An Artful Process: Developing an Arts-Based Research Methodology for Analyzing GIM Sessions

Carolyn Arnason, DA; RP; MTA Fellow, Association for Music and Imagery
Associate Professor, Music Therapy
Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

The purpose of this arts-based research study is to implement a methodology that I, as the principal researcher, developed for interpretively analyzing participants’ therapeutic and musical processes in GIM sessions (the Helen Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music). The methodology emerged organically from a client’s long term process in GIM. The study is collaborative in that both participants and the principal researcher will use the methodology to explore their respective experience of GIM sessions, and each will interpretively analyze the data. A guiding research question is: How do reflexive practices affect the intersubjective experience of a GIM process? Steps in the methodology were crafted from reflexive practices used in GIM sessions and sources for data analysis will include: journaling, session transcripts, music improvisation, poetry (imagery poems), visual art (Mandalas), and listening to music. This research is influenced by the theoretical frameworks of alchemical symbolism, the transcendent function, liminality, and intersubjectivity. The study aims to enhance participants’ self-awareness and knowledge of the safe and effective use of self, which will potentially be beneficial for their professional work as clinicians as well as their self-development.

Keywords: arts-based research; GIM; improvisation; intersubjectivity; alchemy

Romanysyn (2013) affirms that “research is a vocation. A researcher is called into a work, claimed by it...chosen by a work...” (p. 320). The practice of GIM (the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music) calls on our courage to enter into mystery and it requires an equal partner with which to study such dynamic, sensory, and emotion-laden processes. Arts-based research (ABR) is well suited to be this partner since GIM practice goes beyond mere physicality and ego functioning to imaginal spaces and transpersonal realms less familiar to ordinary consciousness. In ABR, the researcher can use artistic and musical tools for developing a topic, formulating research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and representing research findings (Viega & Forinash, 2016). There is creative potential to uncover conscious and unconscious processes in the therapeutic process through spontaneous music improvisation and reflective art making (Seabrook & Arnason, 2010).

The value of a deeply reflective, experiential process is evident in Bruscia’s (1995) heuristic study where he explored his modes of consciousness as therapist through analyzing the transcript of one GIM session. In reference to Bruscia’s study, Kenny (1998) underlines the power of images for understanding “what is meaningful and real” about the human condition (pp. 210-211). Schenstead (2012) created a reflexive and self-interrogative method “of analyzing artistic data [that] encourages the researcher to ask various questions to her/himself and interact with the data by creating intuitive arts as responses to internal dialogue and feelings” (Abstract). Levine (2009) advocates for easing the tension between image (imagination) and word (thoughts). In order to conduct imaginative research we need, as researchers, to involve ourselves “in what we interrogate...we confront the work with our own being, in a passionate encounter in which it speaks to us in a way that shatters our preconceptions” (p. 158). Absolon (2011)
emphasizes that *Self is central to the search* and research is a process of *coming into the knowing*. Rossiter (2007) reframes the use of self as subjectivity; “this concept of self complicates the use of self by asking us to interrogate our responses in light of our social selves...such a use of self facilities greater possibility for respectful recognition, and thus orients practice in justice” (p. 31).

There are theoretical frameworks that influence my GIM clinical work as well as the development of this arts-based research methodology: alchemical symbolism, the transcendent function [individuation], and liminality. Schwartz-Salant (1998) states that “alchemical thinking is metaphorical and neither/nor is its focus...Rather than seeking the differences between things, alchemy searches for the connections. Relatedness, no causality is alchemy’s focus” (p. 17). The transcendent function is a central concept in Carl Jung’s theoretical framework and “the essence of the transcendent function is a confrontation of opposites, one from consciousness and one from the unconscious, from which emerges some new position or perspective” (Miller, 2004, p. 4). There is a close connection between liminality and the transcendent function as “liminality is the archetypal wellspring from which the transcendent function emerges” (Miller, 2004, p. 106).

There are notable intersections between ABR and GIM. ABR is an integrative process with the flexibility to accommodate multilayered consciousness. Data analysis procedures integral to ABR allow the researcher as artist to be true to their art, which, in the context of this study is music-centred psychotherapy. Viega (2016) points out: “…the aesthetic knowledge revealed within ABR can bring new understandings of musical processes in therapy and allow the complexities of social phenomena relevant to music therapy be seen via artistic engagement and performance” (para.11).

ABR has the creative power to uncover conscious as well as unconscious dynamics through images. Images are the data generated by artistic modalities. Imagery has the creative power to represent the real more fully and truly. The imaginal world reveals realities that can be analyzed and the imagination becomes an agent of unfolding research findings. Levine (2009) encourages researchers to find *an imaginative, energetic way of thinking* when analyzing data communicated through images. Related to the imaginal world, Prendergast (2009) writes that poetic inquiry:

> is a way of knowing through poetic language and devices; metaphor, lyric, rhythm, imagery, emotion, attention, wide-awakeness, opening to the world, self-revelation...a means to communicate experiences of memory, identity, place, relationality, hope, fear and /or desire. (pp. 562-563)

The purpose of this research study is to implement an arts-based methodology that was developed from a client’s long-term GIM process with myself as therapist. The emotional intensity, plus the amount of material being generated in this work were reasons why I felt the need for an artistic procedures to process, distill, and better understand the intersubjective process. I believe in the role of multilayered consciousness within the research process and acknowledging the role of unconscious dynamics in data analysis. But, for this to happen consciously, we require procedures.

