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ENCOUNTERS WITH SELVES: REFLECTIONS ON
MUSIC-ELICITED PEAK EXPERIENCES
OF MUSIC THERAPISTS

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INTRODUCTION

In considering the purpose of reflecting on *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*, I kept coming back to what seems to be the dominant task of my current personal developmental process: that of bringing past experiences and past "selves" to awareness, acknowledging (and at times dialoguing and/or interacting with) them, and integrating them into my current sense of self.¹ This work of calling forth and integrating the past into the present has been taking place within the context of my own personal BMGIM therapy and in my day-to-day life. This integrative process, taking place in what is presumably the middle of my life, appears to be one that is necessary in order to create a space into which the next version of myself can manifest. As it is the most personally resonant way I have thought of to address the revisiting of my previous work, I propose to use this opportunity to engage in the process of inquiry, retrieval, and integration of past versions of myself that are related to the early interests and experiences that laid a foundation for my later interest in the topic and the past version of myself that engaged in researching, writing, and revising my original monograph. Additionally, I will reflect on my present self's experience of the work and other selves and attempt an integration of the data retrieved from all relevant selves, past and present, to form an overall composite description (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas 1994) of my experience related to *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*.

This leaves the question of whether and how this the approach I have chosen for this current inquiry might be of use to anyone other than myself. For individuals interested in engaging in a process of self-inquiry and self-integration, this study may be useful as a template for how one might engage in such a process, particularly in relation to a specific phenomenon. This inquiry provides an example of ways in which research can be meaningful to the researcher and speaks to the impact of the person of the researcher on their research. Last, I hope these reflections are useful as an example of a way to approach one's past work and one's past selves, a way that has the potential to reignite past passions and contribute to the development of a greater fullness of one's being.

METHOD

Overview of Method

While I did not initially set out to engage in a full-fledged qualitative inquiry, the need to do so arose as it became clear to me that a more carefully considered and defined structure would better support a deeper level of contact with my inner contents and thereby provide a richer data source and better support the goal of integration. To facilitate this inquiry into past and present selves' views and experiences of my work and offer the opportunity for their integration into my present self, I employed a form of reflexive phenomenology (Hunt, 2016) adapted from Moustakas (1990 and 1994) involving the following steps:

¹ I use the terms "self" and "selves" throughout this paper to reflect the language that has come naturally to me during my recent personal developmental process and which reflect the experiences I have had of encountering past (and present) versions of myself who appear to some extent to be distinct internal personalities.

1. Formulating the research question.
2. Creating a set of interview questions.
3. Identifying and creating basic written accounts of the prior selves to be interviewed.
4. Self-reflection on the research questions/Epoche.
5. Preparation for interviews: Ethical considerations, safety measures, developing "Inner Rules of Engagement," creating procedure for carrying out interviews, creating playlists of music associated with each identified past self.
6. Making initial contact with and interviewing selves using self-reflection and Active Imagination, recording the interactions as they occur, creating a series of written transcripts of the interviews.
7. Engaging in qualitative analysis of the written transcripts, utilizing further self-reflection in conjunction with the interview data and leading to a composite description.
8. Creating a preliminary research manuscript of this process.
9. Checking back in with selves to assess and offer, as appropriate, the option of greater integration into the present self and to validate findings.
10. Creating a final version of the research manuscript.

Formulating the Research Question

Using Moustakas (1990 and 1994) as a guide, I formulated and explicated the primary research question as follows: How do I describe and experience the process and product of *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*? By using the word "how" I mean to indicate my openness to any and all responses related to my research question. "Describe" points to my openness to the use of various and multiple means of expression as legitimate responses to my inquiry (including but not limited to the possible use of artwork, metaphor, symbol, prose, poetry, movement, music, etc.). "I" refers to the totality of my being, including current self, past selves, and any and all components (or "parts"²) of these selves. By "self" I refer to a recognizably distinct personality (generally tied to a specific time period) within myself. "Experience" indicates that this investigation, while centered around the phenomenon of my monograph, will likely touch on a number of other life events, attitudes, beliefs, conceptualizations, and personality structures that exist within the overall web of my experience and that these are welcome components of the research insofar as they provide context for the primary focus of this study. "Process" refers to all that preceded the publication of my monograph and relates to it in some way, including prior peak and related experiences, initial inspiration for the study, and the researching, writing, and publication of the work. By "product" I mean the study *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists* itself, its content, and I indicate an openness to reflections on this work being out in the world in published form.

² For an in-depth discussion of "parts" from an Internal Family Systems perspective, see Schwartz and Sweezy (2020).

Interview Questions

I formulated the following open-ended interview questions for use in semi-structured interviews with my various selves, again using Moustakas (1990 and 1994) as a guide to the process:

1. What stands out to you about *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*?
2. What events, situations, and people are connected with this work?
3. What feelings and thoughts come up for you as you reflect on this work?
4. What are your feelings, thoughts, and reflections regarding the process of this work coming about (anything that led up to it, the experience of bringing it into being)?
5. What are your feelings, thoughts, and reflections on the content of this work?
6. What does this work say about you, your experiences, and your context?
7. What is it like for you to discuss these matters?
8. Are there any other feelings, thoughts, or reflections that you would like to share related to what we have been discussing?

