# Understanding Music Improvisations: A Comparison of Methods of Meaning-Making

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the value of different methods of making meaning in music therapy improvisations. Six research participants met with the researcher and created solo and duo improvisations. Each improvisation was subjected to four methods of meaning-making: participant journals, researcher journals, dialogues, and musical analysis using the Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) (Bruscia, 1987).

The researcher used two methods of data analysis: qualitative text analysis and musical analysis. Text analysis was used to discern patterns in the results from the verbal methods of data collection. In so doing, the following patterns emerged from this analysis: participants found it easier to play and make meaning of referential improvisations; the researcher accessed more components of the improvisations to make meaning of them; dialogues often led to new, shared meanings; and the researcher became more open to the participants' meanings through these dialogues.

The results from the musical analysis using the IAPs revealed that in general, the participants tended to use certain musical elements with greater skill than others; that the participants tended to change their music frequently; and that the researcher seemed to play a dominant or stabilizing role in the duo improvisations. The results also revealed that musical analysis is more useful for understanding several improvisations by the same individual, rather than finding general trends between improvisations of different people.

The study concludes with several practical and theoretical implications. Of particular importance is the finding that therapists who use only limited types of improvisations with clients may be limiting their understanding of their clients, and the therapeutic potential of the medium itself. The researcher also discusses the self-reflective nature of qualitative studies such as this, and the corresponding impact of the researcher on the study.

## INTRODUCTION

This monograph describes a qualitative research study that I undertook as part of the doctoral program at Temple University (Keith, 2005). It is based on my enduring interest in improvisation, in its many forms, as a phenomenon in music therapy. As I have pursued this phenomenon and topic throughout my professional career, I have remained fascinated by the new questions related to improvisation that have arisen.

Despite my early interest, improvisation did not play a large role in my undergraduate training, which was based on principles of behavioral music therapy. After completing training, my professional journey took me to Germany, where I encountered an approach that was

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dominated by improvisation, and steeped in psychoanalytic or psychodynamic traditions. I completed my internship in a psychiatric hospital in Düsseldorf. In the sessions that I observed and learned to lead, groups of adult clients created improvisations with the therapist, and then discussed the improvisation, with a focus on their experience. After I completed my internship, I worked for several years in this model.

During this time I became more aware of differences between the roles of music in behavioral and psychodynamic traditions. The psychodynamic setting encouraged me to consider the *meaning* of improvisations, which could include unconscious material of the improvisers, re-enactments of family dynamics, and so forth. In this context, music's role was tied to the role of therapy: to help the clients gain access to unconscious materials. This contrasted substantially with behaviorism, where music's role (and value) was primarily associated with its strength as a behavioral reinforcer. Upon later reflection, it seemed to me that the role of music in these two approaches had at least one thing in common: there seemed to be little attention paid to any innate qualities of the music. In the psychodynamic tradition, the music's value (and power) lay in its ability to reflect the client's unconscious, not in the intrinsic beauty of the sounds. In fact, comments on the beauty of the music were often interpreted as defenses.

I next encountered questions of the meaning of music improvisations during my training in Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy (NRMT), which is sometimes called Creative Music Therapy. In NRMT, I learned to use improvisation with an entirely different type of client: children with varying developmental problems. Here, the music played yet another role. The improvisations were always duos, the bulk of sessions consisted of musical interaction, and since the clients were children, discussions played almost no role. I learned to "index" the improvisations by examining the recorded sessions. Throughout this process, we paid substantial attention to the music, which was understood as a manifestation of the functioning level of the client, as well as an indicator of the level of the therapeutic relationship. By using Scale I, the "Child-Therapist Relationship in Musical Activity" (Nordoff & Robbins, 1977), we interpreted how the musical interaction between client and therapist indicated the level of the therapeutic relationship. For a more detailed explanation of this approach, see Bruscia (1987).

In NRMT, the approach to understanding what the music "meant" was quite different from the psychodynamic approach. NRMT emphasized the "here and now" aspect of the relationship, similar to some humanistic therapies, whereas in the psychodynamic approach, the music was considered to contain unconscious projections of the past and present. A shared aspect was that they both represent a therapist's understanding of what the music means. In other words, in both traditions the "meaning" of the music is made by the therapist. This seems consistent with some aspects of behaviorism as well.

Another contrast between NRMT and the psychoanalytically informed music therapy I encountered in Germany is the role of aesthetic experience. In NRMT, helping the client make aesthetically meaningful music was a goal of therapy. In the psychodynamic approach, making meaning in the music occurred, in the sense of "working through" material within the music, but aesthetic considerations were often downplayed. Finally, in my experiences with psychoanalytically informed therapy, improvisations were always augmented by talk. This shared process of making meaning verbally after improvising is much more prominent in

psychodynamic approaches than in NRMT. These aspects are consistent with the clients traditionally seen in both settings.

From around 1990 onwards, some NR[1] music therapists began to work with cognitively intact adult clients. The shift from children with developmental problems to non-disabled adults has lead to some changes in the approach, and different therapists have dealt with the change in different ways. In my doctoral studies, I pursued this interesting change, and focused on the writings of NR music therapists who have published their ideas and experiences with adults. Among them, I found a spectrum of ways that therapists analyze and understand client improvisations, as well as a spectrum of ways that therapists work with adult clients. My attention was primarily on the writings of Gary Ansdell (1995, 1996), Colin Lee (1989, 1990, 1996), and Mercedes Pavlicevic (1997). I found a wide variety in the way these NRMT practitioners analyze and understand improvised music, but I was still left with fundamental questions about how Nordoff-Robbins music therapists — and by extension, all music therapists using improvisation — understand the music their clients improvise, especially that of adults.

Most of my questions centered on how a form of music therapy that originally developed with children may change when used with adults. As such, how do NR music therapists understand music improvised by adults? How do adult clients contribute to meaning-making, both within and after the music? How does a music-centered approach to therapy, as NRMT has been called (Aigen, 1999) accommodate the needs of verbal adults? Because of the traditional emphases in NRMT of making meaningful music, and of analyzing music to understand meaning, I felt that these were important questions for NRMT to address as the approach is used with new and diverse populations. While all of these questions had already surfaced in my clinical thinking, they began to be more important in understanding exactly what I was doing in my own work with adults.

To explore these questions, I carried out a small qualitative project (Keith, 2002) to explore the potential differences between "client meaning" and "therapist meaning," and to see what happens when both participants talk about the music together—do they possibly negotiate new meanings, meanings that might be called "co-constructed?" For the project, another student and I improvised together on four different occasions. We recorded our improvisations, journaled about our impressions, and then discussed the improvisation while listening to its recording. I analyzed the resulting verbal data using qualitative research procedures.

Two very interesting results emerged from this study. One was that during our discussions, we often spoke in the same way that we played: simultaneously and often interrupting each other. Like in music, we worked to agree on what we both wanted to express; and at these times in our discussion, we seemed to be the most connected in making meaning of the experience. It was as if the struggle to negotiate meaning, to clarify exactly what we had experienced in the music, led us to richer, and more varied meanings or understandings. A second result was that in our first improvisations, we developed relatively few themes about the meaning of our improvisations. In journaling and discussing later improvisations, by contrast, there was a virtual explosion of ideas about what the improvisations meant to us. I hypothesized that this development was due to a change in our approach—we began to give the improvisations nonmusical titles, and in one improvisation, the subject played alone. This

[1] NR is an abbreviation of Nordoff-Robbins

experience drew my attention to the value of using titled improvisations to stimulate discussion in therapy.

As I look back at the questions that have continually arisen in my clinical work and the topics that I consistently chose to pursue in my doctoral studies, I have become even more interested in the different ways of thinking about meaning in improvisational music therapy, and often more confused about what is meant by "meaning" vs. "meaningful." It has been helpful to consider that in improvisation, there are moments when one or both participants feel that the music is meaningful. These may indicate some kind of musical connection between the players, an aesthetically pleasing moment, or some other event. I call this "making meaning *within* the music." There is another kind of meaning-making that takes place after the improvising ends, and when therapist and/or client discuss the music, which I call "making meaning *of* the music." The former is meaning that emerges spontaneously within and through the music; the latter is meaning that emerges reflectively, outside and after the music.

According to Ansdell (1995), making meaning *within* the music seems related to the idea that "meaningful experiences" tend to be "aesthetically" oriented. Ansdell writes that therapist and client "improvise music to *find* something meaningful" between them (1995, p. 26, emphasis original). In my pilot project, the adult participant did have concerns about the aesthetics of his playing—he wanted it to be aesthetically pleasing to both of us. In the case of making meaning *of* the music, the therapist may do this alone or with the client (in the case of adults), and either during the session, or after the session.

In this vein, I wondered about the relationship between a client's understanding of the music and the therapist's. In my pilot project, the participant's report and my own report tended to be rather different—we noticed different things about the music, and had different subjective experiences. To add another dimension, I wondered if a therapist's knowledge of a client's subjective experience affects the analysis of an improvisation. When the participant and I discussed the music, we developed many more ideas and themes, some of which seemed to require discussion to be developed at all. How does a discussion affect the ideas and themes that both participants make? Can talking with the therapist help the client to make meaning of the improvisation? Conversely, can talking with the client help the therapist to make meaning of the same improvisation? Finally, do verbal data and musical data fit together?

I found that despite the plethora of writings on the subject by music therapists, there are diverse viewpoints, and certainly no consistent answers to my questions. In order to pursue these questions, which to me seem crucial to improvisational music therapy, the purpose of this study was to examine the relative value of various methods of understanding sets of improvisations in music therapy. Specifically, I compared the results of the following types of meaning-making:

1) Verbal description by each improviser immediately following each improvisation;
2) Dialogue between therapist and client upon rehearing recorded improvisation;
3) Musical analyses of improvisations performed by a consultant improvisational music therapist.

In the next section, I will review the literature on improvisational music therapy, with specific attention to areas relevant to the current study.

