

The Psychoanalysis of Music Improvisation: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that clinicians use music, either as music therapy or as an adjunct to talk therapy, in providing treatment to patients with a history of trauma, ones struggling with depression and anxiety, as well as in treating patients whose diseases have organic etiologies. However, the endopsychic structural permutations as the result of encountering music are understudied. The unique qualities of psychoanalysis mean researchers can use it as a tool to study unconscious transmutations and processes. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to understand the endopsychic structure changes during and after music improvisation based on the subjective experiences of 20 adult individuals. The researcher used unstructured interviews. The results show that participants moved toward partial ego positions during improvisation and felt whole after the intense moments of improvisation that involved the experience of heightened emotions. The research result can help inform treating patients with an array of psychological disorders including personality disorders and eating disorders.

KEYWORDS: Endopsychic structure, improvisation, object relations, psychic splitting.

Music has been used as a treatment module for decades. Therapists use music in different types of treatment sessions including actively playing a musical instrument or even just listening to music because of its healing quality (Welch et al., 2020). Outcomes that arise from music therapy can be spanning and can decrease anxiety (Groarke et al., 2020) and depression (Tang et al., 2020), improve mood (de Witte et al., 2020), motor movements improvements in Parkinson's disease (Zhang et al, 2017), decrease of cortisol level (Tumuluri et al., 2017), and even stimulate appetite and impacts food choices (Biswas et al., 2019; Peng-Li et al., 2020).

Research often seeks to understand how music is interconnected with human physical and socioemotional needs. For example, research in social psychology elucidates the existing associations between an individual's predilection for music and one's identity (Xue, 2020) and music the person listens to and the person's facial expression (Kayser, 2017). However, these studies do not help illuminate the transmutations that transpire in the realm of the unconscious, and the repressed cathexis between part-objects and partial egos.

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Carl Jung believed that focusing on behavior solely leads to psychology without the psyche (Jones, 2013) and Jacques Lacan (1948/2006), considered the behaviorist view a reductionistic one. Thus, psychology without the psyche and dispelled of the considerations for the impacts of the unconscious is the corollary of the mere focus on the manifested behaviors, which, in turn, underpins an unassimilated characteristic in the subjective ego. In the latter lies the heart of the individual's story and the person's sense of continuity (Evers-Fahey, 2017). As symbolization belongs to the unconscious, psychoanalytic psychology focuses on the latter (Levy, 2019). Psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychology could provide a depiction of the endopsychic alterations and an understanding of psychodynamic and structural transmutations that result the therapeutic use of music.

Fairbairn's theory of endopsychic personality structure provides a foundation that can help understand how endopsychic structural permutations persist. This theory remains to be applicable today as it is one of the foundational perspectives on psychological processes (Celani, 2010) since not only does it appreciate environmental trauma but also it offers the depiction of one's psychological experiences as the individual strives to skew the inner representation of the external experience to adapt to it (Scharff, 1996). Fairbairn's theory consists of repressed part-objects and partial egos that are repressed, the exciting object-libidinal ego dyad, the rejecting object-internal saboteur dyad, and the ideal object-central ego dyad which is not repressed (Fairbairn, 1994b). Fairbairn suggested that structure and energy are interlinked and alterations in energy levels from repressed libidinal energy sources are what instigate structural transmutations (Fairbairn, 1994c).

One such energy level could be from music. The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of adults using one aspect of music to help explain the permutations in the endopsychic structure. Improvisation, the deviation from written notes during a song, was used as the energy level/ or point in time when change could occur. The expectation of this study was to find the possible peak of a musician's energy level and tie it into transmutations that may arise in the unconscious psyche. This can also explain how music therapy plays such a positive role in change, but more than that, it could provide yet another tool to use in a clinical setting.

