

COMMENTARY

A commentary on “Integrative perspectives on mindfulness, music and music therapy: A literature review” (Hwang)

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This commentary is in response to Hwang’s article “Integrative perspectives on mindfulness, music and music therapy: A literature review” which was published in August 2021 in Approaches. The concept of mindfulness is rooted in Eastern philosophical and religious traditions, particularly Buddhism. Its practice focuses on being in the present, with a non-judgemental attitude to ones thoughts. Chogyam Trungpa described it simply as, “making friends with yourself” (Trungpa & Gimian, 2016).

For many decades now, mindfulness and other Eastern philosophical traditions have been applied to the growing world of ‘wellbeing’ in the West. While research into such integration is still in its early stages, there is a growing evidence base for its effectiveness, particularly within psychotherapy and psychology. The Academic Mindfulness Interest Group (2006) noted such benefits to include: pain management, decrease in mood disturbance and stress, improvement in quality of life and a reduction in anxiety and depression,

Music and health related disciplines have developed over the last century, resulting in a wide range of practices. Coupled with the notion that mindfulness and spiritual practices have long been connected to music and sound, it is not surprising that there has been an intersection of mindfulness and arts-based therapy (and other arts and wellbeing work). Rappaport (2014) edited a comprehensive book on mindfulness and the art therapies, which covered the context of mindfulness, its integration into practice, the approaches involved and its application in education and training. Additionally, Hanser (2016) wrote about music therapy in the context of integrative health, including the spiritual aspect of one’s experience of health.

In Hwang's article, there is a recognition of the growing interest in interdisciplinary wellbeing work and the need to reflect, not only on the dissemination of research outcomes, but on the theoretical frameworks and perspectives that are involved in the integration of mindfulness into music and health practices.

Hwang begins by highlighting the prevalence of Mindfulness Based Practices (MBP) in healthcare, and in particular music and healthcare work – this includes but is not limited to music therapy. The outline of the existing literature is organised into various categories which is helpful in understanding the approaches influencing how people working in music and health fields integrate MBP into their practices. The majority of studies, particularly where music therapists utilise aspects of MBP in practice, have highlighted why combining MBP and music/health practices may be beneficial. However, I have noted that few have discussed the therapist's relationship to the broad notion and practice of mindfulness, the theoretical implication of integrating it into practice, and the resulting methodological choices in relevant research.

In interdisciplinary work, in relation to the literature gap I have noted, practices and techniques can sometimes be pulled from one disciplinary practice to another with little consideration of the ontological or theoretical origins. Instead, an emphasis is placed on evidence from research that has deemed particular practices and techniques as effective. As a music therapist myself, with a focus on sociological and ethnography-inspired research, I tend to critically consider the effects of 'boxing up' music into interventions. As a keen amateur in meditation, I have the same wonderments towards mindfulness. As a complex practice that is integrated differently into each individual's day-to-day life, what may be the effects of seeing such a concept as an intervention - or a model to be used as an add on to an existing practice?

In Hwang's review of the research undertaken in mindfulness and music therapy, it is clear that both mindfulness, music and the combination of the two have often been studied as interventions with a set duration. The methodological approaches vary from qualitative, to quantitative, to mixed method and theoretical based studies, but, as previously mentioned, very few of these articles mention the theoretical underpinnings of the chosen methods of research.

The described methods in Hwang's review mostly involve post-practice retrieval of effects (e.g., interview, questionnaire, scales, inventories) and I am left wondering about the practices of music, music therapy and mindfulness and how they are enacted by people to garner such effects. As DeNora and Ansdell (2017), suggest, focus is needed on the 'black box' of how music 'gets into' action (p.231). I would argue this is also needed for mindfulness and its application within music and health practices.

Hwang begins to address this by focusing on particular types of methods within music therapy (namely within a psychodynamic approach), such as Guided Imagery and Music (GIM). The processes involved in GIM are outlined and then compared to those involved in meditation practices of mindfulness:

When adopting the principle of mindfulness within GIM, processes such as a dynamic process can be observed in a mindfulness way – focusing moment by moment, being non-judgmental, having non-attachment and letting go. (Hwang, 2021, p. 12)

Described in this way, mindfulness is not broken down into an intervention and applied in GIM practice, but instead music and people's engagement with music is seen as inherently mindful – or a natural practice of mindfulness.

In the second half of presenting the results, Hwang has started to unpick aspects of mindfulness and such spiritual practices that seem to align with music therapy and music-health work (here and now, letting go, non-self, nonattachment, nonjudgemental). This is a helpful step in understanding how people may view and use these concepts in practice. In a study of spirituality and music therapy, Tsiris (2018) first developed a knowledge base around people's understanding of spirituality and its place within their work – this inspired a further study as to how spirituality is actually enacted within practice, in situ.

Hwang finishes the article with a call for knowledge development on the themes already pulled out through this literature review. I believe further unpicking the themes inherent in mindfulness practice is a helpful step towards a greater understanding of how mindfulness, music and therapy may be theoretically and practically aligned.

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