

Bridging Medical Ethnomusicology and Music Therapy

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Abstract

This paper is inspired by the recent establishment of the subfield medical ethnomusicology in ethnomusicology and the increasing use of multicultural approaches in the practices of music therapy. Ethnomusicologists have done much research on the role of music in healing rituals and similarly music therapists are actively investigating music's healing power; yet, historically the two professions have not interacted or collaborated in the research of music and healing. The aims of this paper are to: 1) understand the causes for this lack of interaction and 2) explore how medical ethnomusicology and "ethnomusic therapy" (as proposed by music therapist Joseph Moreno) can contribute to healthcare oriented research and sciences.

This ethnographic project uses data from interviews, participant observation, and literature reviews collected between 2007 and 2010 and analyzes the objectives, terminology, and practices of medical ethnomusicologists and music therapists. The research suggests that music therapists are essentially clinicians who are largely interested in measurable, scientific evidence for the efficacy of music's healing power, and most reports of indigenous musical healing do not provide evidence of a quantifiable effect of music on healing. Ethnomusicologists, on the other hand, embrace the ethnographic and cultural elements of healing music and do not scientifically analyze the efficacy of music's healing power, at least not until the development of medical ethnomusicology. In addition, collaborations between music therapists and medical ethnomusicologists appear to be hindered by ethnocentrism, the obstacles of scientific research of indigenous musical healing, and the scarce funding of such research.

This research suggests that 1) future collaborations between ethnomusicology and music therapy will likely require some analysis of the efficacy of indigenous music traditions on physical or mental wellbeing and 2) ethnographic methods are indispensable for educating researchers about the emic experience of the indigenous healing traditions. This project hopes to bring medical ethnomusicology and indigenous musical healing traditions to the attention of healthcare professionals, and to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration for the benefit of the diverse patient populations in the United States. The author can be reached at bee1116@yahoo.com or mmchiang@umd.edu