Identifying Selves to be Interviewed

To identify specific selves to interview for this study, I utilized a set of initial written notes I created prior to my decision to pursue a reflexive phenomenological research method. Upon reading and further reflecting on these writings, I determined a need to interview a self from the late teens to mid-twenties age-range and a self from the period in my mid-thirties. I understood that participant selection would need to be flexible as I could not predict with any degree of certainty what self or part I would encounter when I was actually in the space of deep self-inquiry and thus was prepared to engage in the identified processes as many times as necessary to obtain sufficient data to address the primary research question. I also became aware that the unfolding process may require that I interview more than the two past selves that I originally identified and also that I may make contact with other inner beings, including representatives of the selves with whom I sought to speak. With this in mind, I endeavored to remain open to the natural unfolding research process, adapting my approach as was indicated by the circumstances. Prior to interviewing these selves, I determined that I would engage in self-reflection (utilizing my present/primary self) on the interview questions so that I could bracket these experiences and attitudes during the interviews so as to encourage a clearer demarcation among selves and discourage contamination of my current feelings, thoughts, and reflections on those of previous selves.

In order to prepare myself for the interviews, I utilized my initial writings plus further reflection to create basic accounts of the selves I sought to interview. These accounts are written from the perspective of my present/primary conscious self and are included below.

Late Teens to Mid-Twenties Self

The first peak experiences I can remember having occurred in the period of my late teens to mid-twenties, thereby making the act of engaging one or more selves from this time period important to include for this study. It was during this span of time that the groundwork for my interest in peak experiences was laid, where I discovered non-ordinary states of consciousness triggered by various stimuli, and wondered at the powerful emotions and strange non-ordinary states that occurred. A recounting of some of these formative experiences follows.

When I was in high school and the beginning of college, I played in a hard rock band named Thanatopsis. During one rehearsal, we were engaged in playing a rather repetitive ballad-like original instrumental composition. At some point during the playing of this piece, I felt a shift in my consciousness and a change in my emotional state to that of elation and profound connection. After the music ended, my bandmates and I each looked around the room at one another and discovered through words and nonverbal communication that we had all shared in that profound transpersonal experience. That altered state, involving the feeling of being "high off the music" lasted for an hour or two (possibly more) afterwards.

I had more than one peak experience triggered through contemplation of time, leading to an experience of being on the very edge of "time's arrow." I felt that I was viscerally being pushed by time (or pushed by my awareness of this aspect of time) into the future. The shift of consciousness that occurred in these experiences was one in which the present moment appeared so brief that it could barely be perceived. It seemed as though it was impossible for anything to actually occur within the present moment. The only thing that was possible was to be in constant, swift motion, witnessing the present turn into the future, turn into the future, turn into the future, again and again and again. The feeling was one of elation and contained euphoria.

I have experienced peak experiences within the context of romantic partnerships throughout my life, but my late teens and early twenties was the period in which I had my earliest experiences of this sort. The very first time I remember this happening I had the clichéd feeling that time had stood still and that everything was right and perfect in the world. I felt intoxicated, enthralled, and ecstatic.

In another instance, I was home alone, sitting at the desk in my bedroom in a shared apartment, blankly staring while trying to work on a musical analysis for school. Suddenly, my sense of the room around me took on a different character. It was as if I was seeing the objects in my room as existing independent of my viewing them. There was a sense that I was experiencing this space without me being present in it, an experience of ego-transcendence, and I felt filled with an uncanny void as I sat still and witnessed the quiet, still, unpeopled world of things.

There have been multiple instances of peak experiences triggered by looking at the night sky, contemplating the vastness of space and time and the relatively miniscule scope of my individual life. One particular instance of this stands out in which, walking back from the field outside my mother's house where I used to regularly stargaze, I felt compelled to dedicate my life to pursuing that feeling of elation and wonder I was then experiencing. In looking back on this past self, I take some pleasure in seeing that I took action to in some way fulfill this past self's desire to pursue peak experiences by

investigating the phenomenon and maintaining consciousness of his existence and vow. In writing this, I honor him.

In reflecting on these past peak experiences, all of which occurred decades ago, I feel compassion for the more naive, less experienced versions of myself and I experience a sense of wonder at my former innocence. I also admire the energy, hopefulness, and optimism of these past selves and have a desire to reclaim a portion of these qualities for my present self. As I write this, I feel the presence of those others within me and feel uplifted. I remember the rapidly shifting moods of my teenage years, the confusion, and the seemingly endless possibilities that lay ahead and how much of this has changed over the years.

A Caveat on Childhood

As I reflect on the above statement that the first peak experiences I can remember having occurred during my late teens to mid-twenties, it occurs to me that this may not be fully accurate. I have dimmer memories of talking with my father and being "blown away" by contemplating the existence of God prior to the creation of matter. I have vague remembrances of mysterious nights that lay beyond the safe confines of my childhood home. The more I think on it, the more I seem to recall a sense of magic infusing my childhood years: believing that in some concrete sense the worlds of cartoons and Sesame Street were real, that inanimate objects could have real lives of their own outside of human awareness, that Santa Clause could travel the world in a night. A problem here is in distinguishing this childhood magic from peak experiences. This distinction is made particularly difficult due to the limited resolution and fragmentariness of my memories from these early years. It may be that selves from this earlier period make themselves known somewhere in the depths of the self-inquiry process—I welcome it!—but it seems appropriate and prudent to leave intended exploration of these years up to the unconscious processes and not build this time period explicitly into the research design of this study.

