The Use of Music in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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Those fortunate enough to have had a close relationship with the late Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, probably had their personality played by him on the piano. Dreikurs (1953a) often preferred the medium of music as a means of communicating with individuals and groups. Outlining his rationale for this preference, Dreikurs (1953a) suggested that

> Communication through music does not provoke defense mechanisms. It eliminates any reference to areas of friction which are almost automatically touched as soon as words are used; the question of being right, of knowing more, of agreeing or disagreeing—all these controversial potentialities of verbal communication are absent in musical communication. Music links and does not divide. These qualities inherent in music make it an ideal medium for social integration. (p. 19)

It would appear that Dreikurs thought music could act as a meaningful agent in counseling or psychotherapy. Specifically, Dreikurs (1953a) believed that two basic effects of music on a therapy group are possible. First, music can unite the group and provide each member with a sense of belongingness as they participate in making or listening to music. The resulting group cohesion thereby increases the social interest of the group members and their ability to cooperate with others. Secondly, the effect of music on a therapy group sets an emotional climate for purposeful group activity. The therapeutic outcome of this process can be one of instilling inner order for the group members. Dreikurs (1953b) believed such an outcome was possible since harmony and rhythm represent order which tends to be internalized by group members as they participate in activities such as group signing or rhythm bands.

Based on the work of Dreikurs, it would appear that there are numerous opportunities to use music in counseling or psychotherapy. Other researchers have traced the use of music to biblical accounts such as David tranquilizing Saul with the aid of a lyre (Diephouse, 1969). However, throughout the history of music therapy, there have been limited systematic guidelines set forth which practitioners can use to implement the medium of

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music in counseling or psychotherapy. This paper sets forth how music may be integrated into counseling or psychotherapy. Three steps towards this goal are suggested, and a practical example is given.

The Three Phases of Music in Counseling or Psychotherapy

The creative self of an individual is the nucleus of that individual's personality from which all movements are generated (Adler, 1956). In order for the counselor to facilitate growth in the client it is necessary to make contact with this central dimension of the personality—the creative self. It would seem that the creative self could be experienced and shared most directly through involvement in a creative expression. For the reasons stated earlier, music would appear to be the medium of choice for contacting the client's creative self and entering into the therapeutic process. The following three phases provide guidelines for the counselor to use to contact the client's creative self so therapy can proceed.

1. **Set the stage.** The counselor should have different music media available for the client and counselor to use. This can be done formally or informally. Formally, the counselor could have various types of musical material on hand in the interview room. Tables could display such uncomplicated rhythm instruments as bongo drums, rattles, bells, and cymbals. More complicated musical instruments could be included as available in this repertoire, such as guitars, banjos, or a piano. The counselor might informally "set the stage" in a number of ways: (a) The counselor could ask the client if she/he has any creative outlets (preferably in the music medium) which she/he would like to bring to the next counseling session. (b) The counselor could mention that she/he has a musical instrument or piece of music that she/he would like to bring to the next counseling session. (c) On some occasions, such as in university counseling centers, clients will have just come from a music lesson and will therefore have their instruments with them. In such a case the counselor could take advantage of the situation by asking the client if she/he would mind making up a song.

2. **Set an example.** Once the creative material is made available in the interview room (formally or informally), the counselor will often have to "set an example" by initiating movement in the direction of a musical experience. This can be accomplished in at least three possible ways: (a) The counselor can engage in a creative expression and thereby set a model for the client. (b) The counselor can encourage the client to engage in a creative outlet (e.g., play the musical instrument she/he brought). (c) The counselor and client can agree to produce a musical expression together. Regardless of what procedure the counselor chooses to use, she/he should in no way upstage the client's creative expression by putting his needs before the client's.

3. **Set yourself at ease.** The final phase of the musical experience is focused on musical and spiritual appreciation. By avoiding a judgmental

attitude towards the creative expression (e.g., good song—bad song), the counselor is free (of the subject-object "I-it" dichotomy) to transcend with the client's creative forces to the experience of oneness with the client and perhaps the cosmos (Dreikurs, Note 1). By becoming at one with the client through the counselor's and perhaps client's self-transcendence, a spiritual appreciation is established. This appreciation may serve as a bond in the therapeutic relationship. The experience of oneness is also akin to Adler's (1956) notion of "feeling with the whole of life" which the Ansbachers (Adler, 1956) noted was the direction-giving goal of social interest. A musical experience of this type would seem to enhance social interest as Dreikurs (1953a) suggested.

Case Study

The following case study can illustrate how these three phases can be implemented in the counseling and psychotherapy process:

1. **Set the stage.** John was a 21-year-old male student who came to a University Counseling Center, because he was feeling unable to relate meaningfully with his peers.

I spent the first 40 minutes of the session in the traditional role of the Adlerian counselor. This process basically involved my trying to develop an understanding of John's life style so that his mistaken goals could be identified and reoriented towards the useful side of life (Adler, Note 2).