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I found several studies that directly address the topic of interpreting or analyzing client-therapist improvisations in music therapy. These represent distinct ways of studying client improvisations. Each study placed the improvisation itself in a different position of prominence, and each used other sources of information in novel and useful ways.

## Studies Using Improvisation Assessment Profiles

Bruscia's *Improvisation Assessment Profiles* (IAPs) (1987) have been used in relatively few studies, although few other music-based methods of analysis are available. Wigram (2000) has used the IAPs as a diagnostic tool in assessing children with developmental problems, particularly for differentiating autistic diagnoses from others, such as communication disorders. He found that the focus on the musical events in the IAPs allowed substantial and important differences to emerge that had not been observed in other assessment processes.

Several researchers have also applied the IAPs with adults. Hiller (1993) used the IAPs and the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) to analyze participants' self-concepts. In his study, participants completed the TSCS and then played two referential solo improvisations, in which they depicted themselves in music. These were recorded. Next, he conducted open-ended interviews with participants, which were also recorded. Hiller found that the value in analyzing clients' improvisations was in detecting characteristic tendencies in their musical behavior, thus learning how clients organize and structure themselves and their world musically, and how they relate to others. With regard to self-concept, he suggested that this form of analysis can help therapists understand what areas of need a client might have.

Gardstrom (2003) used the IAPs to analyze improvisations of adolescents in psychiatric treatment. Participants met individually with the researcher and created improvisations alone and with her over a series of sessions. Following the improvisations, the participants were given the opportunity to listen to the recorded improvisation.

Gardstrom applied the IAPs to the musical data. She then highlighted sections of the verbal transcripts and her field notes that referred specifically to the improvisation at hand. Gardstrom found some tendencies among research participants in the way they organized their music, and in the way they expressed themselves verbally about the experience of improvisation. She noted both similarities and differences in the way she and the participants made meaning, both verbally and musically. Finally, she found that musical analysis revealed how the participants interacted with music, but not what the improvisations meant *to them*.

## A Study in the Analytic Tradition

Langenberg, Frommer and Tress (1995) studied the various interpretations given to a client-therapist improvisation by different individuals. The therapist and client improvised together, and then both wrote their impressions of the music. A recording of the improvisation was sent to an independent panel of listeners, who were also asked to write their impressions. One panel

member transcribed the music using modern graphic notation, and wrote a description of the music. All data were in the form of unstructured verbal narratives, representing the subjective viewpoints of the listeners. The researchers developed categories and qualities out of the texts themselves, using hermeneutic methods from the field of comparative case studies.

What seems to be missing in this study is the process of negotiating meaning that would happen between client and therapist. This is striking because Langenberg is from a tradition in which therapists regularly discusses music with clients. It would be very interesting to know what their discussions sounded like—did they parallel their musical interaction?

## Studies in the Nordoff-Robbins Approach

Colin Lee (1996), a practitioner of Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy, studied improvisation with AIDS patients. His case study is based on his dissertation (1992) and includes much musical detail of his work with one client, including exact transcriptions of several improvisations or sections thereof, and audio excerpts on CD. In a departure from "traditional" NRMT, Lee's client (a trained pianist) played alone for much of the course of therapy.

For the purposes of his study, Lee asked his client to listen to the recorded improvisations. While listening, the client was invited to stop the tape at any time—when he felt something meaningful was happening in the music, or whenever he wished. The comments were recorded, and the places where the client stopped the tape determined which sections of the improvisations would be analyzed musically. Lee's client contributed a great deal of additional verbal material in the form of journals. Lee's discussions with the client focused predominantly on the music produced and its relationship to their here-and-now therapeutic relationship. In instances where the client played alone, the focus was logically less on the relationship and more on the client's own personal experience of music, rooted partially in his history as a trained musician, and what that history meant for him. The main focus of Lee's study was the connections between changes in the music and changes in the way the client talked about the music.

Lee did not use outside validators in his 1996 publication. Instead, his client made his own connections between the music and the therapy. Aesthetic qualities were important to this client, which suggests that they could be for other clients as well. Lee retained one aspect that seems based in traditional NRMT: he refrained from discussion and did not offer much of his own understanding of the music to the client. There was a collaborative effort in terms of musical analysis, but not in terms of connecting musical to verbal or experiential aspects of the music therapy process. Lee questions the validity of such an in-depth study in view of the reality of his clients' situation—living with a terminal disease. Here he seems to question the clinical value of in-depth structural analysis.

Ansdell (1996) studied a client improvisation with an emphasis on the difficulty of talking about music. He asked five independent listeners, with varying levels of knowledge of music therapy, to listen to a music therapy improvisation a total of three times. During the first listening, they listened without stopping and then were asked to "say what they just heard." During the second listening, they had the option of stopping the tape at any time and making comments. Finally, during the third listening they were asked to "just listen" and make any further comments afterward. Similar to Lee's (1995, 1996) studies, Ansdell (1996) correlated

the stop-points on the tapes, to see if listeners made comments at similar points in the improvisation.

Ansdell (1996) found three areas of description and one additional area he called "inference." The descriptive areas were "musical component," "qualities," and "tendencies." The descriptive areas and levels, along with "inference" represent a spectrum moving from musical description to extrapolation of nonmusical (clinical) data about the improviser.

Ansdell (1996) found that the listeners needed to go beyond purely musical description to talk about the improvisers as "persons in music" (p. 14). They knew that they were listening to a music therapy session, and this knowledge may account for their decision to do this. Ansdell describes the type of statements that went beyond musical description as "musically-grounded inferences." Ansdell (1996) distinguishes these from interpretations: "[the listeners] often went only marginally outside the 'constraints of intuitive or presentational evidence,' and were certainly not making psychodynamic-style interpretations" (p. 14). This may be because of their distance from the therapeutic setting—they did not know anything about the persons improvising.

Another result was that those listeners least informed about music therapy made the most value-laden comments about the client's experience. Assuming that many music therapy clients are "less informed" about music than music therapists are, some clients' views may be closely aligned with those of "less-informed" listeners. Stige (1999) suggests that therapists may need to adjust their own interpretation of music therapy experiences according to whatever meaning the client takes from them. I believe that this is the missing element from Ansdell's (1996) study: the client's voice. Ansdell (1996) proposes two possible "readings" of his study, one as "what really happened," and the other as a construction of the way the outside listeners describe the improvisation. However, it seems that including the client's voice in the study would be a valuable addition, no matter what the position.

## Problem Statement

After reading and writing about the research mentioned above, I was able to formulate certain problems that I perceived in the existing research that I had found. These were:

- In some research (Ansdell, 1996), the client's understanding of the music is not included.
- In some research (Lee, 1995, 1996; Langenberg et al., 1995), verbal interaction between client and therapist is not included. In Lee's studies, musical analyses and client commentaries form the basis of the interpretation; in Langenberg, commentaries from the therapist and other observers are included.
- In some research, outside observers are used, but in both Langenberg et al. (1995), and Ansdell (1996), there is no discussion or negotiation of meaning with the client.

In light of these problems, the purpose of this study was to examine the relative value of various methods of making meaning of improvisations in music therapy. Specifically,

1. What do the following methods of meaning-making yield about the improvisation and improviser(s)?
    a. Individual verbal description of the improvisation by each improviser immediately after improvising

   b. Dialogue between therapist and client on improvisation upon rehearing it on tape
   c. Musical description of the improvisation by trained improvisational therapist after repeated hearings
2. What do the following individuals contribute to the meaning making process?
   a. Client
   b. Therapist
   c. Outside therapist
3. What kinds of meaning do the following kinds of improvisations yield?
   a. Referential
   b. Nonreferential
   c. Solo
   d. Duet

# METHOD

## Overview of Research Design

I designed this study with several considerations in mind. One consideration had to do with who would be involved in making meaning of the improvisations. It was clear to me that I needed to include the research participants, because only they could tell me what they found important in an improvisation. I had found in my pilot study that talking with research participants was fruitful and led to new and rich information, so I knew that I wanted to hold dialogues about the improvisations. I also knew the value of having a more objective person analyze improvisations, so I found it important to include someone who was not directly involved in the sessions.

Another set of considerations had to do with the types of data that I would collect, who I would collect them from, and how I would collect them. It was important for me to collect both verbal and musical data, and to collect these in ways that would help explore the relationships and differences between the two.

There would have been several benefits of working with actual adult music therapy clients, including meeting with them several times. However, my questions had more to do with methods and procedures in music therapy than any particular client group. For this reason, I chose to accept the inherent limitations of working with regular, average citizens, and to create the improvisations in one setting, rather than over a series of meetings.

My third set of considerations had to do with the various steps of data analysis and presentation. I knew that in the first stage, I would use a form of text analysis to discover meanings in the texts. I also planned for a consultant to use the Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) to analyze the music. Beyond this, I knew that more details would emerge as I proceeded. Looking ahead to the second stage, I knew that since this type of study would generalize large amounts of data (written journals, lengthy dialogues, and musical descriptions for each improvisation) I had to find a way to make sense of the initial analysis results. This caused me to address the epistemological context of my study.

## Epistemological Context

In all qualitative research it is important for researchers to be self-reflexive: to be aware of the beliefs and world views that we bring to the research. This study itself evolved into a form of self-study, in which I engaged actively in the data and with the research participants. I will discuss the ramifications of this type of study in a later section. The degree to which I was engaged in the data in this study required constant self-reflection on my part. In the process of doing the research to answer the research questions, and using extensive self-reflection, I became aware that my research questions called for a dual perspective on epistemology, and by extension a dual perspective on the research design. These dual perspectives were positivism and non-positivism.

This study is positivistic in its focus on regularities or patterns ("what tends to happen"). However, unlike positivistic studies, this study only focused on the sample at hand, and makes no claims of being generalizable to any other population. The study was nonpositivistic in that the central topic of the study was meaning—what kinds of meanings were revealed, what the improvisations meant (and to whom)—questions that all have to do with personal and social reality and less observable phenomena. These two perspectives seemed to conflict with each other, which resulted in some tension throughout the study.

