

Music therapy, regression and symbolic distance in substance abusers and their preferred music

Horesh, Tsvia

Introduction

I would like to open my paper with 2 quotes which I assume most of us music therapists would agree upon – that they validate our profession and strengthen our conviction that music is nurturing and beneficial to one's emotional, spiritual and physical well-being.

"Music is the harmony of the universe in microcosm; for this harmony is life itself; and in man, who is himself a microcosm of the universe, chords and discords are to be found in his pulse, in his heartbeat, his vibration, his rhythm and tone.

His health or sickness, his joy or displeasure show whether his life has music or not."(from the sufi message of Hazrat Inayat Khan <http://www.sufimessage.com/>)

"..There is something in music that keeps it as if at a distance even at the moment when taking us into its embrace. It is simultaneously absent outside us and yet it is an inner part of ourselves. Even though it shakes us profoundly it is all the time under our control. It leads us forward but for some reason we never lose control." (Copland 1952 in Lehtonen K. 2002)

Dangerous music

In contradiction to the above quotes, I would like to tell you about dangerous music. Many of my clients, and the people whom I interviewed for my research thesis – all recovering substance abusers - speak about their music as an important component in their lives. Many of them say "music is my life"; but the music in their lives does not reflect the positive aspects mentioned in Inayat Khan's message. The music in their lives has played, for some of them, a significant part in their self-destructive, obsessive behavior. Their lives – and the music in their lives – are not harmonious. Many claim to have lost control over their emotions and behavior after listening to music. Regarding Copland's quote, one of them said: "... he sure wasn't talking about us addicts when he said that – I certainly do lose control when I listen to some kinds of music...".

The treatment centre

FIGURE 1. Ramot-Yehuda - Zoharim therapeutic community, in Israel



My clients are substance abusers, addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, undergoing an inpatient treatment program over years in the Ramot-Yehuda - Zoharim therapeutic community, in Israel. Men and women, aged 19-50, with a history of drug abuse lasting between 2 to 30 or even 40 years. The majority have lived a life of crime and spent time in prison. Many come from multi-problem families, with a history of various addictions and life in crime-ridden neighborhoods. About half of our clients are Jewish, Israeli born, second or third generation descendants of immigrants from Arab countries. 40% of our clients are immigrants from the former Soviet Union, living in Israel for 17 years or less. 10 % are Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship.

The basic ideology of the therapeutic community is one of inclusive, drug-free, therapeutic care for the addict, as an individual and as a member of society. This ideology is based on the assumption that drug dependency is a mix of educational, psycho-social, medical, emotional, spiritual and psychological factors, all of which must be addressed by treatment. It incorporates both psychodynamic and behavior-modification methods in an effort to relate to the complexity of the issues of addiction.

The work with clients and their experiences

Over 12 years that I have been working as a music therapist with substance abusers, I have come to the conclusion that it is important to investigate the quality of the relationship many of them form with their music – whether it is electronic music, Pink Floyd or Um Kulthum. The music, in therapy, then changes from being a means – to becoming the goal. In our music therapy groups we listen together to music from the clients' childhood, adolescence, and drug-abusing years. We validate and contain

the emotions, memories and life stories the music evokes. We discuss, negotiate and re-evaluate their relationship with the music. For many of the people these sessions enable them, for the first time, to examine their relationship with their music – the soundtrack of their lives - in the secure and containing environment of the group. This is a chance to observe how the music defines their personal, social and ethnic identity; how they use music in their daily lives; how their music relates to their drug abuse and what dangers or risks it holds for them. The final stage is to discover how music can function, as an integral part of their recovery, and as a source of relaxation, joy and well-being.

My incentive to research this issue was to uncover and understand the many faceted meanings that music has in my clients' lives. I was driven to understand the different forces I felt were lurking behind this phenomena. My qualitative research project was conducted as an M.A. research student in the Hebrew University, and was based upon the analysis of 8 narrative interviews, with addicts who had participated in my music therapy groups in the 2 therapeutic communities I worked in.

2 CASES

I would like to share with you the stories of some of my informants and my understanding of some of the psychological and social aspects of their relationship with their music. I would like to stress that in the interviews, it was not always clear whether the informant was talking about listening to music under the influence of drugs, or during periods of abstinence. Due to the limited scope of the research, only one interview was held with each informant, so I did not have the opportunity to clear up this issue.

Let's jump straight into the stormy waters of music- listening as an act of self-abuse.

Eli. Eli was 20 years old when we met. He is a 3rd generation descendant of immigrants from Morocco. His drugs of choice were mainly cannabis, L.S.D, and Cocaine. He was a great lover of music – and was, as he said, addicted to 2 very different kinds of music. Trance music was what he listened to when high on psychedelics, at home or at outdoor rave parties. When feeling down, depressed, under the influence of cannabis, he preferred listening to the king of Israeli middle eastern music – Zohar Argov.

Song title: How long, my God; Singer: Zohar Argov Music: Traditional Turkish Turkish Lyrics Uzi Hitman

This is a song of despair and loneliness. It tells of a recluse, abandoned by his lover. He calls out to God, begging for an answer - how long will he still be alone?

The performer of this song, Zohar Argov, himself a heroin addict, committed suicide while in jail. In his songs, he voices the pain of the lonely and betrayed. The music is typical middle eastern, the singing style nasal with mellismatic embellishments.