Methods

A qualitative study was used for many reasons. First, the focus of the research was studying the experiences of musicians and qualitative research representativeness as a research criterion (Maxwell, 2005). Moreover, the qualitative research method allows for an emic stance and thus strives to discover the meaning hitherto covertly existing in the subjective experiences of individuals (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Finally, data collection in qualitative research is strikingly similar to the free association method in psychoanalysis whereby not only can the researcher elicit stories but also has the opportunity to remain attentive to how the subjects tell their stories and what parts they emphasize (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). In the practice of free association, the individual says whatever flows to one's mind abstaining from being selective or censoring oneself (De Mijolla, 2005). Unstructured interviews, very aligned with psychoanalytic free association and musical improvisation, were used to encourage stories through personal experiences. Maintaining an interpretive disposition in phenomenological research leads to a deeper comprehension of how one understands affecting experiences (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Moreover, in this case, the research was hermeneutical phenomenological qualitative research, which investigates the subjective experiences of the participants and interprets the participants' lived experiences (Guillen, 2019).

It should be noted that it is the quality of the data, rather than increasing its quantity, that is the aim of qualitative research. There are, however, several recommendations for the number of participants: four participants (Bu & Paré, 2018), three participants (Lauterbach, 2018), five participants (Ole & Sælør, 2018), four participants (Meystre, 2012), and fewer than 10 (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The researcher interviewed participants recruited through convenience sampling and the investigator's Facebook direct contacts. These participants were at least 25 years old, had played one or more musical instruments for a minimum of a decade, had self-claimed improvisational skills, and consented to the interviews. The researcher implemented no delimitation for sex, sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, the genre of music, geographical location, maximum age, or musical instrument.

Each participant was provided with a written electronic informed consent prior to the interview and a verbal reconfirmation of the informed consent was obtained; at this time, everyone was made aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Immediately after transcribing the interviews, the researcher assigned code to the data to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The investigator saved all data on a Touch ID-protected laptop. The protocol and study were approved by the California Southern University IRB representative.

Significant statements play a prominent role in phenomenological qualitative research and the analysis of the collected data often leads to the manifestation of patterns (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). First, the researchers developed conceptual categories associated with research questions. Afterward, the researcher assigned some descriptors to each category based on the literature review and the initial reading of the interview transcripts. Then, the investigator reread the data with particular attention to the statements that attracted attention. The categories were color-coded and the researcher used the colors to categorize the data; this was followed by sorting quotations based on their color codes. The researcher followed a recursive process and did all the coding manually.

Bias exists in all research. Validity seeks to decrease these biases and substantiate the data. Credibility in qualitative research is the equivalent of validity in quantitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Working from a psychoanalytic and depth psychology standpoint the researcher's assumption was that every individual has a psyche, and the unconscious impacts the person in one way or another. The researcher acknowledged this by choice of the research title and also in the introductory part of each interview with the participants. Moreover, the unstructured interviews allowed for rich data. Furthermore, the Zoom interviews allowed for interviewing participants on various continents while the researcher remained open to all genres of music and musical instrument to avoid shaping the results based on the researchers' genre-specific assumptions.

Results

The results are based on the 20 unstructured interviews with the participants. As the aim was to understand the impacts of music improvisation on the endopsychic personality structure, as opposed to the possible impacts unique to a genre of music or playing a specific musical instrument, the researcher set no delimitations for genre or musical instrument. The investigator used manual hand-coding and used the recursive process of analysis delineated by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019).

Participants

There were 9 female and 11 male musicians that participated in the research. They lived in different countries: Australia (1), Canada (8), Iran (1), Northern Ireland (1), USA (9). The youngest participant was 38 and the oldest was 86: 3 between 30-39, 3 between 40-49, 1 between 50-59, 6 between 70-79, and 1 over 80 years old. 3 of the participants had two decades of experience, 3 had

three decades of experience, 1 had four decades of experience, 7 had five decades of experience, and 6 had six decades of experience. Some participants played more than one genre of music: American Roots (2), Blues (10), Bluegrass (4), Cajun music (1), Celtic music (2), Country music (3), Classical music (7), Dance music (3), Michigan and Southern style fiddle (1), Folk music (10), Gospels and Spirituals (2), Jazz and its subgenera (11), Latin music (2), Metal music (1), Persian traditional music (10), Pop (3), Ragtime (4), Rock including Alternative Rock, Instrumental Rock, and Progressive Rock (7), R & B including Rock and Roll and Rockabilly (3). Some musicians played more than one musical instrument: Accordion (1), Autoharp (1), Banjo (4), Bass (4), Cello (2), Clarinet (3), Drums (4), Flute and Recorder (4), French horn (1), Guitar (15), Hammer dulcimer (1), Harmonica (1), Mandolin (7), Percussion (2), Piano (10), Saxophone (2), Tanbur (1), Tar (1), Ukulele (5), Viola (1), Violin and Fiddle (4), Vocal (3).