This tension was especially noticeable in the stage of determining how to manage the data. Because I was working from two perspectives, I had to work with the data from both of these perspectives, and I palpably felt the struggle between them. For example, in one stage I used data matrices to organize and reduce the data that I had gathered. Then in a later stage, I moved away from these matrices and thought in a more interpretive way. This shifting back and forth proved to be necessary in order to perceive and make sense of the regularities *and* to be able to make meaning out of these regularities.

## Design

The dual perspectives required a twofold design for this study. On the one hand, the study is an example of modified "transcendental realism" (Miles & Huberman, 1994 p. 4), which accepts a belief in an objective world in addition to an internal social world. This particular perspective and design applied to several parts of my study. Prominently, I was interested in different *ways* of making meaning of improvisations, and my research questions required me to look for patterns, i.e., "what happens when participants and researcher discuss improvisations?" In order to do this, I counted frequencies of codes, and then placed those codes in a matrix display. I used this type of design to answer questions about what the methods of meaning-making revealed and what the different individuals contributed to the meaning-making process. This perspective and this design are present in the "results" section of this report.

On the other hand, several aspects of my study focused more on interpretation than regularities. These led me to hermeneutics, the goal of which is to "engage deeply in the circle of understanding in order to develop insightful and plausible interpretations of events" (Aigen, 1995 p. 292). The interactive nature of my study was one of these aspects. Several aspects of data gathering were hermeneutic-like, most especially the dialogues with the participants.

Additionally, the study required me to interpret the music of the improvisations. Finally, I had to interpret what the regularities actually *meant* by combining them with my own personal knowledge of the experience, as recorded in memos. These multiple perspectives resulted in a very rich palette of options. I operated from a hermeneutic perspective to answer questions about what types of meaning the various types of improvisations revealed, and to interpret the collected results from each participant (case studies). I also operated from this perspective when I interpreted the "results" section. Thus, a hermeneutic perspective is quite prominent in the discussion section of this report.

## Research Participants

After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board of Temple University, I selected a total of ten participants for the study. I placed a notice in newsletters of local organizations, and interested people contacted me directly. All participants were adults with varying levels of musical experience and ability. Participants were placed on a list after they contacted me, and I scheduled the sessions in chronological order of contact. I assigned pseudonyms to the participants in order to protect their confidentiality. While all participants had the basic abilities to participate in the study (e.g., normally functioning sensory systems, ability to use verbal language), they varied to some degree in their level of musical skill, and their verbal insight.

## Procedures

I met with each participant once for an individual session lasting approximately two hours. During the session, I discussed what we would be doing, and allowed the participants to explore the instruments in the room and ask any questions they had. I demonstrated a solo improvisation for the participant and we engaged in a duo improvisation. Both of these were followed by discussions rather like the interviews that would follow. The instruments included those typically encountered in music therapy, i.e., percussion, both pitched (e.g., xylophone, glockenspiel, kalimba) and unpitched (e.g., drums, maracas, cymbal). When participants were ready, they engaged in a series of six different improvisations, including solos and duos, referential and non-referential improvisations. The improvisations varied widely in length, from around 40 seconds to over five minutes, and were of the following types:

| | |
|---|---|
| Improvisation A: | Solo referential: a sound painting of an emotion that you often have |
| Improvisation B: | Solo referential: a musical self-portrait |
| Improvisation C: | Solo non-referential: A free improvisation with no verbal directions. |
| Improvisation D: | Duo non-referential: A free improvisation with the therapist with no verbal directions. |
| Improvisation E: | Duo referential: An important person in your life |
| Improvisation F: | Duo referential: How your relationship with this person sounds. |

These types of improvisations are commonly used in Analytical Music Therapy (Priestley, 1976, 1994) and in Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy (Nordoff & Robbins, 1971, 1977).

The improvisations were digitally recorded using a Sony portable Digital Audio Tape (DAT) recorder. After each improvisation, the participant and I wrote down our immediate impressions of the music and of our experience, which resulted in two monologues on the improvisation at hand. These two monologues (participant and researcher journals) represent the first two methods of making meaning of the improvisations in the study. Next, we listened to the tape of the improvisation and discussed it. These dialogues represent the third method of making meaning of the improvisations. While listening, if one of us felt that something important had happened in the music, we stopped the tape that was playing, and if needed we went back to listen to the section of interest again. The dialogues were open-ended, but they focused on questions about the lived experience of the improviser, such as:

How did you feel while you were improvising?
Did anything come to mind while you were improvising?
Does this improvisation symbolize or express anything in particular?
Does it sound like or remind you of anything?
Does it express any particular emotions or ideas?
What draws your attention as you listen to it?
What were you trying to do at this point in the music?
What title would you give this improvisation?

The entire conversation was recorded and later transcribed for analysis. After each session, I transferred the recordings to a CD, which I sent to a consultant, Susan Gardstrom, PhD, MT-BC. Susan analyzed the improvisations using the *Improvisation Assessment Profiles* (IAPs) (Bruscia, 1987), or an abridged version thereof (Bruscia, 2001), and reported these findings to me.

## Memos

After meeting with each participant, I wrote a reflective memo about the session, and included impressions about the participant and about the research methodology. The initial impact of the memos had to do with the research procedures and how I structured the sessions. With these first four participants, we moved directly from the instructions about the procedures to the actual improvisations. When I analyzed the results of these four participants and my memos, I found a few things that helped to refine my data-gathering procedures to the format described above.

# CODING AND ANALYZING THE DATA

## Verbal Methods

After transcribing the verbal data (participant and researcher journals; dialogues), I analyzed the transcriptions using qualitative analysis techniques (Boyatzis, 1998; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The analysis involved several steps.

## Segmenting and Coding

First I read each text to gain a sense of the whole, with an eye on themes and meanings in it. Then, I re-read it, dividing it into segments. As I continued to engage the text, I developed a four-layered coding system. This detailed system allowed me to describe each segment in four dimensions. A summary of the coding system follows.

- Layer one: the component of the improvisation in the segment
    - Improvisation as Process
    - Improvisation as Object
    - Improvisation as Heard
    - Tangent
- Layer two: type of data represented in the segment
    - Nonreferential
    - Referential
- Layer three: the level of analysis in the segment
    - Descriptive
    - Analytic
    - Intuitive
    - Evaluative
    - Narrative
    - Connector
    - Reason
- Layer four: content of the segment
    - Self
    - Music
    - Title
    - Etc.

As a result of applying the codes, each segment of text had a four-word descriptor attached to it, e.g., “Process: Nonreferential: Descriptive: Title.” Additionally, many segments include an

additional word describing the component of the improvisation, i.e., "Process image, etc." Appendix A includes a complete definition of all codes.

## Musical Analysis: Improvisation Assessment Profiles

A consultant analyzed each improvisation using the IAPs. Each analysis resulted in a verbal account that reflects the way the improviser(s) organized musical elements in the improvisation. I coded these reports using the IAP profiles and elements that were reflected in the reports, and added a layer to indicate whether the description applied to the music of the participant (intraparticipant), the researcher (intraresearcher), or to aspects of our shared music (intermusical). Thus the IAP coding system had three layers: Intra/inter, element, and profile.

## Levels of Interpretation

The data that result from the IAPs can be interpreted on several levels, depending on the purpose of analysis. These levels range from descriptive to projective, which was the only level used in this study. On this level, the way the client plays is understood to represent certain aspects of his or her personality. Projection can happen on two levels; in this case the following quote is helpful: "When data from the IAPs are regarded as projections of unconscious aspects of the personality, interpretation involves the derivation of symbolism expressed through music. A psychoanalytic perspective is most appropriate" (Bruscia, 1987 p. 422). It is important to remember that *all levels* are interpretive. Even the most basic level, which is "purely descriptive," is interpretive, because the framework of the IAPs is placed over the music itself.

## Data Analysis

After coding all the verbal data and the written narratives that resulted from the IAPs, I placed all the codes into data matrices that were organized in several different ways. These matrices made it possible to answer the sub-problems of this study:

1. What do the various methods of meaning-making yield about the improvisations and improvisers?
2. What do the different individuals contribute to the meaning-making process?
3. What kinds of meaning do the different types of improvisations yield?

I examined the matrices to determine patterns and regularities, in order to see what they communicated in terms of the research questions. I determined these patterns and regularities numerically, by looking at those codes that were used most and least frequently under each condition.

Using these matrices, I wrote narratives to describe in detail each participant, each improvisation, and each method. As I progressed through the data matrices, many redundancies appeared; this was bound to happen, because I was looking at the same data from different angles. At that point, I summarized these narratives into a cohesive whole. The following main topics emerged as the most prominent regularities and characteristics in the data:

- The way the participants organized themselves musically and responded to the verbal tasks
- Regularities and differences among the methods of understanding improvisations:
- Regularities and differences in types of improvisations

In the next sections, these topics serve as an organizational structure for the results, discussion, and conclusions. These sections are organized and discussed according to the two perspectives in this study: transcendental realism (positivistic), and hermeneutic (nonpositivistic). The "results" section is based on transcendental realism because it reports idiographic regularities: regularities in the various verbal methods, and those within each participant. The "discussion" is hermeneutic because I discuss and interpret the results in conjunction with my experiences as researcher. The "conclusions" section represents another layer of interpretation, because in it I apply the results of my study to similar clients in music therapy.

# RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relative value of various methods of making meaning of improvisations in music therapy. This purpose resulted in the following questions:

1. What do the following methods of meaning-making yield about the improvisation and improviser(s)?
    a. Individual verbal description of the improvisation by each improviser immediately after improvising
    b. Dialogue between therapist and client on improvisation upon rehearing it on tape
    c. Musical description of the improvisation by trained improvisational therapist after repeated hearings
2. What do the following individuals contribute to the meaning making process?
    a. Client
    b. Therapist
    c. Outside therapist
3. What kinds of meaning do the following kinds of improvisations yield?
    a. Referential
    b. Nonreferential
    c. Solo
    d. Duet

The purpose of this section is to present regularities found in the raw data upon numerical analysis of the various matrices I created. The most important results of this study are

reflected in the organization of this section, which is divided into two parts: Individual Participant Summaries and Types of Improvisations.