Mid-Thirties Self

My mid-thirties self was a graduate equivalency student in music therapy. It is this self who researched and wrote *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists* and therefore it is this self who is most qualified to provide a contemporaneous account of experiences related to the development of the work.

As I wrote in my monograph, the significant event that immediately preceded and most directly inspired my embarking upon the research project that became *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists* was a peak experience I had during a non-referential music improvisation in a music therapy class:

At some point during the 10-minute improvisation, I experienced a shift in consciousness in which I experienced a disappearance of conscious thought and personal individuality—I no longer felt a distinction between myself, the music, and the other musicians. There was an intense sensation of connection, pleasure, and transcendence during and immediately following this experience.

After the improvisation ended and the class let out, I went about the rest of my day, running errands and engaging in the mundane tasks of living, but the peak experience I had in class refused to let go of me. I did not fully return to my usual state of consciousness when the class let out; rather, all I could think about was wanting more of that intense euphoria and connection. I did not get what I wanted, however, and my mood turned very sour. I felt like an addict in need of a fix and did not know where to turn to get it. Eventually, I just went to sleep and woke up feeling more or less myself again.

This particular experience left me wanting to know more about what exactly happened to me, what allowed the experience to occur, what I could have done to counteract the negative fallout, and whether there was a way to foster more experiences like this. As a music therapy student, I naturally wondered whether and how similar experiences occur in the clinical setting, what meaning therapists and clients ascribe to such experiences, and how they might affect the therapeutic process (Nicholson, 2015, p. 61).

This self had limited clinical experience as a music therapist. Although I had at this point worked for several years in the field of adult psychiatry as a psychiatric technician and vocational rehabilitation specialist and had recently completed a music therapy internship, at the time that I was researching and writing this project, I had just begun working in the field in a per diem position at an outpatient program for older adults. Simultaneously, I continued working full-time as a psychiatric technician at an adult acute inpatient psychiatric unit, a job I had had since my second semester of graduate school. I currently see this lack of clinical experience as a benefit to the study insofar as my data collection and analysis were not influenced by my own clinical experiences. Despite this limited clinical experience, I had significant experience with music-making and my own personal peak experiences which led to my interest in the topic and sustained my motivation to see the research process through to its completion.

My time studying music therapy was characterized by a sense that I was finally doing school "right." I had learned from past mistakes and was old enough, experienced enough, and mature enough to have a clearer view of the reality of academia and a better sense of what did and did not matter in life and learning. Examples of this are that I had an understanding that my professors and instructors were fallible human beings like everyone else, which allowed me to feel more comfortable asking questions of them and engaging more authentically in my schoolwork, whereas in past school experiences I held back more and avoided asking questions for fear of being ridiculed or looked down upon. I was also less shy around and less fearful of my fellow classmates; it probably helped that most of them were younger than me. I established a weekly "Music Night" in which I invited fellow students over to my home to engage in active music-making so as to keep our personal, authentic musical selves alive and engaged in the midst of studying and practicing clinical applications of music. My participation in these Music Nights also influenced my interest in the topic of peak experiences occurring within the context of music improvisation, as free improvisation was a staple of Music Night activity and led to what I would consider to be many sub-threshold peak experiences. I cannot recall a clear peak experience happening at Music Night, though it is possible that it did occur at some point, possibly more than once.

As I reflect on my mid-thirties music therapy student self, I see a person who had recently experienced a number of transitions: transitioning from someone who previously was not at all career-focused to one who had recently dedicated his life to pursuing the field of music therapy, transitioning from one state in New England to another in the Mid-Atlantic, and from a secondary or tertiary city in terms of population size to one of the country's major city. Over the course of the years I was in school studying music therapy, I see myself as transitioning from young adulthood into full middle adulthood. I continue to build upon the foundation laid in those years and feel gratitude toward that version of myself for working so hard for so long. This work led to the completion and publication of *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists* and set the stage for the next transition to occur from student self to full professional self.

Current Self's Reflection on Interview Questions/Epoche

Here, I will respond to each of the eight identified interview questions from the perspective of my current conscious self. I engage in this exercise in order to bring to full awareness my feelings, thoughts, and attitudes so that I can bracket them during my engagement with past selves through self-reflection and Active Imagination and to attempt to discourage contamination between my current feelings, thoughts, and reflections and those of previous selves and other inner characters that I may encounter.

What stands out to you about Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists?

It stands out to me that six years have passed since this monograph was published. I think of all that has transpired in that span of time. Some of the things that have occurred include: working various combinations of per diem, contracting, and part-time positions, eventually landing a single full-time position at a single agency; engaging in advanced training in the Bonny Method of Guided Music and Imagery (BMGIM); and the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a dearth of in-person group improvisation in my life and leading to further emphasis on GIM as a method for experiencing transcendence through music.

What events, situations, and people are connected with this work?

The peak experience I had during the in-class non-referential group improvisation comes to mind. I remember each of the participants from the study, of traveling to visit some of them and engaging with others via Skype or telephone conversations. I recall having different reactions to different participants while feeling a sense of appreciation to each of them for taking the time to be interviewed. I remember my advisor and all the help and guidance she offered me. I feel grateful to all these people.

What feelings and thoughts come up for you as you reflect on this work?

