

How Cultural Background Affects Music Therapy

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Music and culture are very familiar topics to human beings. Music originates from culture and every culture has a unique music style. Since ancient times music is always around us and develops human life better in a certain way. Now the world connects with each other so fast and shares culture very easily so the modern culture does not have clear boundaries like western and eastern. However, clients background culture affects treatment processing in music therapy.

Keywords: music, culture, music background, music therapy

Introduction

Nowadays, modern society has so many stresses that humans focus on mental health more and more. Psychotherapy is not a special thing anymore; it is common for human needs. We can see many psychotherapy services around us and we have many therapists with different methods. There is not only counseling but also art therapy, music therapy, drama therapy, etc. We have diverse therapy forms. Especially creative art therapy has developed very fast and gets more attention. These creative art therapies are affected by many elements: background, education, language, etc. In music therapy, a client's cultural background is very important factor for treatment processing.

Culture Background and Folk Music

"All music is folk music" (Blacking, 1973, p. x). Where music comes from and how it affects our society are an important topic. I believe that music comes from the country's own culture and society. Music and culture are very coherent because every culture affects their music. In many kinds of cultural music, all people can enjoy the music without possessing skills in music theory.

Actually, folk music is from people, not from certain musicians. Also, some kinds of songs have been transmitted orally throughout generations, so for some music, the composer is unknown. When we grow up in a culture, we can sing children's songs and other songs naturally. Our body remembers our culture's traditional habits and music from our ancestors, so our body feels one's own culture stronger than that of the others, meaning that the body automatically reacts to the traditional music beat because it is used to its own music. For example, Korea's culture is based on Confucianism, so we do not express our emotions or feelings externally. We had a lot of restrictions in past generations and our culture still upholds some of these concepts (Park, 2008). My body also remembers my culture and music. I found it very difficult and strange when I first tried to play the piano in certain rhythms and genres such as Arabic music, blues, and jazz. My body did not accept the feeling of such

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different rhythms the first time I tried. Even though I could play the scale, it did not sound completely authentic. Park (2008) explains in her article that folk songs develop from environment and culture. Korean folk songs originate from our agrarian period, so many of our folk songs were sung when people were working in the ordinary field (Lim, 2006). It was hard for them to express individual emotion, but they sang together and shared music together. These shared experiences brought a lot of cohesiveness to these groups of people. Two unique aspects of Korean music are that we use the pentatonic scale and our songs follow breathing. I think our folk songs demonstrate groove because everybody breathes and moves together. Also, our folk songs are very simple but they do express how social pressures emotionally affect us. When participating in Diane Austin's vocal holding (Austin, 2008), I felt that the technique allowed me to express myself more deeply than when I was simply playing music. This was because it just used two simple chords while singing a melody. But it overlapped with Korean musical structure and mood, so it was easy to match my feelings and my whole body. It also made me feel more comfortable and open. "Music can make people more aware of feelings that they have experienced, or partly experienced, by reinforcing, narrowing or expanding their consciousness in a variety of ways" (Blacking, 1973, p. 108).

Music Background and Therapeutic Approach

As previously mentioned, Korean music uses the pentatonic scale and is not used in a decorative sense to be heard. I think this is because Korean music is not made for performing. Korean songs have unison melodies and use the pentatonic scale. I think these qualities are important to the character of our music. Our music is almost always played in unison. Even though many instruments are played at the same time with the same melodies, they have different sounds. Other types of music such as Latin and Jazz music are strongly based in groove and they do not have clear unison melodies among all of the instruments. I think that was why I could not identify the chords in these styles when I first heard them. I found the melodies before I could figure the chords out. I still found it hard to understand how other music therapist could know chords when they listened to music; it was not easy for me to identify them in the music at that time. Of course, I can learn to listen but many Koreans who do not have western music education base cannot hear chords as easily as western people.

I agree with Park's (2008) view that folk music not only reflects a culture's society and expresses people's emotions, but also affects the human body. That is why musical background affects people's understanding of music in different ways.