## Individual Participant Summaries

The following vignettes are condensations of the multifaceted and extensive data gathered about each participant (see Appendix 1 for an example of the coding process). I have included a section summarizing the results from all participants, organized to give a general impression of:

1. How participants and I made meaning of the improvisations;
2. How our meaning-making process differed from referential to non-referential improvisations; and
3. How musical analysis is appropriately applied.

### *Jenny*

Jenny was a woman in her fifties who lead an active cultural life. She was a retired teacher and participated in musical groups in the community.

In her journals, Jenny focused on the process of playing, and nearly all of her statements were referential. For example, in her journal on "a musical self-portrait," she wrote:

> *My life is very rich in different kinds of experiences and people. Therefore I chose to use the other instruments. The Celtic drum indicated my intense desire to be a part, to make a difference, to be heard, etc. The xylophone rings clear, even when a sour note is played (sometimes by my own bad choices)…*

In statements such as this, Jenny connected her process (here, her choice of instruments) to the topic of the improvisation (her life).

For the most part, Jenny did not seem concerned about the "quality" of her music. However, in the same journal, she wrote a rare comment that seemed to evaluate her musicality: "I would love to be able to really play that piece but because I am not a pianist I cannot."

My journals on Jenny's improvisations contained a balance of statements on the music itself and the process of playing. For example, in my journal on her improvisation "a musical self-portrait," I wrote:

> *She played 4 or 5 instruments; I noticed little dynamic change. I noticed much change of timbre from one instrument to the next, but only on the ocean drum did she play more than one timbre or technique.*

Here, I describe both the music itself and her process of playing. I made slightly more non-referential than referential comments. However, the referential comments that I made frequently revealed strong intuitions that I had about her:

> *I had an image of a butterfly, moving from one flower to the next, not staying long. I thought about her—is she flighty?*

Our dialogues focused on the process of improvising and our reactions to hearing the recorded improvisation. For example, as we listened to the improvisation "a musical self-portrait," Jenny commented

> *So yeah, I think trying the different things does help relieve stress. I could see how they could be connected.*

This comment (which occurred at the end of our dialogue) was a prime example of how Jenny and I often gained new awareness, or developed new meaning, by listening to the recorded improvisation.

### *Agnes*

Agnes was a widow in her seventies, with several children and grandchildren. She had some musical training as a child but has not been involved in music since then.

In her very brief journals, Agnes focused exclusively on the process of playing. After our improvisation on her relationship with her son, her entire journal entry consisted of the following:

> *I tried to show happy feelings in my relationship with S. I hope it came across.*

My journals on Agnes' improvisations were mostly about the process of playing. Slightly more of my statements were referential than non-referential, and most of them were intuitive in nature. For example, after experiencing the duo improvisation on "an important person," I wrote:

> *I enjoyed this music, and this is a positive, loving person, one of her children or grandchildren*

The dialogues with Agnes focused mostly on the process of playing and our reactions to listening. There were also many tangents in our dialogues—we seemed to go "off topic" frequently. Our comments were mostly referential and contained frequent narratives. Interestingly, our dialogues contained different foci from either Agnes' or my journals.

### *Catherine*

Catherine was a woman in her early seventies. She had some musical training as a child, and enjoys playing the piano.

In her journals, Catherine focused exclusively on her process of playing. Nearly all of the statements were referential, and the content of her journals centered on the titles of the improvisations or Catherine herself.

In my journals on Catherine's improvisations, most of my statements were about process, but many were about the music itself. Nonreferential and referential statements were balanced, and most were intuitive. The content tended to center on the music, the process of playing, and the titles.

In our dialogues, we tended to talk mostly about the process of playing, and most of our comments were referential. The dialogues contained a balance of descriptive, analytic, and intuitive comments, with several insightful comments as well. The dialogues tended to center on the improvisation titles, the music, and the process of playing. Our dialogues thus contained similar foci and content as our journals, but were marked by a different levels of analysis.

### *Suzanne*

Suzanne was a retired woman in her sixties. She was involved in one musical group in the town but had no musical training.

Suzanne wrote short journal entries that focused entirely on the process of playing. Nearly all of her statements were referential, and her journals centered on the music and the experience of improvising.

In my journals on Suzanne's improvisations, I focused nearly evenly on process and the improvisations. Most of my statements were non-referential, and the content of my journals centered on the music and the titles, with a few statements on countertransference-like feelings.

Our dialogues focused mostly on the process and our reactions upon rehearing the improvisations. Nonreferential and referential comments were nearly balanced; interestingly, evaluative comments were relatively common, indicating Suzanne's concerns about the quality of her music. Our dialogues centered on the music and the experience of playing. Thus, the dialogues with Suzanne contained similar foci and content as our journals.

### *Albert*

Albert was a man in his early sixties, and was the participant with the most musical experience. He had an undergraduate degree in music, and was musically active in the community.

Albert's journals focused mainly on the process of playing, but also substantially on the music of the improvisations. He tended to make referential statements, which were frequently intuitive, insightful, or evaluative. His journals tended to center on the titles, the experience of playing, and the music itself.

My journals on Albert's improvisations focused mainly on the process of playing, and contained a balance of referential and non-referential statements. My journals centered on the music and the titles of the improvisations.

The dialogues on Albert's improvisations focused strongly on process. We talked more about the music than our reactions to listening. We made few tangential comments. Most of our comments were referential, and many were insightful. Our comments centered on Albert himself, the music, the experience of improvising, and the titles of the improvisations. Thus, our dialogues contained similar foci and content as the journals, on an analytic level similar to those of Albert's journals.

### *Richard*

Richard was a man in his forties. He and his wife are both part of the academic community in town. He had no musical training.

In his journals, Richard focused nearly exclusively on process, with a balance of referential and non-referential statements. Most of his statements were descriptive. The content of his journals centered on the music, the process of playing, and the sense of connection in the duos.

My journals on Richard's improvisations focused equally on process and product, and most statements were non-referential. Descriptive and intuitive comments were equally common. Some (self-) evaluative comments were also present. The content of my journals centered on the titles, the music, the experience of playing, and a countertransference-like reaction in one improvisation.

Our dialogues focused on the process of playing, with some comments on the music, our reactions to listening, and frequent tangents. Referential and non-referential comments were nearly balanced. The content of our dialogues centered mostly on the music, the experience of playing, the titles of the improvisations, and the sense of connection. In short, the dialogues covered more topics and foci than either his or my journal.

## Summary of Participants

The people who participated in this study were all individuals with distinct personalities and life experiences. Although the finding are best understood ideographically, that is, according to each participant, some patterns did emerge in the data. These give an overall sense of how this group of people made meaning of the music, and how they made meaning in the music itself.

- Generally, we focused on the *process* of improvising more than the improvisations themselves.

For example, in his journal on "an important person," Richard wrote

> *I felt good—warm—just thinking of her as I tried to find a way to express her through the improvisation.*

This example also reveals another regularity: we tended to connect the improvisations to nonmusical things, rather than focus on the musical details. In general, we connected them to the titles of the referential improvisations, the participants themselves, their life experiences, and the feeling of connection between us when we played together.

- The participants rarely focused on musical details, but they did so more frequently in non-referential than in referential improvisations.

The following exchange indicates how difficult it was for one participant (Richard) to describe the musical details of his solo non-referential improvisation.

> D: *was there a texture to your music?*
> R: *texture in music—I like texture in music, if I understand what texture means. It's not flat, it's a combination of sharp/crisp and so forth. I think there was!*
> D: *can you describe it?*
> R: *not really, except there was depth to it.*

At the very least, the example indicates potential challenges of using traditional musical terms with non-musicians.

- Most participants responded more intuitively to the referential improvisations than the non-referential ones.

Albert and I both, for example, responded intuitively to hearing the recording of his referential improvisation "a musical self-portrait."

> D: *you speak of your being steady and solid, but I can't deny the energy there. I thought I heard a lot of energy there. You know, even though you're dissatisfied with the instrument you selected, and you felt compelled to stay with it anyway, there was a lot of energy there, throughout.*
> A: *yeah, I think that's accurate. And even though I didn't like the sound, or didn't like what it was giving back, and how it came across, I think it's probably a lot more me than if I were using the shakers, or some other instrument.*

The intuitive way of responding, in this example, led Albert to an insight about himself. Some participants were more insightful than others, and those who were insightful tended to respond more insightfully to the referential duos. I was also more insightful with certain participants, and I certainly resonated differently with each one of them. It is also possible that the participants and I may have become more insightful as we progressed through the improvisations, as insights seemed more common in the duos than the solos. Participants who were concerned about the quality of their music seemed less insightful, but this was not the case with two participants—the only males in the study.

- When looking at the combined musical results, I found that it was more meaningful to examine patterns *within* the participants rather than *between* participants.

The participants tended to create rather individualized sounds, and musical analysis of the improvisations only made real sense on an idiographic level, by comparing how an individual created different types of improvisations. Summary statements must therefore be rather general:

- The participants tended to use rhythms more than melody or harmony, and with greater sophistication.
- The rhythms in duo improvisations were more grounded than in solos, and the duos were usually characterized by greater integration and stability in general.

Participants also used timbre, texture, and volume expressively; these tended to change frequently. Just as some participants were more verbally insightful than others, some participants were more sophisticated in their manipulation of musical elements, and in their understanding of them than others. This seems to confirm Priestley's (1976) finding that people vary in the verbal and musical insightfulness. The musical results also have practical suggestions for music therapists using improvisation; I will discuss these in the Conclusions section of this report.

## Types of Improvisations and Meaning-Making

All participants created six different improvisations. Some improvisations (referential) were given a title beforehand, while others (non-referential) were not. Some were solos, and some were duos with the researcher. All permutations of these types were used: solo referential and non-referential, and duo referential and non-referential. Thus, this section presents the results of 36 improvisations analyzed by four methods—a total of 144 documents. I will compare the different types of improvisations: referential vs. non-referential, and solo vs. duo. Each comparison is organized by the methods and represents a summary of all participants together.

