

My Tune: Music therapy from OUR perspectives

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Music therapy (MT) is a scientific-artistic form of therapy and a therapeutic approach particularly well accepted by adolescents and young adults in the mental health sector. However, there is limited research on how young people perceive their therapy and how they reflect on their music therapy processes. Hence, in “My Tune“, an MT assistive tool for young adults was developed, (pre-) tested, and reviewed in a participatory process. The “My Tune“ tool enables service users to deepen and expand the reflection on their music therapy processes and provides structured proposals for accompanying the reflection processes for the music therapists. In this way, it is designed to help service users to become aware of their experiences and progress and to identify favorable conditions as well as challenges in their MT. In sum, the innovative aspects of this tool are that (1) it was co-developed by adolescent music therapy service users, a caregiver, and music therapists, that (2) service users actively co-determine and decide upon their reflection process(es) (what, when, how, with whom), that (3) young service users are empowered by increasing their agency in MT, and that (4) the “My Tune“ tool thereby enriches MT practice. Additionally, MT research benefited from the insights of developing, testing, and applying this MT tool in a participatory setting.

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1. Introduction

MT is a legally recognized health profession in Austria and according to the Music Therapy Act (MuthG, § 6, par. 1; translation by authors), music therapy is defined as an “independent, research-based, artistic, creative, and expression-promoting form of therapy”. It is particularly well accepted by adolescents and young adults; however, their opinions and experiences are underrepresented when it comes to the assessment, or evaluation of MT as well as research in MT [1]. There is a variety of reasons for this condition; in any case, it is due to general norms and hierarchies in society which also are reflected in MT research and clinical practice. The definitions of goals and methods for the evaluation of MT is mainly accredited to healthcare professionals and academic researchers and less to service users. These approaches focus on external views on MT and the experiences from those who are concerned most, namely the service users, remain hidden. In “My Tune – Music therapy from OUR perspectives”, we addressed this gap by innovatively reversing the perspective of MT evaluation and involved young adult service users, MT clinicians, and caregivers as co-researchers in the co-creative development and the testing of an MT evaluation tool [2,3,4].

2. Methods

For the whole project management as well as the project goal of developing and testing the innovative “My Tune” tool for MT reflection, we applied an as-yet little-used participatory research approach by engaging service users with their competencies, perspectives, perceptions, and experiences in co-leading positions and in a co-creative process. More precisely, young adult service users, MT clinicians, and caregivers were actively involved in the “My Tune” project in three different ways: (1) as co-leaders of the “My Tune” project together with two academic researchers, i.e., as the steering committee¹ over the course of the entire project, (2) as co-creators of the “My Tune” tool, and (3) as testing experts during the test phase of the “My Tune” tool. However, each of the various involvement roles as well as the different project phases required distinct forms of cooperation. The co-leaders met in in-person and online meetings and workshops regularly, to define next steps and individual tasks accordingly and to discuss and decide on possible techniques for the different purposes (e.g., co-creation workshops). Besides, the co-leaders also participated in the co-creative workshops together with the co-creation team for developing the “My Tune” tool prototype. The latter was developed within eight co-creation workshops that were held in different constellations including various techniques (e.g., participatory diagramming, brainstorming and mapping techniques using creative media) to follow an iterative development cycle of the tool by (i) defining the target group’s needs, (ii) determining the content of the tool appropriately, (iii) refining the phrasing of the text and jargon of language, and finally, (iv) evaluating the workshops’ results. In the next step, the prototype was tested. During the test phase the co-leaders collected the expert opinions from eight music therapists and seventeen young adult service users through three different feedback forms, that were developed by the co-leading team in advance, as well as from a focus group workshop held together with the testing music therapists. After some final revisions, the end version of the “My Tune” tool for MT reflection was finished.

¹ The steering committee comprised two young adults, two music therapists, and one caregiver.

3. Results

The results of the “My Tune“ project can be summarized in two core points: (1) the “My Tune“ tool for MT reflection and (2) a diverse collection of experiences from the participatory research processes over one year from young adult service users, MT clinicians, and caregivers from different involvement perspectives, as well as from the WZMF team. In these proceedings, we will focus on the “My Tune” tool and describe it in more detail, whereas the collection of experiences will be published in a separate article.

The “My Tune” tool (cf. Figure 1) consists of four main components: a handbook for music therapists, an information sheet for young adult service users, Part I (for service users and music therapists), and Part II (for service users exclusively). Part I again comprises various pieces, namely, printed cards with reflective questions and possible answers in different colors, a form for the music therapists to take notes on, and a wooden die to stimulate and/or support a playful approach to interactive MT reflection between therapist and service user. Part II contains a collection of reflective questions in the form of printed cards kept together by a ring that can be worked through by the service users on their own, completely self-determined. However, if wanted, alternatively or additionally, the service users can share their thoughts with their therapists.

The target topics of the reflection tool, as defined during the co-creation workshops, are the following: (1) young adult service users and their music in everyday life, (2) young adult service users and their music therapy, and (3) young adult service users and their music therapy in the context of their everyday lives. Related to these fields, the main purposes of the tool are to accompany the reflection on one’s own music therapy process, to stimulate the exchange between young adult service users and their music therapists, and importantly, to empower young adult service users by letting them decide if, when, where, what, how, and to what extent the tool is being used.

Additionally, the uniqueness of the tool is determined by the development of the “My Tune” tool *by* young adult service users – together with relevant persons in this context – *for* young adult service users.



Figure 1: The "My Tune" tool set including a handbook, an information sheet, Part I, and Part II

4. Discussion

From its processes and results, the “My Tune” project constitutes an example and learning experience how participatory research in the sense of co-leading and co-creation can be successfully carried out in the field of MT and how the project’s product can feed into MT practice. It thereby addresses the general request for greater user involvement in the health sector and delivers an outcome relevant for MT practice. A limitation of the project was the homogenous group of users in terms of their music therapy experience and their abilities. In that respect, the idea arose to develop the tool further to meet possible different needs of service users, e.g., in terms of their ability to use spoken language. Overall, the experiences from the “My Tune” project will feed into future participatory research activities at the WZMF and the “My Tune” tool is intended to be translated into other languages than German as well.

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