Special Zone

When speaking about the subjective experience of improvising on tunes, the participants had positive associations with it, a significant number of participants described it as being in a special zone. Mu06 maintained it was a trance-like experience, “I’m in an absolute trance ... there's no anxiety at all ever.” Mu05 described what it meant to be in this zone:

When you're improvising, when you're playing music, you're not into memories that much ... you're in a certain zone ... you're so zeroed into what you're doing it's a kind of a bodily thing it's, it's not so very conscious it's kind of a bodily feeling, it's a feeling it's kind of when it's working you're not really thinking you are, it's very hard to describe ... it's a very happy feeling when it's working it's a very very very happy thing that you're feeling free and kind of oceanic and just at ease completely at ease with the world. You're not trying to do anything so much as it's just happening ... It's sort of as if you're not in the world so much, you're not in memories, you're not in your personal life, you're not in whatever problems or thoughts or whatever, whatever those things are occupying you at the moment.

This accompanies what Mu01 depicted as “a feeling of elation” and Mu04 described as a psychosomatic experience:

It just opens me up more to when I play, I feel my whole all my cells my body just feels better and I feel almost ecstatic, I guess is a good word, I and grounded is another word like I get, I get more in touch with being happy yeah being in a happy content state.

Separation and Anxiety

A significant number of participants maintained that improvising on some tunes evokes profound sadness, one they subjectively associate with the loss of the human relationship as ramifications of the demise of the loved one or other forms of separation. That which one subjectively perceives as trauma fragments the person’s psyche, hence one splits subjective perception of reality (Mészáros, 2018). Mu02 depicted a picture of this subjective experience of emotional shift:

The state of Michigan is as you know [is] the shape of a mitten and there used to be years ago fiddle jamborees in the state of Michigan and there were four of them, so the people who were organizing those jamborees living in the four different areas North, South, East, and West. They would divide the state of Michigan in half or in quarters and that's what, what this experience can, can do. It can divide these compartments that store all of those things. But when you get a time, when get such great sadness, it's like you're in a different compartment, but you got all of these other compartments to kind of hang on to you and let you go forward.

Moreover, inherent in these experiences for the participants were encountering the unknown. Mu16 deemed it to be animal-like and resembling “the challenges ... the road throws at you” and added, “you may change the position of your head and just, just like a wolf changes. Sometimes it becomes like very, very basic, very animal and instinctual.” To Mu11 improvising on a specific tune takes this person “to playing somebody across that threshold and dying with that tune ... watching this guy go to where we [do] not know.” However, to Mu13 the subjective experience of unpredictability and the anxiety embedded in it was the ramification of collective trauma:

That made me like play and cry at the same time and it was very, very heavy feelings because people that died on the streets, and like all those memories rushing to my head, and we never had the chance to deal with them because like, they happened so fast and then there was like, this oppression was like, full-on it was heavy, it was that was really heavy stuff!

Becoming Whole

A significant number of participants felt whole after the emotionally intense moments of improvisation. This is the description of Mu06's subjective experience:

[Improvising on special pieces] brings back memory, important memories that I, I remember slightly differently each time and it's important for me, it, for me, and it just process [es] 'cause I think it's happening you can't process; it's just happening! But later, with your wisdom and experiences and maturity, you view things differently. When look[ing] back and, and then to, to go back there ... it helps me understand it.

Mu14 described how this emotional process helped this person feel whole:

I find some sort of good feeling, the joy of being somewhere, as if being with someone and then coming back. Then, ... I can find comfort in that, the comfort that I probably do not necessarily have, have in [at] that moment to provide me with something. It's as if I go somewhere, if I can get something that I do not have at that moment, and then after that I, I, I feel I don't know why, I don't know, I can't say I feel as if, as if, it's as if I was born again so ... it's not an epiphany but ... it's like go [ing] somewhere and I come back, and come back I could get what I want, I was

missing where the path, some, something like that ... I feel maybe somehow fuller inside.