### *Referential and Non-referential Improvisations*

- Participants made meaning of referential and non-referential improvisations in different ways.

In both referential and non-referential improvisations, participants tended to write about their experience of improvising. In referential improvisations, they overwhelmingly connected the improvisations to something else, usually the titles, themselves, the music, and the experience of improvising. For example, Suzanne wrote about her improvisation "an emotion you frequently experience" in the following way:

> *Slowly warming up to people, getting to know them. Loving to interact with them. The joy of knowing them. Leaving them until the next time I see them.*

In non-referential improvisations participants did not usually connect their experience to anything outside of the session itself, e.g., the experience of playing, or a sense of connection between us in the music. For example, Albert wrote about our non-referential duet:

> *I felt pressure to lead, but it was more fulfilling when that pressure was occasionally lost and it as if we were in synch, not needing to make something happen, but rather just letting it happen.*

These differences suggest different areas of usefulness for referential and non-referential improvisations; I will discuss these at length in the Discussion and Conclusions sections of this report.

- I made meaning of referential and non-referential improvisations in different ways, but these were also different from the participants themselves

My journals on referential improvisations tended to focus on musical details. For example, I wrote the following about Albert's musical self-portrait:

> *His drum playing was dry, somehow. He didn't play it so it resonated. The cymbal added more resonance, and it was closely tied in with the drum — a tight fit. It was a counterweight and partner in sound.*

By comparison, my journals on non-referential improvisations tended to connect the music to other things, especially the non-referential duos. My journals tended to focus on a few topics: the music, the experience of playing, and the titles. I wrote the following after the non-referential duo with Suzanne:

> *I noticed my structuring tendency was reinforced. She's structured, I played with structure—is this how she relates in life?*

These two results suggest important differences between myself and the participants in the way we made meaning — on our own — of referential and non-referential improvisations.

The dialogues on referential and non-referential improvisations were different in many ways.

- Dialogues about non-referential improvisations included more comments about the details of the music.

For example, in our dialogue on the non-referential duo, Jenny and I had the following exchange:

> D: *What do you notice?*
> J: *how much together it is! Playing and listening, it sounded like two separate things. Like I started playing, and then gradually we played together.*
> J: *right.*
> J: *just the intensity, the rhythms were more together.*

- Dialogues about referential improvisations were mostly about connecting the music to other things, usually the titles.

Many participants began our dialogues on referential improvisations with a comment about their intent — the referent. For example, the dialogue on Richard's improvisation "a significant person" began this way:

> R: *it just sounds more amusing than I thought it was going to sound.*
> D: *What makes it sound amusing?*
> R: *well, I meant it to sound light and sparkly, and airy, but there's something comical about it—it wasn't really amusing.*

It seemed that the provision of a referent made it more difficult to talk about the music itself, but easier to talk about whatever that referent was. However, the results suggest that when we talked about non-referential improvisations, we tended to keep our focus on components of the improvisation experience, and when we talked about referential improvisations, we seemed to be frequently led to other topics. Another difference was that the participants showed greater concern for the quality of their music in non-referential improvisations than in referential ones.

*Solo and Duo Improvisations*

In both solo and duo improvisations, the participant journals showed a focus on the process of playing, and participants tended to connect the improvisations to nonmusical things.

- In the solo improvisations, participants connected the improvisations to the participants themselves, the titles of the improvisations, and the experience of improvising.

For example, Agnes wrote the following after the improvisation "a musical self-portrait:"

> *Walking quietly on the beach but then some minor crisis happens. Or in a happy mood another mishap or crisis. My life is really up and down — mostly up.*

Participant journals on the duos centered on the sense of connection between the players and the titles of the improvisations. The non-referential duo improvisation seemed to bring about the largest shift from referential to non-referential meanings. For example, Suzanne wrote in her journal on the non-referential duo:

> *Enjoyable experience. Joyful. Variety. Enjoyed being part of a duet.*

Many participants experienced this shift in focus at this juncture and the Discussion section of this report includes a discussion of this shift.

There were notable differences between the participant journals and the researcher journals.

- The researcher journals on solo improvisations were characterized by a focus on the music of the improvisations, while in those on the duos, more attention was paid to the process of playing.

Two short examples from the session with Catherine will illustrate this difference. After her improvisation on "an emotion I experience frequently," I wrote:

> *I noticed very regular playing, the rhythm kept coming back in varying ways — playing with palms, tips of fingers, and the butt of the hand.*

By contrast, after the duo improvisation "An important person in my life," I wrote:

> *This sounds like a person who is there, is a negative presence, like someone who is a burden. I felt bored while playing.*

These examples illustrate another common difference between researcher journals on solo and duo improvisations: the researcher journals on solo improvisations tended to focus on the musical details, whereas those on the duos showed a stronger tendency to connect the music to nonmusical things.

Dialogues on both solo and duo improvisations contained similar tendencies to connect the improvisations to nonmusical things. In dialogues on solos, we connected the improvisations to the participants themselves most frequently. For example, Catherine and I had the following exchange in our dialogue on "a musical self-portrait:"

> D: *Do you notice anything as you listen?*
> C: *I wasn't aware it sounded like that.*
> D: *What did it sound like?*
> C: *It's sounding like I was feeling, what I was trying to portray*

Another example from Catherine illustrates the tendency to connect the duo improvisations to the titles. In our dialogue on "how our relationship sounds," Catherine and I clearly connected the improvisation to her difficult relationship with her son:

> D: *What were you doing here?*
> C: *Not much. There wasn't a lot of sound from me. I didn't know what to do—because I didn't know what to do…Right along here, there was a vision of being swept over with a wave. You know how at the seashore…*
> D: *When a wave comes over you?*
> C: *Yeah. For him, but not losing him. But it was like this wave.*
> D: *Was that from the sound you were making?*
> C: *And you.*
> D: *That I was making too. That's interesting! Well, first of all you made it very clear what I needed to do. So…did that sound like him? But I felt like in*

*order to be him, I had to not listen to you. And when you were running your palm across the drum, I felt like you were following me sometimes, and I didn't want that, in that role.*

C: *Umm-hmm!*

D: *But then I must have stopped for a second. I heard you do something different, that wave sound. And I heard you then! And I wanted to go with you. So it was kind of like "don't follow me, please, but when I am able to hear you, I will follow you." That was my feeling when I was in this role.*

C: *That would be very, very appropriate. Yes.*

The discussion section of this report addresses implications of this finding.

Looking at the musical analysis using the IAPs, it is possible to make a few general comments about the music of solo vs. duo improvisations.

- Rhythmic patterns tended to be ungrounded in the solos, but integrated into a rhythmic ground in the duos.
- Rhythmic patterns also tended to change more in the solos than in the duos.

In other words, my playing in the duos seemed to lead to greater stability and grounding of rhythmic patterns, both simultaneous and sequential.

Overall, the IAP results suggest that the solo improvisations were more tense than the duos, that the duo improvisations were more integrated and stable than the solos, and that the researcher's music provided this structure. The Discussion section of this report contains projective interpretations of the IAP results for each participant.

# DISCUSSION

This section, which interprets the results just presented, is constructed from a hermeneutic perspective. In writing it, I drew on verbal and musical sources from the meetings with the participants; I also drew on my observations during the study, my experience talking with and improvising with the participants, and my experience as an NRMT therapist.

This section is organized into the following sub-sections:

- Verbal methods of meaning-making: an interpretation of what the methods of meaning-making used in this study revealed
- Improvisations: an interpretation of what the different types of improvisations revealed
- Musical analysis: an interpretation of what musical analysis using the IAPs revealed

## Verbal Methods of Meaning-Making

The results from each method of meaning making (participant journals, researcher journals, dialogues) revealed certain things about that method: its strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies. In this section I will interpret the regularities that I found in these methods.

### *Participant Journals*

Several important findings emerged from analysis of the participant journals. These include:

- While participants were generally not able to make sense of their music (i.e., the sounds themselves) on their own, they could describe the process they went through to create the sounds

They could talk about the instruments they chose, why they chose them, the order they played in, etc. In referential improvisations, the participants connected their process to the improvisation titles naturally and easily. This result also suggests several things:

- Referential improvisations had a strong structuring effect on the way these participants thought about and organized their music.
- Referential improvisations were useful in encouraging the participants to reflect on the topics of these improvisations.
- The meaning for the participants resided in the connection between their process and the titles of the improvisations.

When the participants played non-referential improvisations (especially duos), they made more sense of the musical details than in referential ones. The fact that this tendency was stronger in the duos suggests that it was fostered by my own musical structure, though this interpretation may be a bias on my part. However, taking the data and my memos into account, another possible finding emerged. Specifically, when the participants focused on musical details, it limited the way they understood the improvisation.

- When they focused on the music, they seemed to write less and make fewer connections.

Instead, since they were mostly untrained in writing about music, they got stuck. Thus, for the participants, focusing on musical details was not such a valuable undertaking.

*Researcher Journals*

Similar to the participant journals, several important findings emerged from the researcher journals.

- It may be easier to focus on clients' music when listening to them play.
- It may be easier to focus on the process of playing when improvising with clients.
- It may be easier to relate *process* to the titles (referents) of improvisations than to relate *music* to them.

Records from my experiences with the participants also confirmed this pattern. Several times, I wrote in my field notes that the process of playing was a very powerful experience, so strong that it was sometimes difficult to remember musical details. In fact, the demands of improvising with a client may require the music therapist to focus on his or her (as well as the shared) process so closely, that the musical details fade into the background, at least in the moment.

- Some music therapists may be more aware of their emotional responses to clients when playing with them, rather than listening.

The two roles of listener and co-improviser may call forth different types of responses. While listening, some may have a more "intellectual" response, related to the more detached role of listener. While playing, it may be more difficult to remain in a detached role, and therapists may respond more emotionally under these conditions. These two roles thus have different potentials for music therapists.

