

HEARTBEAT RECORDINGS IN MUSIC THERAPY: A SEQUENTIAL-
EXPLANATORY MIXED METHODS STUDY

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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Heartbeat recording projects—the combination of a patient’s recorded heartbeat and a meaningful music recording—are becoming popular in music therapy practice. These projects can provide a meaningful representation of a patient’s identity, especially in the context of a legacy project when a patient is nearing death. Despite the appeal of heartbeat recordings, there is minimal research about how they are being used in clinical practice. This study used a sequential-explanatory mixed methods design to better understand the current practice, clinical use, potential barriers, and ethical implications of heartbeat recording projects in music therapy. An online survey was distributed to 8,962 board-certified music therapists. The survey data was collected and analyzed through Qualtrics and informed the questions for the semi-structured interview. Survey respondents with at least one year of experience using heartbeat recordings in music therapy were invited to participate in this interview. Of those who expressed interest, three survey respondents were selected to participate in the follow-up interviews, which provided opportunity to elaborate on the topics addressed by the initial survey based on informants’ personal experiences with heartbeat

recordings in music therapy. The final transcripts of the interviews were analyzed with a thematic analysis, and findings from the survey and interview data were applied to the initial research questions.

Results of this study indicated that while there may be some barriers to learning how to use the intervention, heartbeat recordings are nevertheless being used across all regions of the American Music Therapy Association in a variety of populations for a variety of clinical goals not limited to legacy work. The results of this study also suggest that music therapists must navigate a balance in the process and product, especially when desire for a product is high and patients are near end-of-life, and that music therapists can also be creative in their introduction and use of the intervention. Additionally, music therapists may need to consider difficult questions of copyright issues, cultural sensitivity, and how the heartbeat recording may act as a representation of a traumatic time. Music therapists may also need to provide education to administration or interdisciplinary teams before using the intervention. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide important information for board-certified music therapists interested in incorporating heartbeat recordings in music therapy into their clinical practice. Further research is recommended on topics related to the use of heartbeat recordings in music therapy, including the various uses of heartbeat recordings not limited to legacy work, the importance of rapport and a process-oriented approach, the non-musical product of the recording of the heartbeat alone, and the cultural appropriateness of heartbeat recordings.

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