Discussion

Music therapy has been used for decades. It has treated a range of disorders and illnesses, from anxiety (Groarke et al., 2020) to failing memory in Alzheimer’s disease (Popa et al., 2021). That said, research has never investigated how music could be used to understand change in the psyche. This information could highlight ways to understand the transmutations in the world of internal objects and the repressed cathexis associated with them. As such, one major event was investigated—music improvisation—to see if this is one way that could bring about this type of change.

The results showed that the repressed cathexis became activated during the improvisational experiences; however, whether one cathexis become activated or the other fully depended on the experience of each participant. In other words, the subjective negative associations instigated the activation of the cathexis between the antilibidinal ego (internal saboteur) and the rejection object while the presence of positive associations entailed the activation of the cathexis between the libidinal ego and the exciting object. This information aligns with Fairbairn’s idea that there is a split in the ego (Fairbairn, 1994d) and the fact that it is the quality of split that varies from one person to another not its presence (Fairbairn, 1994c). Thereby, during these improvisational moments, the individual departs from the central ego position to swing toward one side or the other. Moreover, it becomes clear that the role of the object is important; for instance, one area provides the elation of connecting with the object in the special zone, and the other has an absence of the object that is the manifest experience, albeit in both cases the interactions are with part-object and as the result of hallucinatory psychic maneuvers. Hence, though subjectively real and perceived by the individual, they are not objectively real. The good object and the bad object are merely imaginary objects (Laplanche & Pontails, 1964/2010) and are referred to as the breast, the split off nourishing and persecutory aspects of the archaic mother (De Mijolla, 2005).

However, it needs to be iterated that in either case, it is a maneuver of hallucinatory psychic nature on the part of the individual to compensate for the unavailability of the original object for introjection by an attempt of incorporation (Gibeault, 2010). Thus, it is likely that the individual perpetually interacts with part-objects rather than the whole object. This is evident in the heightened emotional experiences of the participants on the one hand and the subjective experience of loss that they had on the other hand. The two reveal the existence of the cathexis between the libidinal ego and the existing object or the antilibidinal ego and the reacting object, respectively. The former, resulting from subjective positive associations, led to the individual’s heightened emotions and the experience of a special zone wherein one felt connected and grounded. The activation of the repressed cathexis between the internal saboteur and the rejecting object was the depiction of the opposite experience, nearly anxiety, fear of loss, and unpredictability. Once again, the presence of this fear betrays the truth about the unpredictability of the original environment and its failure because “the breakdown that is feared has already been” (Winnicott, 1964/2018, p.139; Winnicott, 1970/1987).

Finally, as a result of the abreaction during the improvisational moments the participants felt whole. The process evoked a reminder of the representations of the object they had originally interjected; a significant number of the participants retained these representations after the improvisation. In other words, the results showed that the participants managed to augment their internalization of the object. The integration of the two sides of the split leads to personality integration and Scharff (1996) believed other psychoanalysts like Guntrip, Sutherland, and

Winnicott all maintained the same position. This translates, utilizing Fairbairn's theory of endopsychic personality structure (Fairbairn, 1994c), that the energy becomes structure and thus the repressed cathexis becomes derepressed, which leads to a release of energy. Once the energy becomes structure, it adds to the structure of the central ego and the ideal object, the dyad that has never been repressed. Hence, it strengthens the observing ego.

Implications for Clinical Practice

Music therapy has been useful for many adverse outcomes, including mitigating pain and alleviating perturbing emotional experiences (Liang et al., 2021). More specifically, for people who are able to play music rather than simply listen to it, it has been shown to diminish the impacts of the trauma (Bensimon, 2021; Volkman, 1993), as well as decrease anxiety by impacting the level of subjective worry (de Witte et al., 2020), improve states of depression (Guo & Yu, 2020), and enhances the quality of interpersonal relationships in patients with Alzheimer disease, which leads to immediate benefits (Leggier et al., 2019).

This research also used music therapy for musicians in order to more fully understand how utilizing music structural changes that lie beneath the manifested symptoms. The results showed the corresponding permutations that transpire in the endopsychic personality structure. Thus, as music improvisation provides an opportunity for reconstructing the personality structure, the clinician can utilize improvisation to derepress either of the two repressed dyads. Whether the clinician asks the patient to improvise on a tune that the latter has negative or positive personal associations with depends on the profile of the patient, that is the personality structure, as well as where the patient is on the psychotherapy journey. For example, this type of treatment could be used with psychic disintegration in narcissistic personalities (Stark, 1994) and the repetition-compulsion inherent in the paranoid personality (McWilliams, 2011). Thus, a clinician can use music improvisation as a means to access the split and work toward the integration of the partial egos and part-objects with the patient.