*Dialogues*

Holding a dialogue with the participants was a way to share not only the experience of making music, but also what we thought and felt about the music and the experience, what we remembered, and what it brought to mind while we listened. In this case, I had hoped it would lead to new, shared meanings, as had been the case in the earlier pilot study. Research by some others on improvisation (e.g., Langenberg, Frommer & Tress, 1995) did not include discussion as a way to make meaning out of an improvisation. However, I was not sure exactly what to expect when I carried out my research. I wondered if the participants would develop musical understanding, if I would find out what was important to the participants, and if we would create new meanings—and if so, what kind they might be.

On a very basic level, the dialogues tended to reflect the foci of our individual journals. Specifically, the participants connected their process to nonmusical things, especially the titles of the improvisations. For example, Albert connected his process of selecting an instrument to depict "an important person" in his life:

A: *The harmony was important here. There had to be harmony, an instrument capable of harmony.*
D: *What is that related to?*

A: *Well, it's this kind of who she is, and how we define ourselves. Harmony in multiple senses. She cannot stand discord. I don't like it—and much less than I can deal with it. More of a harmony vs. melody thing, or harmony vs. lead, which is what I am.*

By contrast, I tended to make more "purely musical" connections. Furthermore, in the dialogues the participants did not shift from this type of referential meaning to non-referential meaning, even if I brought such "musical meanings" into the conversation. The following excerpt, from the discussion with Albert about the improvisation "how our relationship sounds," demonstrates how some participants responded when I brought in "strictly musical" topics (in this case, change in the music):

D: *I don't know if we talked about if there was much change in this music, besides the fact that I brought in these different motifs. Was there change in loudness, for example?*

A: *Yeah. There was variety. Some loudness, some…from the original, again very harmonic, to dissonance, coming back to the harmonic. Some of the flights took me a little adjusting to get back in synch with. And that fits [the way this relationship sounds] too.*

Here, Albert (the participant with the most musical education) connected the level of change in the music (i.e., "musical meaning") to the title of the improvisation (nonmusical meaning).

Over time it became clear that the dialogues needed a "leader;" it seemed necessary for me to lead in order to explore whether discussion would lead the participants to new things. But my leading did not prevent shared understandings from emerging. Rather, part of creating shared meaning required me to become aware of the meanings *they* took from the improvisations. In the dialogues, I had to put aside the things that *I* thought were important in order to share what *they* felt was important.

Another result was that many new insights or understandings were associated with what initially appeared to be tangential materials. These "tangents" were associated with narratives, which often led to insights. In other words,

- Going "off topic" often gave participants insight into whatever we were talking about.

Obviously, if we had not talked about the improvisations, this would not have occurred. It probably also would not have occurred if I had tried to focus the discussion on the music itself, rather than on what was important *to the participants*. In any case, I believe that the interconnection of tangents, narratives, and insights may confirm the idea that listening to and talking about improvisations may lead to shared meanings.

## Types of Improvisations

While analyzing the results of the different methods of meaning-making, I noticed patterns in the meanings derived from the various types of improvisations: solo/duo and referential/non-referential. This was especially true looking at the verbal methods of meaning-making. The musical characteristics of the improvisations, as I have stated before, were rather idiosyncratic for each individual participant, but in fact a few meaningful patterns appeared in the musical results. In this subsection I compare the results from the various types of improvisations and interpret the differences that emerged in each method of meaning-making.

### *Referential and Non-referential*

Using referential (titled) improvisations had a substantial influence on the way the participants thought about the improvisations

- Participants organized their music-making very differently when asked to play to a title and when asked to play without one.

When they played to a title, they had an easier time both improvising and making meaning of what they improvised. Thinking this through to one possible conclusion, this indicates that the meaning these participants took from improvisations was based predominantly on their process of improvising, not on the music itself. This type of result suggests that music therapists need to be aware of the importance of process — both to clients and to themselves — in making sense of improvisations.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, I often intuitively made the connection from "process" to the referents (titles) of the improvisations. However, I did not intuitively connect the music to these titles (or other things). One possible related conclusion to be drawn here is that musical intuitions lead to musical insights only, while intuitions from "process" tend to lead to other, non-musical insights. This seems to be a type of blind spot among some in the broader community of music-centered therapists (Aigen, 1999; Ansdell, 1996) who struggle with the issue of connecting musical intuitions into "clinical" awareness. To speak more generally, paying attention to process or to the music revealed rather different things, and an exclusive focus on musical details limited my understanding of the participants.

When I compared the dialogues on referential and non-referential improvisations, it emerged that talking about these two types of improvisations was useful for rather different purposes, and that dialogues on each type helped to reveal the strengths of that particular type of improvisation. When we talked about referential improvisations:

- The participants were less concerned about their quality of the music;
- Participants found connections easily between the improvisations and other things; and
- Participants seemed to reach insights more easily.

When we talked about non-referential improvisations,

- The participants were sometimes concerned about their music; and
- We focused closely on the experience of playing and what was happening in the session.

This means that while referential improvisations took our attention *away* from the session to other things, non-referential improvisations helped us focus on what was happening in the "here-and-now" of *the session itself*.

When looking for patterns in the IAP results, it was difficult to make generalizations because of the many differences in the ways the participants chose to express themselves. However, I could see in the music of each participant that certain improvisations were related to each other. Thus, the best way to make sense of the music was by looking at all of the improvisations of a given participant, rather than all the improvisations of a particular type across participants. This is a concept upon which the IAPs are based, of course.

*Solo and Duo*

There were few differences in the participant journals on solo and duo improvisations. In fact, the only difference seemed to be related to the presence of another improviser (myself). In my journals, it was notable that most statements about my own personal reactions occurred in the context of duos. This supports the thesis that I was more aware of my emotional responses when I was a co-improviser. My lack of awareness of potential personal issues seems to support the thesis as well, and brings up additional questions about blind spots on my part.

- It seems that I was blind to the impact of my own unconscious reactions when listening to the participants (as opposed to playing with them).

For example, when I reflect now on the experience of listening to the participants, I was reminded of my private music lessons when I was a teenager. The roles were entirely different, but the situations resembled each other enough to connect the two. I wonder now if the participants felt the way I did when I played for my teacher. I also wonder if I put myself in the role of the "objective listener," rather like my music teacher. These questions, which are clearly about countertransference, are easy to address in the context of Analytical Music Therapy, but in the NRMT model, they present certain challenges. In NRMT, therapists nearly always play duos with their clients; therefore most therapists do not have the chance to make this comparison at all. Thus, questions about different types of emotional responses in solo and duo improvisations never even arise. Therapists may experience strong emotional responses, or they may not. However, my experience is that NRMT does not give a great deal of direction for addressing these emotional responses. Instead, I perceive a resistance to addressing such concerns using ideas that are not native to music and NRMT (see Aigen, 1999).

The results from the dialogues on solo vs. duo improvisations were similar to those from the participant journals, with a slightly different angle. The titles of the referential duos seemed to have a stronger impact on the dialogues than the titles of the referential solos. This probably reflects the fact that I connected to the titles of the duos more than those of the solos,

and carried this connection over into the dialogues. Additionally, our dialogues on the duos suggested that the participants were conscious of, and possibly uncomfortable with, the differences in our musical skills.

While a comparison of IAP results from referential and non-referential improvisations revealed few differences, a comparative analysis of the solo and duo improvisations revealed one interesting pattern that merits discussion. As reported in an earlier section, the solos were tenser than the duos, and the duos were more integrated and stable than the solos. For example, duo rhythms were usually based on a pulse, and the participants changed instruments less frequently. I believe that these results suggest that I was uncomfortable with the tension in the solos—possibly because they were less "organized." The perceived disorganization in the music seemed to make me tense. Though I was not consciously aware of it, the results suggest that I believed it was important to reduce the tension I perceived by providing grounding and structure. I did this by imposing a pulse and by staying on one instrument more than the participants did. Another interpretation could be that the social process of playing together led us to seek unity in the music. In this view, the musical results might indicate that the lowered tension was an intersubjective response between myself and the players. These are just two possible interpretations of the data that resulted from the musical analysis, and others are certainly possible.

## Musical Analysis using Improvisation Assessment Profiles

The results of musical analysis were very different than those of the verbal methods. Whereas in the verbal methods, it was possible to generalize between participants, this was more difficult with the musical results. The results of the musical analysis only made real sense in the context of each individual, not in the aggregates of all the participants. In this section I will interpret the musical results in the context of the individual participants.

### *Levels of Interpretation in the IAPs*

As I have mentioned earlier, the IAPs can be used on several levels. In this study I used them on three: descriptive, participants' musical abilities, and projective. However, the real value of the IAPs seems to lie in their interpretive nature.

On the descriptive level, each analysis reduced the improvisations to a set of descriptive terms: profiles and gradients on the profiles. This provided a "thumbnail sketch" of what the particular improvisation was like, in the first place, and also alerted me to what aspects seemed important. Next, these results made it easier to compare rather different improvisations. This is possible because of the profiles and the gradients, which are independent from the musical elements themselves. For example, they made it possible to look at how a participant tended to ground her playing across the set of improvisations, even if she used rather different musical materials to do so.

The second level (generalizing from the improvisation descriptions to the participants' musical skills) seemed almost a natural extension. The first realization on this level was that participants were not able to manipulate tonal elements as well as they could other elements such as rhythms. They were able to play rhythms relatively freely, while they had a difficult

time playing both rhythmically and tonally. This and other inferences on this level seem intuitive in many ways; they seem to reflect that different people with different levels of musical skill may organize their sounds differently. Making inferences from the purely descriptive data to this slightly more interpretive level was aided by my observations of the clients when I worked with them.

Inferences on the projective level were dependent on my observations of the participants, my own impressions of the experience of playing with them and listening to them, and other data that were not available to the consultant. This level is thus the most interpretive of all three, and judging from the richness of the projective interpretations that emerged from this study, it indicates the importance and value of the IAPs.