I recognize the significant amount of work that went into completing the research. I feel a sense of gratitude to my earlier self for putting in such effort. As part of my preparation for engaging in this current research, I did a search to determine whether or not my work had been utilized in subsequent research and found that it in fact had. I feel validated

knowing that some people have cited my work in their work. I note that my work has been cited for the purposes of acknowledging its existence as being related in some way to the author's topic (Jones, 2019; Konieczna-Nowak and Trzesiok, 2018; Tsiris, 2018), to support the idea that training in improvisational methods can help clinicians achieve peak experiences in their clinical work (Romanelli, Moran, and Tishby, 2019), to describe what peak experiences are (Konieczna-Nowak and Trzesiok, 2018; Levitan, 2020; Romanelli, Moran, and Tishby, 2019; Tannous, 2020), to tie the concept of peak experiences to other, related concepts (Tannous, 2020), and to identify and discuss the effects peak and related experiences can have on students, clinicians, clients, and/or the therapeutic relationship (Courter and Ryan, 2018; Levitan, 2020; Pathak, 2017; Tannous, 2020). Additionally, there was one doctoral dissertation that apparently cited me but to which I was unable to gain access and therefore was unable to review (Schell, 2017). It feels good to be in some small way a part of the development of the knowledge base of music therapy and related disciplines; that was the ultimate reason that I engaged in this research in the first place.

What are your feelings, thoughts, and reflections regarding the process of this work coming about (anything that led up to it, the experience of bringing it into being)?

As mentioned above, I remember the group improvisation experience that inspired the study and the classmates who were there. I remember the struggle and work exerted in researching and writing it. I remember being a more melancholic person at that time in my life. I feel glad that I have more joy and peace in my life at present.

What are your feelings, thoughts, and reflections on the content of this work?

In reviewing the work recently, I was pleasantly surprised at what I found. I had thought that I had left some gaps in the study that I felt a little embarrassed about, but found upon reading it that I had in fact addressed those concerns prior to publication. I was pleased by my writing, as it seemed reasonably clear. I wish that I had had more than five participants, but I do believe that I did the best I could at the time. I am aware that, were I to do the study over again, I would probably have a better chance at obtaining more participants due to the greater ubiquity and familiarity the general public (and presumably potential participants) have with online conferencing platforms, which I suspect would make more people more willing to be interviewed. Also, I have grown in confidence and assertiveness in the ensuing years and believe that I would have greater capacity to invite and follow through regarding obtaining potential participants.

What does this work say about you, your experiences, and your context?

It says that I have an interest in and experiences with altered states of consciousness and am open to self-exploration through a variety of means. It says that I have a connection with and love for music improvisation. It says that I believe in the power of qualitative research to reveal aspects of phenomena that may not be otherwise obvious or apparent.

What is it like for you to discuss these matters?

It feels fine discussing these matters. I am feeling excitement about this current research project and am looking forward to seeing how the interview procedures work out in practice. I feel like I worked hard on the monograph and I have worked hard on this present study. Feeling as though I have worked hard and focused on something that hopefully will have a positive impact on furthering knowledge and understanding is a good feeling.

Are there any other feelings, thoughts, or reflections that you would like to share related to what we have been discussing?

As I seek to connect with my recent and present self, I feel a sense of calm and peace. I feel appreciation for all the effort that I have put into developing as a professional and as a person and am pleased about my assessment that the effort has paid off. I continue to be excited about continuing my growth and development as I strive to become a more integrated human and a more relationally and technically effective therapist. At the same time, I am aware of my tendency to over-focus on this development and remind myself to step back from the process of becoming to make more time to experience being. Both movement and stillness seem appropriate and desirable at this point in my life and finding the right balance between them is something I find myself focusing on more and more.

Preparation for Interviews

Ethical Concerns and Safety Precautions

Before seeking initial contact with previous selves through self-inquiry methods, I first engaged in a serious deliberation concerning relevant ethical considerations. As I (consisting of my selves and other identifiable internal structures such as "parts") am the only participant in this self-study research, the usual concern for confidentiality does not apply. In terms of informed consent, I created this research project and fully consent to participate in it and to publish the findings as they are written in this paper. The real ethical concerns involve issues of engagement with my own unconscious contents that I will be seeking to access via self-reflection and Active Imagination. While it is unknown how deep a layer of my unconscious I will actually be able to access using the pre-determined procedures, erring on the side of caution seems prudent. Since beings that manifest through the Active Imagination process—as contents of the unconscious—can differ markedly from the attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of ego consciousness (Johnson, 1989, pp. 138-139), it seems appropriate that I take reasonable steps to engage with my own inner world in a safe and ethical manner. Therefore, I will in fact endeavor to obtain verbal confirmation of informed consent from my inner research participants in the deeper levels of consciousness, introducing myself, explaining the reason for the interviews, the fact that this is part of a research project related to my previously published monograph, and that the results of the interviews will be analyzed and presented for publication as research findings. I will obtain permission prior to engaging in the actual interviews, will engage with inner contents in a warm and friendly manner, and will make it clear that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw their

consent to participate at any time. I will also make explicit my overall intention of self-integration, offering this as an option, and making it clear that participation in the integration process is also voluntary and not a required component of the interview or research process.

I decided to observe basic safety measures for both my inner and outer self during the interview process, knowing that there is a small possibility that my system could become overwhelmed by the intensity of the experiences that come up (Johnson, 1989, pp. 137-138). Thus, I decided to engage in the interviews on days and times in which another individual was aware of what I was doing and would be available to be contacted and offer assistance as needed.