This is what Eli said, about his feelings when listening to this song: "...I would put this song on...I mean, it's not enough that you're listening to Zohar, and you're on grass, and you're under house arrest, and the song says: "Shut in, all by myself, can't leave my house"...I mean, you can go crazy... it's like I enjoyed suffering, it was like masochistic. I don't know what to call it – it was like hurting myself on purpose, hitting myself when I felt bad. " Later on he said: "I had to release what I felt so I listened to all those songs that told about guys like me, where he really sings about what he feels..."

Hanna. Hanna, 28 yrs. old, poly-drug and alcohol abuser, spoke about her dangerous music. She saw a clear connection between the music she listened to during her drug and alcohol abusing years, and the self-abuse

she inflicted upon herself: "...I used to have the earphones on me 25 hours a day... There were situations where some of the music I listened to seemed to attack me...all the harm I did to myself – was with the music. It was during drugs, and depression and alcohol...I listened to that music and it was as if somebody was sitting and talking to me...and saying that everything is wrong and bad and there's no point in living. there are lots of songs like that ...I don't think that I would have had the guts to hurt myself the way I did, without that music...there's that song by "the witches": waking up in the morning and hating yourself. I really loved that song. It was just right for me"

Song title: Waking up in the morning and hating yourself

Music and lyrics: Inbal Perlmutter

Performed by Inbal Perlmutter and The Witches

The song describes situations of oblivion, of ways to escape emotions: drinking, smoking, disappearing, sleeping. It is a sarcastic manifest of hate and avoidance of love and feelings. The music is harsh and repetitive, the solo female singer's voice reflects the cynical atmosphere. In the chorus, other female voices join in to repeat the name of the song, in an almost childish style of singing.

How can we understand this self-abusive behavior, where Eli, Hanna and other addicts purposely choose to listen to music that they know would cause them emotional pain and distress?

Psychoanalytical discourses on music listening, specifically Kohut and Levarie, described the

"oceanic feeling one may achieve by listening to music. The listener and the music become "one" emotionally. The ecstatic listener does not clearly differentiate between himself and the outside world – he experiences the sounds as being produced by himself...emotionally they are what he feels." " the ability to **regress to this early ego state, while at the same time preserv-**

ing the complicated ego functions required to recognize and master the influx of organized sound, is the prerequisite for the enjoyment of music" (Kohut & Levarie, 1950)

Regression and symbolic distance

Both Eli and Hanna spoke about a regressive experience while listening to their music; the almost total absence of boundaries between themselves and the music, complete identification with the songs' textual and musical messages. What they seem to be lacking are the complicated ego functions mentioned above.

The symbolic distance that Copland spoke about – seems not to exist for these people. The music **does not** function as a transitional phenomenon, aimed at keeping the traumatic memories and associations, aroused by the music, at a safe distance. It seems that some times, the music is the raw emotion itself – and not a symbol of the emotion. The music IS the trauma, the original pain, the abyss, the anger – and the only reality one can perceive.

The question is – why do these people lack this symbolic distance which enables other people to enjoy emotionally arousing music?

Further research is needed to explore this issue. I can hypothesize that the reason is a joining of many components, of which I will relate to 2:

1. the bio-chemical and neurological effects of the drugs they took, some of which cancel the natural perception barriers of the brain and bring about sensory overload.
2. the psychological dysfunction displayed by addicts. This dysfunction is partly the result of the drug abuse. It seems that some aspects of personality disorders apparent in addicts' behavior have developed secondarily as a consequence of substance abuse, whereas others are primary and stem from the interaction of early developmental wounds and experiences, with biological predisposition. (Kaufman 1994).

In people with borderline personality disorders, self abusive behavior occurs, paradoxically, in situations of fear from pain, caused by an outside agent. When someone hurts him or herself – or listens to painful music – they control the situation. They are in charge of when the pain occurs and how hard it will be – as opposed to former traumas they have experienced. I cannot say whether my informants, or my clients in general, are borderline personalities, but many, for sure, are post traumatic at some level.

Listening to music as an act of self-abuse is but one of the many functions music has for my informants. Because of the scope of this paper, I can only briefly mention other functions:

Music as a high risk cue for drug and alcohol abuse: music is often an inseparable component of the drug experience. As one of my informants said: " my drugs and music went together – I never used drugs without listening to music, and never listened to music without being on drugs". An important part of treatment is to learn to recognize these high risk cues.

Music as a vehicle to other realms - to fantasy, as a means of emotional escape from an oppressing or unsatisfying reality;:

"...the music lets me escape to a different world, a better one"

Nostalgic music that brings up memories of other times and places – an especially strong issue for those immigrants who are far away from their childhood surroundings and culture;

Music as a cultural symbol – many people define their identity by way of the music they listen to. Sub-cultures and ethnic groups have their own

music. Among my clients, many friendships are made - or broken – on the basis of the music the people listen to. Music can define social territories and boundaries.

Conclusion

We have seen that for many addicts, music has a powerful destructive potential. It can be abused, as drugs are. It can be misused and lead into a vicious circle of dependency and self-destructiveness. But music has the potential to heal.

I believe that by achieving a deeper understanding of the relationships addicts form with music, we can assist them in discovering more of their inner selves as manifested in their music. By rehabilitating their music-listening habits, they can begin to incorporate music into their lives as a source of enjoyment and enrichment.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Horesh, Tsvia CMT

Ramot Yehuda Zoharim Therapeutic Community

Israel

Horesh.tsvia@gmail.com

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