The helping process seemed to break down at this point. John was very reluctant to clearly express himself. This made it difficult for me to understand his life style well enough for any reorientation process. Worse than our lack of understanding of each other was our lack of feeling for each other. I realized that if our relationship did not reach a deeper level, John would probably not return for a second counseling interview. I therefore decided to try a musical experience with him in the hope that the music medium would be less threatening for us to reach out to each other. Fortunately, I was able to "set the stage" informally by noting that since John had just come from a music class, he had his trumpet with him.

2. **Set an example.** Once the creative outlet was identified, I proceeded to "set an example" by encouraging John to engage in a musical expression. In an effort to encourage John's self-expression, I made the following statements:

> We've been talking for close to an hour, and I get the feeling that neither of us knows each other much better than when we started. (John nodded.)
>
> One way that I have found personally helpful in getting to know myself and others better is to share in some form of musical expression. I noticed that you brought your trumpet, and I was wondering if you would mind making up a song?

Naturally John was a bit curious about the unorthodox turn the counseling session was taking. He asked several questions about the purpose of his playing for me, etc. I reiterated that I found sharing in a musical expression to be a meaningful way to bring communication to a more intimate level. I offered to bring my guitar to the next counseling session so that we could participate in a musical session together (I prefer to think of such activities as a "counseling duet"). With this encouragement, John was willing to play his trumpet for me.

3. **Set yourself at ease.** As John made up a song ("jammed") on his trumpet, I sat back and attempted to enter into the state of "no mind" (Watts, Note 3). This state occurred for me as I meditatively avoided trying to analyze the song as good or bad and thereby avoided the subject-object (I-it) dichotomy. In so doing, John and I had the opportunity to transcend to the level of oneness with each other and perhaps even the cosmos.

Therapeutic Value of Music in Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

After John finished playing his trumpet, it became apparent that two important therapeutic processes had resulted. First, John and I stated that we felt as if we had encountered each other in an intimate way. An existential relationship seemed to have been established. Secondly, John began to talk more about his social relationships. The transcendental (oneness) experience between John and myself that resulted from the musical expression could have activated his social interest. With this increase in social interest, it is not surprising that John began discussing his social relationships.

With John and myself engaged in a more meaningful relationship and John moving in the direction of increased social interest, the climate was set for productive Adlerian psychotherapy to proceed. It was at this stage of the therapy process that I tried to obtain a more phenomenological understanding of John's life style so that his "real" concerns could be worked through.

I was able to obtain a phenomenological picture of how John viewed his world by having him reflect on the musical expression that he had shared with me. This reflection was structured by my asking him the following two questions: "Could you describe yourself in terms of the song you just made up?" and "What does that song say about you?" As John described himself in terms of the song he had played on the trumpet, he mentioned that he played a lot of minor notes. I then asked, "And what does that say about you?" John went on to mention that he felt he was playing a lot of minor roles in his interpersonal relationships and was in a general "bluesey" mood. I responded by saying that I had also felt the "blues" as he played the trumpet, and would like to know more about these feelings. As the session progressed, John described that for him, having the blues meant that he felt inadequate in many interpersonal situations. With his help I was able to identify this general concern with various mistaken ideas he had operated on during specific

interpersonal relationships. Through cognitive restructuring, he was able to reorientate these ideas to the useful side of life.

Throughout this place of the counseling session, John had described himself basically through his musical expression. In doing so, he projected himself through his creative self—the nucleus of the personality from which all movements generate (Adler, 1956). I thereby obtained an authentic phenomenological picture of John's world.

Adlerian psychotherapy continued over a two-month period with about half of the sessions involving music (i.e., either John, myself, or John and I participating in a musical expression via the three phases set forth in this paper).

The case was terminated when John thought that he had resolved his major concern (i.e., being able to formulate a close relationship). I then followed up on his progress during the next several weeks at weekly intervals. During this period, John reported that he no longer was feeling inadequate in his interpersonal relationships. It appeared that John had become involved in a meaningful relationship with several members of a musical combo. With John's increased social interest, it appeared he was on his way to a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to establish three specific phases that a practitioner could follow to implement the medium of music into counseling and psychotherapy. These three phases do not require the practitioner or client to have any musical background, since anyone can become part of a musical expression (e.g., tap some rhythm on a bongo drum). The suggested procedures have also been applied to clients as young as 5 years old with similar results to those reported within the present paper.

Additional research will have to be done to determine the precise effects of music in counseling and psychotherapy.

Reference Notes

1. Dreikurs, R. The dynamics of music therapy. Noted that the "X Factor" still seemed to exist, creating a mystical connection between music and the cosmos, 1953a.

2. Adler, A. *Superiority and social interest.* The useless side of life is described by Adler as a narcissistic rather than altruistic orientation, 1956.

3. Watts, A. *The way of man.* Described "no mind" as a state of consciousness that does not actively search for novelty. The concept originated from the writings of Zen Buddhism.

References

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