Taking the concerns of ethical engagement and safety in mind, I created the following "Rules of Inner Engagement":

1. Participation in interviews is completely voluntary.
2. Verbal informed consent will be obtained.
3. Agreement to participate in the study may be withdrawn by the participant at any time without penalty (and no hard feelings or resentment on the part of the researcher will be harbored).
4. The interview process will be conducted in a warm, friendly, and transparent manner.
5. The researcher's interest in integration will be explicitly discussed, with the researcher making it clear that integration is not a required component of the interview process.

I also created a brief formal Informed Consent Agreement for use with my inner co-researchers (see Appendix A).

Interview Procedure

To engage in initial contact and interviewing of past selves, I first "set the stage" for the process by making arrangements to have a span of time of at least an hour's duration to spend in my home office free from disturbances and distractions (Johnson, 1989, pp. 163-164). Next, I made sure that I had the informed consent and interview questions at hand and opened a blank word processing file on my laptop for the purpose of recording the interview process and contents. I also had my smartphone at hand for use as an audio recording device in the event that this manner of recording seemed useful or preferred. Then, I spent as much time as was needed to calm my mind and focus attention on the task at hand. I reviewed the written account of the self whom I was endeavoring to contact and spent some time in quiet contemplation before playing music from a pre-created music playlist relevant to that self (see Appendix B for a list of the artists included on these playlists). I engaged in reflective writing on the target self, keeping the music on or turning it off as seemed most facilitative of the process. Next, I sought contact with my past self (and/or its representative(s) and/or other entities that presented themselves) using the process of Active Imagination as explicated by Johnson (1989). During the interview, I followed the "Rules of Inner Engagement," sought to obtain verbal informed consent, and used the *interview guide* or *topical* approach to interviewing, using the research questions I devised as a guide to engage my co-researcher(s) in a naturally

unfolding discussion of the phenomenon under study (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). I recorded the interactions in the word processing document and continued engagement with my inner co-researcher(s) until the interview came to a natural close. I then took field notes on my impressions, reactions, thoughts, and feelings related to the interview. Finally, I took care to transition back to the external world through the use of sensory mindfulness and grounding techniques, completion of a mandala, movement, and/or any other activity that seemed useful and appropriate at that time and engaged in additional physical rituals to concretize the experience as seemed appropriate.

The step-by-step procedures I developed for my self-inquiry interviews are as follows:

1. "Set the stage": Make arrangements to be free from disturbances and distractions.
2. Have informed consent and interview questions at hand. Open blank word processing file on laptop and have smartphone at hand for possible audio recording.
3. Calm my mind/focus my attention through focused breathing/mindfulness meditation.
4. Review written account of self to be interviewed followed by quiet contemplation.
5. Play music germane to that self from relevant playlist.
6. Engage in reflective writing on that self (keeping music on or turning it off as seems most facilitative of the process in the moment).
7. Seek contact with past self or representative(s) of past self via Active Imagination, engaging in informed consent and following the "Rules of Inner Engagement."
8. Interview co-researcher(s), utilizing interview questions, recording the interactions, continuing engagement until interview comes to a natural close.
9. Take field notes on impressions, reactions, thoughts, and feelings related to the interview.
10. Transition back to external world through use of sensory mindfulness/grounding techniques, completion of a mandala, movement, and/or any other activity that seem useful and appropriate. Engage in additional physical rituals to concretize the experience as appropriate.

Active Imagination and Preparing for the Unknown

Active Imagination is a technique developed by Carl Jung that involves active engagement and dialogue with unconscious structures at the level of *imagination*, which lies halfway between conscious mind and unconscious mind (Johnson, 1989, pp. 138-139). Johnson (1989) identifies four steps to approaching Active Imagination: 1. The Invitation; 2. The Dialogue; 3. The Values; and 4. The Rituals. The Invitation involves inviting inner persons to engage in dialogue. Steps 1-6 of my interview procedures are devoted to the Invitation and were designed to assist me in shifting my focus away from the external world and toward a portion of my internal world related to the target self. The Dialogue consists of

my procedures 7 and 8, in which I directly and actively interacted with aspects of my unconscious related to my past selves, obtained information I would not otherwise have been aware of, and formed rapport and connection that fostered integration of the past self into my current, conscious self. The Values have to do with how I engaged with my inner contents and what I did with what I found there. When dialoguing, I endeavored to allow inner contents have a life of their own, sustained a willingness to listen, remained present in my own feelings, resisted the urge to control the interaction, and was open to whatever occurred in the interaction (Johnson, 1989, pp. 179-187). In addition to not dominating the dialogue, it was equally important to not allow myself to be dominated by inner figures and to stand up for human values, disagree, and speak my truth when necessary (Johnson, 1989, p. 193). The Rituals are physical actions I took in the world to concretize the Active Imagination experience and bring its boon from the inner world into the outer world. This step is addressed in procedures 9 and 10. In addition to the writing, movement, and mandala drawing, I was prepared to engage in additional ritual activity as needed to sufficiently move the experience into everyday reality. One such activity was the writing of the present paper.

