτήν τη διαδικασία, εισάγουμε το πλαίσιο «Κουίρ Χώροι στη Μουσικοθεραπεία» (Queer Spaces in Music Therapy, QS-in-MT), έναν εννοιολογικό οδικό χάρτη που έχει σχεδιαστεί για να αντιμετωπίσει τις θεραπευτικές προκλήσεις που αντιμετωπίζουν τα ΛΟΑΤΚΙ+ άτομα στη μουσικοθεραπεία. Με βάση προηγούμενη έρευνα, εντοπίστηκαν δύο βασικά θέματα που θεωρούνται συνήθως προκλητικά στη θεραπεία με ΛΟΑΤΚ+ άτομα και στη συνέχεια συνδυάστηκαν ορθογώνια για να σχηματίσουν ένα δισδιάστατο πλαίσιο. Το πρώτο θέμα αφορά τις κουίρ σε σύγκριση με τις ετεροκανονιστικές αντιλήψεις του πελάτη και αποτυπώνεται ως το συνεχές του άξονα x. Το δεύτερο θέμα αφορά τα συναισθήματα του πελάτη σχετικά με την αίσθηση του ανήκειν έναντι της μοναξιάς και αποτυπώνεται ως το συνεχές του άξονα y. Το πλαίσιο αυτό και οι τέσσερις «κουίρ χώροι» τους οποίους διαμορφώνει, προσφέρει στους θεραπευτές τρόπους να κατανοούν, να ερμηνεύουν και στη συνέχεια να υποστηρίζουν καλύτερα τους πελάτες στη θεραπευτική τους πορεία. Προσφέρεται μια κλινική μελέτη περίπτωσης για να καταδειχθεί η πρακτική εφαρμογή του πλαισίου QS-in-MT. Παρουσιάζονται διαφορετικά κομβικά σημεία της κλινικής διαδικασίας και στη συνέχεια ερμηνεύονται μέσω του πλαισίου. Παρουσιάζεται το πώς διαφορετικές μουσικές παρεμβάσεις και δραστηριότητες, όπως ο αυτοσχεδιασμός με ποικίλα όργανα, η ενασχόληση με οικεία και πρωτότυπα τραγούδια, καθώς και η φωνητική εξερεύνηση, λειτουργούν ως φορείς αλλαγής στην κλινική διαδικασία, και πώς αυτές οι αλλαγές παρουσιάζονται και αρθρώνονται με σαφήνεια μέσω του πλαισίου. Στη συζήτηση παρουσιάζονται πιθανοί τρόποι αξιοποίησης του QS-in-MT σε διαφορετικά πλαίσια, όπως στην εποπτεία, στην εργασία με συναδέλφους και με πελάτες. Τέλος, αναφέρονται οι περιορισμοί του πλαισίου, καθώς και πιθανές κατευθύνσεις για την περαιτέρω ανάπτυξή του.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

κουίρ μουσικοθεραπεία, ΛΟΑΤΚ ταυτότητα, κουίρ θεωρία, μουσικοθεραπεία, κλινικά ζητήματα που αφορούν ΛΟΑΤΚ+ πελάτες