*Projective Interpretations*

This sub-section presents projective interpretations of the musical results from the previous section. These interpretations are written from a psychodynamic perspective. For each participant, a statement summarizes the interpretations of the individual improvisations. These interpretations are based on my own experience of working with them and the data from the IAPs, using the psychodynamic guidelines for interpreting IAP results, one of the two options provided (K.E. Bruscia, personal communication, March 22, 2005). As with all interpretations of this kind, others are always possible.

*Jenny*

Musical analysis of Jenny's improvisations revealed that she seems to be a person who consciously dislikes routines or externally imposed structure, and prefers to go her own path(s). Reflecting on my session with her, I had the impression that while she enjoys presenting a colorful, varied impression to people, she seems to be limited or more structured than she realizes, an impression I also developed in our session. This tendency comes out most in the way she interacts with other people. She seems to prefer not to impose her will on other people, perhaps because she knows how distasteful this experience is to her. This manifested most obviously in a few statements she made about how open-minded she is, and how she "doesn't go along with people's expectations". However, her own tendency toward routine (which she may not be aware of) seems to conflict with her wish to appear "different."

*Agnes*

Agnes' improvisations were noteworthy for their consistent brevity. Of all the participants, her improvisations were the shortest. This did not seem to restrict the meaning that musical analysis could glean from them. Rather, they seemed to be concise statements of what was important, similar to Agnes' journals and our discussions.

With Agnes, the IAP results made the most sense when supplemented with materials from the dialogues and her journals. In two improvisations, Agnes experienced strong imagery while playing; these both influenced and were influenced by her music-making. She is a good example of a person with whom IAPs may work best when integrated with verbal data.

*Catherine*

The results of the musical analysis of Catherine's collected improvisations suggest that Catherine organizes and manages her life with some skill and some degree of satisfaction. She is an egalitarian person who seems to treat people as equals, and she can hold her own in many areas of her life. While she experiences some satisfaction in her life, she has had to resign herself to a difficult and distant relationship with her son. She is quite able to manage her own life, but she realizes she cannot do this for him.

*Suzanne*

The results of the musical analysis of Suzanne's improvisations suggest that Suzanne is a person who warms up, both to experiences and to people, but then displays a healthy self-confidence. She has a sense of stability in her life that allows her to try new things, and she seems to have integrated this stability from important relationships in her life. However, she may not be particularly aware of her emotions.

*Albert*

Musical analysis revealed that Albert presents himself as a structured, grounded person governed more by thoughts than emotions; he seems threatened by his own power and strength, which he does not trust. However, he may not actually be as cohesive and stabile as he believes himself to be; he may be partially aware of this and this may be the cause of his feeling unsafe around power, especially his own. Albert seems to come into his own more when another person is there to encourage him to express himself, and he seems to unconsciously put people into this role, suggesting that he may be rather passive. I believe that his musical training (which manifested in the way that he structured tonal elements in his improvisations) allowed him to show *less* of himself in the music than other, musically untrained participants did. Of course, this very characteristic also revealed something on its own: that he tends not to let his guard down very easily, and is musically rather defended.

*Richard*

Musical analysis revealed that Richard presents himself in different ways when alone and with others. On his own, he is impulsive, free, and prefers to do his own thing. With others, he seems to become more withdrawn, and he sometimes subjugates his natural tendencies. This is especially true in his relationship with his wife. It may be that Richard enjoys sharing leadership with others, and in some cases it seems to give him some balance and keep him grounded.

These projective interpretations required me to go beyond musical description and to connect the musical characteristics of the improvisations to nonmusical — in this case, psychological — meanings. This, it seems, is a necessary step: music therapists must draw *clinical* conclusions from the music they analyze, not musical ones. When I compare the purely musical descriptions that I wrote to these projective interpretations, the contrast is stark. The

initial documents were "dry" descriptions of the purely musical features of each improvisation. They were, in a way, denatured — removed from their natural, aurally lived state. The projective interpretations, with their necessary theoretical overlay, seemed much truer to the participants and to my experiences with them. In order to connect the music to therapy, and to exploit the potentials of this source of meaning, an interpretive (as opposed to a "purely musical") perspective was required. Other therapists and researchers may draw different conclusions, depending on their perspectives and belief systems, but when all the data were examined together, taking a clinical, interpretive, perspective was necessary in order to understand the therapeutic implications of these improvisations

# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The participants in this study were not clients. While they stood for clients in terms of their role, they were quite different, as was the relationship in the context of the session. Still, some of the results may be informative for a more clinical setting. This section summarizes the conclusions of the study and points out how they are related to music therapy as a clinical practice. Also included are theoretical implications and suggestions for future research.

## Summary of Findings

Looking at the participant journals, certain conclusions emerge about their value in this study, and by extension, in clinical work.

- Adults without a great deal of musical training may find improvising easier when given a title.
- They may also find it easier to make sense of improvisations of this type. These adults may have more difficulty making meaning of untitled improvisations.
- Finally, the meaning they take from improvisations may lie in the connections between the improvisations and nonmusical things, not in the musical details.

Looking at the researcher journals, several conclusions emerge as well.

- Music therapists make meaning from more components of improvisations than clients
- Therapists may respond differently depending on their role in the improvisation.

Some therapists may respond more emotionally when they play with clients, and more objectively when they are in the role of listener. Both roles are potentially helpful, and offer different strengths and possibilities. Related to this, music therapists may take different types of meaning from client improvisations, depending on their role and the type of improvisation, as well as on their philosophy of therapy.

Looking at the dialogues, talking about improvisations may be beneficial to both therapists and clients.

- Music therapists who talk with their clients about improvisations may become more aware of what improvisations mean to their clients.

- Clients who talk about improvisations may develop new ideas about the music and what it means to them, often reaching insights that they have not experienced before.

Thus, dialogues bring therapists and clients to a sense of shared meanings, almost a type of "middle ground," where both contribute to the process of meaning-making, both within the process of improvising as well as in discussions about them.

The Improvisation Assessment Profiles are not the only method available to analyze the music of improvisations, but they are the most thorough method created for use in music therapy, and their aural nature seems more suited to analyzing improvised music than methods that require transcription. However, the idiosyncrasies of referential improvisations and individuals make it difficult, if not impossible, to use musical analysis on collected improvisations of different people. The strength of musical analysis lies in its ability to give a very clear description of how an individual organizes him or herself to create music, both alone and with another person. The results of the IAPs are very rich and meaningful in the context of an individual, but less meaningful when applied to a group of people.

## Implications for Practice and Theory

A study such as this tends to generate many possible findings. Some of these have obvious connections to clinical work, while others may seem to have purely theoretical implications. This section presents possible implications for clinical practice and theory. While many of the implications may seem pointedly directed at NRMT, they may be instructive to improvisational music therapists with other clinical approaches. The implications fall into four areas:

- Solo vs. duo improvisations
- Referential vs. non-referential improvisations
- The use of words for meaning-making
- Connecting music to verbal meaning

The first implications are related to the differences between solo and duo improvisations. In NRMT, the therapist nearly always plays with the client. This holds true in most cases with adults, as well as with children. The results of this study suggest that when therapists always play with their clients, they limit both their clients and themselves. This has both practical and theoretical implications. The practical implications have to do with the amount of attention that a therapist can actually direct to a client's music, and with the actual music that therapists are hearing.

Consider the nature of solo and duo improvisations: a solo consists of one person's music, and a duo consists of two peoples' music. When listening to a client-therapist duo, we hear two people play, one of whom is the therapist. If, as in NRMT, therapists always play with their clients, and never ask them to play alone, the therapist's own music is always audible and always implicated in the improvisation. Thus, they run the risk of never fully hearing their clients *independent from themselves*. Music therapists need to acknowledge the unintended effects that their own music can have on the music of a client. For example, in my case, I

frequently imposed structure and organization in the music. This seems to be a part of my musical self, but it was also a substantial part of the NRMT training.

A theoretical implication brings us back to the main focus of this study: making meaning of improvisations. When therapists try to understand their clients by understanding the improvisations, they must think rather differently about duo and solo improvisations, especially when analyzing the music, because they are two very different phenomena.

Musical analysis of the duo improvisations revealed that the presence of the therapist in the music usually made the duos more stable and integrated than the solos. This is probably due partly to my training, and partly to my own musical history. NRMT training encourages therapists to be aware of their own musical tendencies and limitations. For example, we learned to be aware of our own personal musical styles and their characteristics, and were led from there into new, unfamiliar areas. Applying this idea to the presence of structure in music is also useful: if therapists tend to provide a lot of structure, they should consider if that structure has to do with their own musical needs or the clinical needs of their clients. The same holds true for therapists who provide less musical structure for their clients. Neither tendency is "better"—some clients need structure and some do not. Rather, we should be flexible in our use of structure according to the needs of our clients, and we should always be aware of the many effects of our own music in duo improvisations. This is similar to the idea that countertransference is always implicated in our work with clients.

Another theoretical and practical implication grows out of this one, and is related specifically to the way the duos were more structured and organized. The theoretical foundations of Nordoff-Robbins music therapy imply that the *interpersonal* relationships that develop through joint improvisations lead to increased *intrapersonal* integration. In other words, healthy relationships lead to better intrapersonal health. This theoretical stance seemed to develop because of the needs of NRMT's original clients: children with autism and other severe developmental problems. By contrast, some models (e.g., Analytic Music Therapy) assume the opposite: that intrapersonal integration must be present in order to relate to other people: healing comes from within, not from the outside.

The increased integration and stability of our duos indicated that the participants were influenced by me, in my role as co-improviser, to stabilize and integrate the music. In other words, a type of "musical dependency" emerged. If we combine this "musical dependency" with the notion that "healing comes through healthy relationships," a very important question arises: how does therapy terminate? If the entire musical interaction in therapy encourages dependency on the therapist, how does the therapist know when a client is ready for termination? I have not seen this topic frequently addressed in Nordoff-Robbins music therapy. Given the lengthy treatment periods of some clients in NRMT, it seems to be a vital theoretical and practical issue for the model.