Initial Contact and Interviewing

For my first initial contact and interview, I sought to reach my late teens to mid-twenties self or his representative. I followed the interview procedures as identified above and entered the Active Imagination by imagining myself in the yard behind the barn at my mother's house, where I lived for the majority of the time during this period. I stated my business and intention and invited someone to appear and speak with me. In time, a large, burly, monster-like gatekeeper appeared and stated, "I am Mothar, I have come to see what it is you seek." I replied, "I seek conversation with a younger version of myself. I want to talk to myself or a part of myself who can speak from the point of view of when I was in my late teens to mid-twenties. Is there a way that you can help me, Mothar?" Mothar indicated that he might be able to help me, but that first he needed to make sure that my intentions were pure. He asked me what my intentions were. I told him about the research I was engaged in and discussed informed consent and the "Rules of Inner Engagement." Mothar stated that he wished to know if I could be trusted. I stated that, "I believe that you can trust me, for, I am you, and you are me, and naturally I only want the best for all of us. That is why I am here." Mothar then led me into the nearby field. A rocket ship hurdled down out of the sky at incredible speed, plowing into the field. Mothar said, "be not afraid...he has come to speak with you." A cartoon child in a space suit (appearing to be about 12 years old) climbed out of the rocket's cockpit and motioned for me to follow him. I walked with him back toward the area behind the barn. We went inside a doorway into a tree, then up onto its branches. Sitting out on a limb together, I introduce myself, stated my intentions, explained the research project, and discussed the informed consent agreement and the "Rules of Inner Engagement." The child gave consent and agreed to participate in the interview. He identified himself as Tigris. I asked him what his relationship was to my late teens to mid-twenties selves. He replied, "I am a part of them and a part of you. I am a through-line and take my name from "Thundercats" (the animated cartoon TV show from the mid- to late-1980s). I engaged Tigris in conversation, asking and receiving responses to all research questions. After the interview concluded, Tigris agreed to integrate with my present self. He said goodbye to Mothar and indicated

that the appropriate ritual would be for us both to burn in a fire while listening to Metallica's "And Justice for All." We performed the ritual, holding hands as we burned, and turned into spheres of ash. As I returned my awareness to the room around me, Tigris confirmed that he was inside of me and was content to be there. Following the Active Imagination, I completed a mandala, took a few focused, energizing breaths, patted my body to ground and awaken myself, engaged in some stretching, and played guitar for 30 minutes.

A few days later, I sought contact and an interview with my mid-30s self or his representative. I followed the interview procedures and entered Active Imagination by imagining myself in my university's main music therapy room. I stated my business and intention and invited someone to appear and speak with me. I received a response in the form of a high, somewhat eerie voice saying, "Mmm-mm-mmm-I am here." When I asked the speaker what his name was, he replied, "my name is something you may never know, but I can help you with your quest today." I thanked this unnamed individual and proceeded to introduce myself, state my intentions, explain the research project, and discuss the informed consent agreement and the "Rules of Inner Engagement." The Unnamed One agreed to participate. I interviewed this individual, asking and receiving responses to all of the research questions. Following the interview, we improvised music, with the Unnamed One playing guitar and me playing body percussion. Then the Unnamed One was curious about what had happened between his time and mine, so I updated him on the highlights from the past six or seven years. The Unnamed One agreed to integrate himself with me and identified the appropriate ritual as being plunging ourselves into water. A pool of water appeared on the music therapy room floor and I played Gillian Welch's "I Dream a Highway" from the playlist I had created for this self. The Unnamed One and I hugged each other, face to face, with our arms around one another, counted to three, and then we plunged down into the water together. The water was deep. A whirlpool formed around us as we held onto one another. We swirled around for some time until eventually I felt The Unnamed One moving into me. The swirling gradually slowed and I could feel The Unnamed One resting inside of me. I smiled and felt a deep sense of wellbeing, peace, contentment, and wholeness. Following the Active Imagination, I took some slow, deep breaths, completed a mandala, and engaged in stretching.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the interview data, I used the following steps, adapted from Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994):

1. Limited epoche, in which I reviewed my current self's responses to the interview questions (completed prior to the interviews) with the aim of bracketing these experiences, thoughts, and attitudes and promoting viewing the interview data "naively and freshly" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85), minimizing the influence of my current self on my perception of the interview data as I engaged in horizontalization of interview data for my two past selves.

2. Horizontalization of the data (creating a list of significant, nonrepetitive, and nonoverlapping statements) from interviews of past selves first, then dropping the epoche and horizontalizing data from my current self's answers to the interview questions. Dropping the epoche is not typical practice in phenomenological research, but was warranted in this present study due to the point of it being to discover the essence of the identified phenomenon using the perspectives of present and past selves. The purpose of epoche in this present study was to discourage contamination between my present self's feelings, thoughts, and reflections and those of past selves during the interview and horizontalization processes.
3. Grouped statements into meaning units.
4. Created a textural description (what co-researchers experienced with the phenomenon).
5. Created a structural description (how the experience happened).
6. Created a composite description (the essence of the experience, combining textural and structural descriptions).