This methodology provides a framework with which to encounter, explore, and understand the music-imagery process. The steps in the methodology are crafted from reflexive practices used in GIM practice; poetry, music improvisation, embodied listening, journaling, Mandalas, verbal processing, and/or expressive movement. The research approach is collaborative and aesthetic in that clients/participants and the therapist/researcher will explore their intersubjective musical experience of the GIM process.

The research questions will likely evolve. The initial questions are:

1. How do reflexive practices affect the intersubjective experience of a GIM process? [interacting musical selves]
2. What awarenesses emerge from analyzing a GIM process with artistic, musical modalities? [music-centred experience]

3. How does the exploration of multilayered consciousness in a research context reshape worldviews and assumptions? [personal, professional relevance]

Participants

There will be 5-7 participants in this study. Participants will be invited because of their experience in GIM sessions and familiarity with the method or because they have expressed an interest in the GIM method and in using reflexive practices to analyze their experience.

Procedures

The approach in this study is collaborative in that participants and the principal researcher will both use the methodology to explore their intersubjective experience within GIM sessions, and each will contribute to analyzing the data. The steps in this methodology were crafted from reflexive practices used in GIM sessions and data analysis will include the intermodal study of: music improvisation, narratives (journaling), poetry (imagery poems), verbal processing, and visual art (Mandalas). A key element in the methodology is the process of creating, recording, and listening back to music improvisations. I believe that music improvisation as a reflexive practice is relevant for GIM practice to process and analyze the music-imaging experience. Improvisation is described as:

a field of experimentation where we may learn to transcend previous borders of freedom. It is a space of experience where processes of listening are expanded to the extent that there is nothing ‘wrong’ or without value. We find ourselves in a space emptied of experience where something more honest may come out of the hidden.

(Fritz Hegi, cited in Even Ruud, p. 97)

Participants will be asked to participate in five GIM sessions, plus one review session that focuses on verbal, musical, and artistic processing, for a total of six sessions. Each session will be 1.5 to 2 hours in length. As principal researcher, I will be the therapist guiding the GIM sessions. I will work with a clinical supervisor as well as a research assistant (2nd year Master of Music Therapy student). All sessions will be audiotaped for the purpose of data analysis and for recording the music improvisations.

GIM can feel like a spiral process and, therefore, the steps in this methodology do not have to be done sequentially. The right balance between the artistic-musical modalities is an emergent practice. Music improvisations can be done as often as needed. Music improvisation is featured in Step 1, but improvisations can be created as interludes between steps in the methodology, created in GIM sessions, e.g., during the Prelude or Postlude phases, and they can be created in response to imagery poems. For practical reasons, audio recording equipment and instruments should be accessible in order that technology becomes part of the experience. The overarching steps are outlined as follows:

- **Step 1: Centering.** Create a music improvisation to ready your mind and body for starting the process of analyzing GIM work, e.g., a particular session or part of a session). Start the recording device, allow silence, then create a short form improvisation (3-4 minutes). It is possible to do a Take 2 or Take 3 improvisation based on the first music improvisation (Take 1). These further takes can focus on emergent musical motives, images or be openly improvisatory, allowing whatever emerges. Make notes on this experience.
• **Step 2: Entering.** Listen to a recorded GIM session in order to re-experience the flow of imagery in response to the music. You have the option to follow the session transcript, or not while listening. If necessary, write down dialogue details that may be missing from the session transcript. Note your reasons for choosing this particular session or particular part of the music-imaging experience.

• **Steps 3 and 4: Highlighting and Shaping.** Highlight key imagery from a session transcript; new, thematic or evolving images. Intuitively combine these key images to create (shape) an Imagery Poem. You may want to note any connections between the music playing and key images in your poem. This process may take several “takes” to create a poem that communicates the message you are trying to illustrate.

Imagery poems distill and convey meaningful imagery in one’s process, e.g., memories, emotions, relationships, allies, paradoxes, breakthrough moments, meaningful themes. Here is an imagery poem that I created (as therapist) originating from the process of the client mentioned earlier in this paper:

**It Won’t Turn Black**
I can find my way even if it ends
I don’t have to be afraid, I can find my way for myself
The strings want me to be their friend, they need me
I can just be me, the strings can just be them
There will always be water, wind, notes, magic and it will never go black
I am the wind and it’s freeing, the power of letting go
I’m learning to see things differently
It will never end
It won’t turn black
(Session 43, Quiet Music)

• **Step 5: Musing.** Read your Imagery Poem(s) silently or out loud. Make notes on this experience. Create a music improvisation in response to the poem. The poem can also be recited during the improvisation or sung while improvising (improvised song writing). Alternatively, you can draw a mandala in response to the poem. At any point in this methodology, Mandalas can be created.

• **Step 6: Reflecting.** Write a narrative on the process so far, e.g., reflective or analytic memo, story, letter to self). You may wish to create a music improvisation with a particular intention (e.g., what stands out so far) or draw a Mandala. However, it is important at this stage to put your reflections into writing so as to anchor emerging thoughts and feelings.

**Concluding Remarks**
When writing this paper for these proceedings, I had not yet implemented this arts-based research study because I was still completing revisions for ethics approval from Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research Ethics Board. The study will be implemented during my 1-year Sabbatical Leave, which starts July 1, 2017.

**Address for Correspondence**
Carolyn Arnason, DA, RP, MTA
Faculty of Music, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada; Email: carboy@golden.net
References