Music Therapy in Cast Study: Psychiatry Setting

It is important to consider our clients' cultural backgrounds in music therapy sessions. At the psychiatry unit in medical center where my fieldwork site was located, most patients were blacks and Hispanics. We had a patient, T, who was a Jewish woman. She loved music and music was the best way for her to connect to others. She did not like listening to music in group sessions because many of the other patients chose to listen to jazz, hip-hop, and reggae. She did not enjoy the music and she did not move to it like the other patients did. I think that because she had a totally different background than the other clients, she was not engaged in the session in the same way that the other clients were. She said that listening to jazz or hip-hop gave her a headache. I played "You Raise Me Up" by Secret Garden in one of her individual sessions, and she was very engaged while listening to that song. That song is based on an Irish folk song. The song's melody, rhythm, and mood affected her physically and emotionally. Maybe this was because the song was similar to the music from her culture. Blacking (1973) believes

that “the structure and function of music may be related to basic human drives and to the biological need to maintain a balance among them” (p. 100). I believe that when we perform a music therapy session with a client, we deal with the client’s cultural background and it is a very important point. If my client is from an Asian country such as China or Korea, I will use the pentatonic scale in their music session to try to connect to them. This is first step with client giving them a safe feeling with familiar music in the therapy session.

Music Therapy in Cast Study: Special Education Setting

What is the cultural background for autism? It is hard to tell if autistic children can understand culture because they have difficulties with social interactions and therefore have difficulty fitting into society. Therefore, an autistic child’s cultural background is more based in their family background. Autistic children live in their own world and if they come out from their world, the first environment is family (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006). Music therapy with an autistic child awakens the child’s awareness through music. Autistic children connect to instruments and music first, and then they connect to the therapist through the music. After that, they may be able to connect to other people (Alvin, 1991). I think that when we try to connect to a child, we can use a source from the child’s musical background or their family’s cultural background.

At my other fieldwork site, a special education kindergarten, the children were on the higher functioning end of the autistic spectrum. I observed J, who was eight years old and had behavior problems. J had problems in his music sessions. He often threw instruments and could not stop moving around in his chair. However, when the music therapist sang “Let It Be” by the Beatles, he became more focused and sang the song with the therapist very nicely. My supervisor said J’s family listened to music from the seventies in his home so that is why he knew the song and sang along. This case showed me how a therapist could connect to a client through a particular song that was from the client’s family background. I believe we can start treatment from this place of connection. I think that the child’s family background can give a therapist a key to the kind of music a client can relate to. It can really help a therapist in establishing their relationship with the client. Therefore, understanding a client’s family background and their musical culture is the first step in understanding the client.

An autistic child’s family background is often about the relationship with their parents. If an autistic child’s parents care for music or if music has an important place in their home, sometimes music can create a bond between the parents and child (Alvin, 1991). Also “The parents’ attitude towards music is a factor in the quality of autistic children’s relationship with the music therapist” (p. 111). I think that music can allow children to connect to their family and this could help them connect to other people through music. I believe that music and culture are related to each other.

For example, one of my clients, T, lives with her single mom and three siblings. Her older sister is a typical child but other children all have special needs. T is on the low functioning autistic spectrum disorder. She can speak, but not like typical children. Her mom works full time, so the children are with a babysitter at home. The babysitter sings children’s songs with the children in their home and the children play the games based on the concept of school. This is why she knows many children’s song, and she asks the teacher to sing her favorite song. However, T does not play any instruments in her music sessions and she just wants to sing songs. I think she sings children’s songs with her siblings or listens to them a lot with her babysitter. She is isolated in the music session when I play the piano. But she is totally engaged and responds to me when I sing children’s songs that she knows. In the beginning of the semester, she did not have any reaction when I played the piano and did not sing lyrics. When I played the piano in the rhythm, tempo, and feel of children’s songs, she focused on the piano

and then played with me. I believe that the “tonal experience is related to people” (Blacking, 1973, p. 99), so using the tempo and rhythm typical of children’s songs helped her relate to me. It helped us connect and establish our relationship. I believe that incorporating a child’s family music background is key in connecting during a music therapy session.

Conclusion

Therefore, when we want to understand different clients, we have to understand their society and culture first (Cho, 2006). For example, when I had listened to Jewish music, it made me feel sad because it was in a minor key. In Korean culture, minor key music is always sad and I also believe most Asian culture too. However, after having learned more about Jewish music, I realized that music in a minor key is not always a sad tempo or mood. Jewish music is based on minor chord with upbeat rhythm and there is mostly singing with family to celebrate some their event and holiday. It is totally different mood of music which Asians do not experience. I think we can use this concept in music therapy sessions. We need to understand not only clients’ diagnosis or symptom but also their music background and culture. Additionally, it gives us the key to how we provide a safe space for our clients and build relationship going through their familiar music.

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