RESULTS

Performing the data analysis procedures above resulted in the following composite description:

I describe and experience the process and product of *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists* through an integration of three perspectives (that of Tigris, The Unnamed One, and my present conscious self) from three different time periods. Through the data analysis process, the following seven categories were generated:

1. Parents' Influence
2. Personal Characteristics, Interests, and Values
3. Influence of Past Peak Experiences
4. Creativity and Structure
5. Other People
6. Development
7. Reflections about the Final Product

My parents each influenced me in different ways that were important to my developing an awareness of and interest in topics related to the study. My mother played a role in me developing an interest in peak experiences through her love of the odd and unique, her mystical bent, openness to ghosts and other paranormal phenomena, valuing of creativity, intelligence, and knowledge, and supporting my love of music. My father was an amateur guitarist and influenced me musically through modelling musical engagement and buying me my first guitar. His sudden, unexpected death when I was 17 years old threw me into an intensely altered sense of reality that I consider to be a formative nadir experience. Music was a key component to my grief process and I believe my continued

pursuit of musical training was strongly influenced by a semi-conscious sense of duty to somehow further his legacy through music.

My own personal characteristics, interests, and values (many of which were influenced by my parents) are also heavily involved with the phenomenon of interest. My tendency toward shyness and introversion allow me to tolerate and largely enjoy spending long periods of time reading, writing, structuring research, and analyzing data. I have a long-standing interest in the odd, the strange, and the transcendent, and believe in the importance and power of non-ordinary states and experiences. I also have a love for music and music-making, especially free improvisation, and I believe in the power of qualitative research to reveal aspects of phenomena that may not be otherwise obvious or apparent.

Peak experiences are important to me. They are meaningful, powerful, spiritual, transcendent, and unitive. Peak experiences connect me to my deeper self and, simultaneously, to others and the universe. I believe that the world would be positively impacted if more people were in greater contact with the sense of connectedness that occurs in these experiences. Peak experiences can lead to a shift of perspective and reevaluation of what matters most.

My own peak experiences played an essential role in laying the groundwork for my interest in the monograph's topic. The shared music-elicited peak experience my friends and I had playing in a hard rock band that one day, involving a feeling of being "high off the music," connected, and outside of myself was one such key experience. An early experience with romantic physical contact led to the experience of time stopping and a sense of rightness with the world. Stargazing involved a powerful feeling of awe and wonder and a desire to dedicate my life to pursuing that feeling. The music-elicited peak experience I had in a music therapy class during a non-referential improvisation involved feeling elated, "high," free, as though I had transcended myself, and left me wanting more.

The high value I put on creativity has influenced me for much of my life to want to be a creative person through various musical and writing endeavors. The majority of these pursuits have not lived up to the level of quality, proficiency, or productivity that I would have preferred. I find that the structure of academic writing and research has been very helpful in overcoming the stuck points that I have experienced in other creative endeavors.

There are people besides my parents who were involved in my experience of creating *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*. Individuals who took part in weekly Music Nights figure prominently in this category. These late-night improvisational experiences heightened my interest in improvisation, and may have primed me for my in-class peak experience by giving me a level of comfort with improvisation that allowed me to relax, play freely, and thus increase the odds that a peak experience might occur. The students participating in that in-class improvisation played a key role in making the index event happen that inspired my subsequent research, as did the instructor who facilitated the improvisation experience. My study could not have existed without the study participants, whose narratives made up the data for the study. Last, the guidance of my advisor and other school faculty were key to me successfully carrying out and completing my research.

Personal and professional development were involved with *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*. Personally, I see a progression from a young person living in a rural area with lots of interest in learning and knowing about the world and relatively little aptitude in the ways of people, through experiences of social awkwardness,

shyness, and loneliness, to moving to other parts of the country, accumulating experiences, education, understanding, having more substantial and meaningful human relationships, experiencing a low-level, steady state of melancholy, and moving on to a more mature state of confidence and self-knowledge later in life. Professionally, I committed to and pursued training for a career in music therapy, which seems to me now to be a culmination of much of what came before. This career presents itself now as a realization of a conversation I had with a good friend and fellow bandmate one night about our desire to use music to help and to heal people. My career choice involves living up to the legacy of my father. It is a manifestation of the influence of both my parents. Similarly, *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists* is a realization of the desire I had one stargazing night to dedicate my life to pursuing the transcendence I had experienced there, following up on that desire many years later. I am also aware of the changes that have occurred in the six years since my monograph was published. I think of all that has transpired in that span of time. Some of the things that have occurred include: working various combinations of per diem, contracting, and part time positions, eventually landing a single full time position at a single agency; engaging in advanced training in the Bonny Method of Guided Music and Imagery (BMGIM); the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a dearth of in-person group improvisation in my life and to greater emphasis on GIM as a method for experiencing transcendence through music.

Additionally, I note that development has occurred as a result of the publication of my monograph, in the form of other researchers utilizing my work in their own research. My work has been cited for the purposes of acknowledging its existence as being related in some way to the author's topic (Jones, 2019; Konieczna-Nowak and Trzysiok, 2018; Tsiris, 2018), to support the idea that training in improvisational methods can help clinicians achieve peak experiences in their clinical work (Romanelli, Moran, and Tishby, 2019), to describe what peak experiences are (Konieczna-Nowak and Trzysiok, 2018; Levitan, 2020; Romanelli, Moran, and Tishby, 2019; Tannous, 2020), to tie the concept of peak experiences to other, related concepts (Tannous, 2020), and to identify and discuss the effects peak and related experiences can have on students, clinicians, clients, and/or the therapeutic relationship (Courter and Ryan, 2018; Levitan, 2020; Pathak, 2017; Tannous, 2020). It feels good to be in some small way a part of the development of the knowledge base of music therapy and related disciplines; that was the ultimate reason that I engaged in this research in the first place.