The second group of implications has to do with the differences between referential and non-referential improvisations. In Analytical Music Therapy (AMT), therapists use both of these types, for different purposes. While referential improvisations are used to explore certain specific ideas, non-referential ones are often used to give a kind of "baseline" impression of a client's natural, undefended musical self. They are also used to help verbally "blocked" or defended clients to "loosen up." By contrast, in NRMT, nearly all improvisations are non-

referential. The differences between referential and non-referential improvisations have both practical and theoretical implications.

On the practical or clinical side, both types of improvisations offer useful ways for therapists to work with and observe their clients. The participants in this study tended to relate to the referential improvisations in a very direct way, and found it easy to connect their process and the sounds that resulted to the idea they intended to express. They usually had more insightful comments with referential improvisations. These results suggest to me that musically untrained people may be able to understand and connect with improvisations better when they play to a referent. What is the relationship of this result to clinical practice?

In some forms of music therapy, especially those based on psychodynamic models, "insight" is an important goal area, especially for adult clients. While a thorough discussion of goals for all forms of improvisational music therapy goes beyond the scope of this study, we can consider the issue in the context of the research questions. If an important goal of improvisational music therapy with adults (that is, adults without severe cognitive limitations) is to help them to gain insight of some kind, then it seems important to include referential improvisations in therapy.

On a more theoretical level, the topic of referential vs. non-referential improvisations brings up significant issues within improvisational music therapy in general, and in NRMT in specific. Because some forms of improvisational music therapy are partly based on theories with nonmusical origins, their clinical goals are easier to define, and are usually related to the theories on which they are based.

The goals in AMT, for example, have to do with freeing clients' inner psychic energy, removing emotional blocks, and other areas from psychoanalytic theory. AMT was clearly developed with the needs of both adults and children in mind. By contrast, NRMT was originally developed for children and their needs, and the theoretical basis and clinical goals of NRMT with adult clients are not yet clear. It would be of great benefit to the NRMT community to explore and develop this basis so as to determine what type of adult clients it is best suited for. This would be a substantial step in the development of the approach.

A third implication is a little thornier, and has to do with the relationship between music and other media (e.g., language). This is pertinent because of the more natural relationship between referential improvisations and talk. In this study, the referential improvisations were easy for participants to "grasp," regardless of musical skill. The non-referential ones were harder for them to talk about, and harder for them to understand. The meaning that the participants tended to glean from improvisations (especially referential improvisations) was not musical, but nonmusical.

The fourth implication is about connecting music to verbal meaning. As we have seen, different forms of improvisational music therapy have varying relationships with nonmusical media (e.g., talk). For example, in AMT, therapists move back and forth between music and talk in sessions. They acknowledge that while music is separate and different from other forms of expression, it is possible to establish relationships between them, and for clients to perceive these relationships. In other words, an improvisation does not point to itself, but beyond itself. In NRMT, by contrast, improvisations seem to be purely self-referential. Certainly it is impossible to capture the *true essence* of music in words or other media, but it is easy to recognize *similarities* between music and other things. If music is only self-referential, it is very

difficult to determine what improvisations mean beyond themselves (i.e., clinically). Finally, to avoid making this connection is to shirk one of the basic responsibilities of being a music *therapist*.

## Implications for Research

### *Research Paradigm and Design*

In the introduction section, I wrote about an earlier pilot study that I carried out (Keith, 2002). In that study, I did not include musical analysis of the improvisations. Comparing that study to this one, it is clear that the musical analysis revealed very different things than the verbal methods of meaning-making. While both types of meaning-making (verbal methods and musical analysis) were valuable, the combination of both types seemed to enrich the results substantially. They also made this research more complicated. The complications lay in the dual perspectives that were required when including both types of analysis. It was possible to discern regularities in the way people made meaning of improvisations verbally. However, the way people made meaning *in* the music was so idiosyncratic that a much more interpretive perspective was needed. Doing verbal and/or musical analysis throughout a qualitative study is bound to have effects on the study itself, because they reveal a great deal about both participants and researcher and the way they interact, both verbally and musically. Such effects seem necessary and true to qualitative research requirements.

### *Participants and Data-Gathering*

The original plans for this study included working with clients in music therapy, but circumstances made this impossible. Working with community members had several effects on the study; one had to do with the number of times I could meet with them, and another had to do with the "participant pool."

Working with clients would have been more naturalistic. For example, data-gathering would not necessarily have been limited to one session. Perhaps more importantly, using research participants limited the range of people available. In the original conceptualization, I would have had a rather diverse group of clients (many ethnic groups, wide range of socioeconomic status, etc.), the participants available for the study were relatively uniform. Future studies would benefit by including a broader spectrum of people.

The data gathered in this study were of two types: verbal and musical. Thus it was important to include both media in the introductory section of each session. Changes in the way I gathered verbal data were discussed in the method section of this report, but future studies may explore differences in the way musical data are gathered. For example, a future researcher may want to consider having participants complete the improvisations in a different order, perhaps over several meetings. Holding more than one session, and thus gathering more data about each person, would likely shift the study in the direction of positivism and away from hermeneutics.

## Future research

The findings and the process of this research study suggest several potential future research topics. In particular, I would like to see more studies using the Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) (Bruscia, 1987). An interesting study might consist of comparing the IAP results to those using traditional musical analysis of an improvisation from NRMT. Another idea would involve analyzing both solo and duo improvisations in NRMT using the IAPs. Both of these could move toward positivism, in order to answer questions such as "which type of musical analysis reveals more accurate information about the client?" and "what is the effect of the therapist's music on the music of the client?"

# CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relative value of various methods of making meaning of improvisations in music therapy. Participants created six improvisations of various types: solo, duo, referential, and non-referential. Each improvisation was subjected to four methods of meaning-making: participant journals, researcher journals, discussion, and musical analysis. Verbal materials were transcribed and subjected to qualitative text analysis, and the musical data were analyzed using the Improvisation Assessment Profiles.

Several important findings emerged from the study. These were related to the ways the participants made sense of their improvisations, the types of improvisations and their usefulness, the use of words, and the use of musical analysis.

Adults without musical training found it easier to make sense of the process they went through in improvising music than to make sense of the sounds themselves. In particular, it was easiest for them to understand referential improvisations. Implications deriving from this include that asking clients to make sense of the music itself—i.e., musical meaning—may not be a fruitful undertaking, and that including both referential and non-referential improvisations may be important with adult clients.

During duo improvisations, adults without musical training seem to be strongly affected by the playing of the therapist, often playing in a more stable or structured manner. Therapists should be aware of the effects of their own music on the jointly produced improvisation, both while improvising, and while analyzing the music.

Talking with adults about improvisations often leads to new ideas and thoughts, especially following referential improvisations. Therapists who do not discuss improvisations with their clients thus miss out on a potential source of information about the clients. Therapists who refuse, for whatever reason, to talk with their verbal clients about the music, may be shirking the responsibility of deriving clinical—as opposed to purely musical—meaning from the improvisations.

Finally, countertransference is implicated in every decision that therapists make, from the types of improvisations they choose, the clients they work with, and the way they listen to their clients improvise. When therapists are aware of this, and acknowledge it, they may be able to work past its potential negative effects, and to use it in a positive way, when appropriate.

When we do not acknowledge the possible effects of countertransference, we may be unnecessarily limiting the quality of our clinical work.

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# APPENDIX 1

## Coding System for Verbal Results

*Layer One: Component of the Improvisation*

The first layer refers to the components of the improvisation: the experience of playing (process), the music itself (object), and responses to listening to the recorded improvisation (heard). In addition to these three components, a fourth category on this layer is "tangent."

- Improvisation as PROCESS. Feelings, thoughts, actions, reactions, observations, or intentions. For example, "My life is very rich in different kinds of experiences and people. Therefore I chose to use the other instruments."

- Improvisation as OBJECT. Comments that refer to the outcome or musical product, for example, "This music sounded like many phases in his life, or the many things he does in life."

- Improvisation as HEARD. Comments about feelings, thoughts, reactions, images, wishes, or responses as a listener. For example:

  DK: Any impressions while you listen?
  PART: Happy.

- TANGENT. Comments related to something outside of the process or object of improvisation. For example:

  *"People who are my friends, and people I enjoy being with, are very different from each other. They're so different that my husband's cousin said 'I don't understand how you can be friends with so many different kinds of people!'"*

*Layer Two: Type of Data*

The second layer describes the type of data in the segment, and includes sub-groups that describe the data more exactly.

- Nonreferential: about music in general, including elements of music. For example: "Tonally grounded"

- Referential: about the improvisation in relation to something else. For example, "I was trying to express serenity, calm, peaceful feeling"

*Layer Three: Level of Analysis*

The third layer has to do with the level of analysis represented in the code.

- Descriptive: any description of what happened, what was observed. For example, "She played the xylophone."
- Analytic: Comments that go beyond what was heard or observed and suggest connections or explanations. For example, "It was faster than the first section."
- Intuitive: Comments representing spontaneous responses to the music or the experience of playing. For example, "It was like running away."
- Evaluative: any comment on the quality of the music. For example, "I don't think it sounded good."
- Narrative: stories, for example, "It reminded me of when my son and I went to the play one evening…"
- Connector: significant connections, insights that occur between an improvisation and something else. For example,

> DK: *That's really interesting. I felt like in order to be him, I had to not listen to you. And the time you're talking about—the wave sound—when you were running your palm across the drum, for some reason…I felt like you were following me sometimes, and I didn't want that. But then I must have stopped for a second. I heard you do something different, and I wanted to go with you. When I can hear you, I will follow you.*
> PART: *That would be very appropriate*.

- Reason: explanations given for insights, awareness, instruments chosen, things that happen during an improvisation. For example, "Oh, it sounds that way because I always play like that."

*Layer Four: Content*

- The fourth layer specifies the content of the code. Examples would include self, music, playing, title, session, connecting, and similar.