Furthermore, the result of the research can help patients who have musical skills and are struggling with eating disorders: binge-eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa. The individual attempts to achieve the protective fusion, and this impels the person to pursue switching part-objects in the realm of fantasy (Lebovici, 1961/2010). However, as the object one interacts with is not the whole object, the individual uses displacement, unbeknownst to oneself. Hence, one interacts with the part-object other (Fairbairn, 1994a). Once the need is displaced onto milk or other food in adulthood (symbolic representing the content of the part-object orally devoured) the bingeing episode manifests itself; this is the ramification of the activation of the cathexis between the libidinal ego and the exciting object. The purging episode is the result of the swing and the activation of the cathexis between the internal saboteur and the rejecting object. More specifically, anorexia nervosa could be the result of fixation in the latter position. As one strives to quell the part-object, one deprives oneself of food. Here, depending on the activated cathexis, the clinician can ask the patient to improvise what the latter is experiencing; thereby, one sublimates the experience, rather than acting it out.

Finally, since the displacement of eating and mild to sex and breast, respectively, betray the truth about the analogical, metaphorical, and metonymic displacements (Gibeault, 2010), the findings of this research can also help patients struggling with sex addiction. This is because as the individual's need for the breast, psychoanalytic meaning, intensifies under pressure, the person with sex addiction chooses the anatomical breast or other body parts to incorporate the psychoanalytic breast, hence the compulsive sex addition episode. As with treating other patients, the choice of whether to ask the patient to improvise on a tune that the latter has positive or negative

associations with depends on the subjective emotional experience of the patient at the given moment.

Limitations

Every research has its limits. In this research, the researcher used Fairbairn's theory of endopsychic personality structure (Fairbairn, 1994b) to understand the subjective experiences of adult individuals and their corresponding endopsychic permutations. This is a theory developed in the English-speaking world used with participants well-versed in the Anglophone culture and despite the geographical variation in the participants' place of residency, these participants all spoke English as their first and only language or spoke English as their second language and were well-versed in the cultural lens of the English-speaking world. This is a limitation from a multicultural standpoint. Other theories could have provided a different foundation and subsequent knowledge. That said, transcription and translation are all possible issues that could arise during data collection and subsequent analysis. The research could have been improved by including more musicians of different levels, genders, and locations. Finally, it should be noted that the research team may have had personal biases towards results, as they were musicians as well.

Conclusion

This study provides illuminating information on the structural changes that transpire in the psyche as the result of music improvisation, regardless of the genre of music or the musical instrument. Thereby, the picture of the impact of the music on the psyche it provides surpasses the boundaries of the manifested behavioral alterations observable by bystanders and quantifiable neurological changes. The study showed improvisation instigates the activation of the repressed cathexis; hence, the individual moves toward one of the partial egos and begins interacting with its corresponding part-object. While the direction of the psychic maneuver depends on the subjective associations unique to each adult individual, implicit in it is a departure from the central ego position. However, the activation of the repressed cathexis led to the release of its energy; this energy changes the structure and augments the structure of the central ego, hence the feeling of being whole and calm by the participants. This endopsychic structural augmentation equates to enhanced emotional insight and a stronger observing ego. In other words, improvisation leads the split psyche toward integration, and the adult individual stronger central ego is the corollary of it. The results of this study can help clinicians in working with patients who have some musical skills, whether the clinicians provide music therapy or use music as an adjunct to talk therapy.

Future research could include phenomenological qualitative research interviewing children and teenagers as participants to understand the potential endopsychic transmutation that could potentially occur in other age groups as the result of playing improvisational music. Furthermore, future researchers could use other psychoanalytic theories like Carl Jung's transcendent function, and Jacques Lacan's Borromean knot with Imaginary, Real, and Symbolic. The latter would help researchers see if using theories developed outside the English-speaking world would show the same results and if they could reveal more information about the impacts of improvisation on the personality structure.

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