Regarding the final product of the monograph itself, I feel fairly positive about it. The concerns I had about having left some gaps in the study turned out to be unfounded; I had corrected all of these issues prior to publication. The main thing I wish is that I had had more study participants, though I do feel good that I did my best to get all the participants I could. I am aware that, were I to do the study over again, I would probably have a better chance of obtaining more participants due to the greater ubiquity and familiarity the general public (and presumably potential participants) now have with online conferencing platforms, which I suspect would make more people more willing to be interviewed. Also, I have grown in confidence and assertiveness in the ensuing years and believe that I would have greater capacity to invite and follow through regarding obtaining potential participants.

The finding that peak experiences can occur in the music therapy context during clinical improvisation is not necessarily surprising, but is good to have documented as something that can happen, that (at least in the experiences of the study participants) had

to do with a deepening of connection between therapist and client, and that these experiences can have positive effects on the therapeutic process and the therapist's personal and professional self.

DISCUSSION

The above composite description presents an interweaving of the perspectives of my two co-researchers and my present conscious self, showing multiple streams of experience related to *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*. Various people, characteristics, interests, values, experiences, structures, developments, and reflections are revealed to be associated with the monograph. I am struck by the wealth of connection that is evidenced in these findings, leading me to reflect on the richness of each individual human's inner world and how vast and diverse the aspects of the person are that come into play in any experience or interaction. This brings me a heightened awareness of and appreciation for the diversity and complexity that exists within myself.

I am curious about the beings I encountered in my Active Imagination. Without providing a complete analysis of these entities (due to me still contemplating these images and also desiring a limit to how personal the content is that I share in this paper), my initial impressions are as follows:

The name Mothar appears to be a thinly-veiled pseudonym for "mother," leading me to wonder about the role the inner mother (mother introject or archetypal mother) plays as gatekeeper to my inner world. It is interesting that Mothar manifested as a burly, beastly male character who possessed great physical strength and capacity for engaging in physical violence, but who interacted in a very calm, cooperative manner, calling Tigris to come down from wherever he was in outer space.

It was surprising to me that Tigris appeared as the representative for my late teens to mid-twenties self, as he seemed more associated with a younger point in my development (he was himself a cartoon, named after a TV cartoon I watched when I was roughly around his age of 12 years old, and he came down in a rocket ship in a fantastical manner that would be especially appealing to someone around that age). He stated that he was a part of my selves from the target time period and that he was a through-line of some sort. I reflect on "A Caveat on Childhood" above and how Tigris appears to relate to this sense of childhood magic. Perhaps it is this magic that is related to my later peak experiences, insofar as an openness to the unknown and willingness to believe the non-ordinary and unbelievable seem potentially to be attitudes supportive of openness to peak experiences.

I am curious about why The Unnamed One appeared as such an eerie, mysterious being. Is it because he is closer to the present moment and my current self and so I do not have enough distance and perspective to experience him as fully-formed and separate?

Further contemplation of these inner components is warranted and is an activity in which I fully intend to engage over the coming weeks and months.

CONCLUSIONS

I consider this research to be a success because the Active Imagination yielded information that I had not been consciously aware of prior to the interviews. Even more

personally important, both of my co-researchers engaged in a process of integration with me.

As I identified in my research method, I checked back in with Tigris and The Unnamed One after completing a research manuscript that included the research process and composite description. Both Tigris and The Unnamed One indicated that they were content with their current level of integration and validated the findings. The primary feedback was that the composite description was too dense and needed to be rewritten in a more inviting way; I attempted to address this concern in the subsequent draft of this paper.

While I do consider the current research to be successful in addressing the research question through a thorough and effective self-inquiry process, it was also rather time-consuming. Now that I know that this process can work for me, in the future I am likely to engage in a similar process, adapting as needed the procedures identified in this paper involving Active Imagination, but utilizing it independently of the reflexive phenomenological structure. It is my plan to continue with further self-exploration, seeking to interact with other selves and parts related to my late teens to mid-twenties, as well as selves from other time periods, parental introjects, and other inner structures as I continue my work of integration and individuation.

Strategies other than Active Imagination could have been employed for the purposes of this study, including Guided Imagery and Music (either self-guided or guided by a Fellow of AMI) and artistic endeavors such as music improvisation, songwriting, visual art-making, dance, poetry, and/or creative writing. I chose Active Imagination as my mode of exploration due to a personal interest in further exploring and developing my capacity for using it as a tool in this manner and logistical constraints related to time and a perceived need to engage in a process that did not require the coordination of schedules with others (as engaging in GIM with a trained guide would).

In summary, this paper has provided an example of self-inquiry to explore the researcher's past and present selves as they relate to a previously published research paper. Highlighted in this endeavor have been the person of the researcher and the uncovering of multiple autobiographical facets that informed, influenced, and resulted from the original research paper. The overall process of carrying out this present research has been one of self-discovery and meaning-making, resulting in a richer understanding of how I relate to my monograph and a more integrated sense of being.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

I agree to participate in a research study on Reflections on *Music-Elicited Peak Experiences of Music Therapists*. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a publishable paper (Adapted from Moustakas, 1990, p. 58).

APPENDIX B: ARTISTS ON MUSIC PLAYLISTS

Playlist: Late Teens to Mid-Twenties Self

Artists: Metallica, Guns N' Roses, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden

Playlist: Mid-Thirties Self

Artists: Chris Thile, The Punch Brothers, Gillian Welch, Paul Simon