Ethics and Informed Consent Requirements for Publication of Music Therapy Research

Music therapy journals usually make statements about ethics and informed consent requirements for research that they will publish. This paper presents information related to ethics and informed consent, which music therapists need to consider when planning to do research. It also describes different types of research contexts and associated issues related to ethics and informed consent. The paper is aimed to encourage consideration about issues rather than be a definitive statement about what is needed for journals. Music therapy researchers are encouraged to approach journal editors to clarify any uncertainty related to whether proposed research would need ethics approval and participant informed consent for publication in their journal.

What is Music Therapy Research?
Music therapy research can be defined as “a systematic... inquiry which leads to a discovery or new insight, which when documented and disseminated, contributes to or modifies existing knowledge of practice” (Bruscia, 1998). Music therapy research stems from a number of philosophical perspectives; it utilizes a broad range of methodologies; and it asks diverse questions on theory, practice with varying populations, and professional issues. Depending on the topic, research may be collaborative with other disciplines, and take place within interdisciplinary research teams. Data can be collected from varied sources, including:

1. objective measures, such as physiological responses.
2. subjective measures, such as quality of life measures or a client’s statements of her/his experiences.
3. therapists’ or other observers’ interpretations of sessions.
4. therapeutic products (e.g., song lyrics; musical improvisations).
5. other relevant artifacts (e.g., music therapy texts; visual images).

If the research question is systematically examined through a research methodology, which is informed by a methodology already described in the music therapy or related academic literature, it can be described as research. Types of research being published in music therapy and allied refereed journals include:

1. Participants receive an intervention or control condition in a specific research design.
2. Participants receive an intervention in a pre-post-test design.
3. Qualitative analysis of experiential data (e.g., clients’ verbal description of music experiences or interviews with clients on their music experiences).
4. Participant health workers’ (including music therapists’ & students’) music therapy related reflections (e.g., in surveys, interviews, diaries), including about their own work.
5. Sole health worker’s, music therapist’s or student’s self-reflections about music therapy related phenomena, including their own work.
6. Retrospective audit (e.g., examining already collected music therapy reports).
7. Prospective audit (e.g., features of clients accepting music therapy).
8. Case series (e.g., interventions and outcomes for 3 children with Asperger’s syndrome).

**What is Informed Consent?**

Participants involved in research are usually required to be adequately informed about and consent to participating in the research. Ethics committees always request that research participants, if possible, read and sign a Participant Information and Consent Form or similar before participating in a study. Alternately, research committees may approve a situation whereby participants give “implied consent” after being informed of the study: their participation in the study signifies consent. When a potential research participant is unable to give informed consent, or is regarded as too vulnerable to give informed consent (e.g., a child or a person with late stage dementia), their guardians must give informed consent on their behalf. An assent form should also be written for anyone (e.g., the child or older adult) who is able to indicate willingness to participate, in language that they would understand. If an agency is involved in the study, a consent form also must be written for the agency.

When seeking informed consent Participant Information and Consent Forms (or Information Sheets when seeking implied consent) usually includes the following information: Introduction to and purpose of the research project; what research participation involves; its possible benefits and risks; a statement that research involvement is voluntary, that they can withdraw any time before their information is included in the analysis process, and that withdrawing from the research will not affect their future care; whether they will be informed about the study’s findings; what happens to their personal information which is obtained for the study; whether they can access this information, the research committee which has approved the study; and to whom they can express concerns about the research by phone or mail.

**What Does it Mean to get Ethics Approval for Research?**

Ethics Review Committees are called different things in different institutions (hospitals, schools, universities, etc) and countries. For example in Australian hospitals, they are called “Human Research and Ethics Committees” (HREC), and in the USA they are called “Institutional Review Boards” (IRB). Committees also can be established in universities to review studies in private practice or studies in countries without public or institution committees. These committees are established to approve, monitor, and review research in order to protect the welfare and rights of human research participants or people whose clinical records will be used for research, and the researchers themselves. Their purpose is to ensure that music therapy research is conducted ethically to minimize harm and maintain the welfare and rights of research participants and others whose clinical records are being examined, either with or without their permission. Ethics committees usually provide guidelines for how to submit research applications. Sometimes they have different guidelines for “high risk” and “low risk” research.

For some agencies and in some countries, the researchers also must take an on-line ethics course to be approved to complete the study. Examples of these courses are at the following sites: [http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php](http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php) or [https://www.citiprogram.org/Default.asp](https://www.citiprogram.org/Default.asp).

**Registering Clinical Trial**

In some countries (e.g., Australia, New Zealand), medical journals require that research trials (e.g., randomised controlled trials) submitted to their journal for publication have been pre-registered on a Register of Clinical Trials. While this is not required by any music therapy journals at present, those hoping to publish their music therapy research in a medical journal are advised to clarify whether this is a prerequisite of the journal in which they hope to publish their research. (For further information see: [http://www.who.int/ictrp/en](http://www.who.int/ictrp/en))
When Should I Seek Ethics Approval for my Research?
Music therapists are advised to ensure that they have obtained all necessary ethics approvals that their organization requires, and also that the journals they hope to publish in require before beginning their research.

What if the Ethics Committee or its Chairperson, or My Manager Says, I Don’t Need Ethics Approval or Informed Consent?
Even if an ethics committee or its chairperson states that ethics approval or informed consent is not needed for a specific research project, a journal editor may still require a letter from the ethics committee or its chairperson who stated this when the article is submitted for publication. It is therefore advisable to get this information in a written form, from the ethics committee or its chairperson, before commencing the research.

What Happens when the Organization associated with the Research does not have an Ethics Committee?
In some international clinical and community music therapy contexts, ethics committees are not available. In such instances, a manager may give permission for the research to be conducted. This may or may not be acceptable to various journal editors, and will likely depend on the type of research. Furthermore, journal ethics requirements may alter over time. If in doubt about individual journal requirements, music therapists should approach the journal editors to explain their anticipated research and clarify the situation.

It is advised that music therapists working in these contexts help to establish research and ethics committees to oversee music therapy research. Local health authorities may be able to assist.1

Is Ethics Approval Needed for Research on Music Therapists’ Perspectives?
When research is conducted on music therapists’ or students’ professional perspectives, ethics approval may or may not be required. Signed consent also may or may not be required when the music therapists are collaborating as participant-researchers. Again, when planning this kind of research, music therapists are advised to obtain all necessary approvals that their clinical or community contexts require, and approvals, information, or letters that the journals in which they want to publish require. It is important to remember that there is a potential risk for clients to be implicated when music therapists and students examine their own clinical reflections.

What are “Case Series” and “Case Report,” and are they Research?
Many music therapy articles include case “vignettes,” or “studies,” that is, descriptions and discussions of work with clients. It is important to consider whether these descriptions/discussions are regarded as “research” in your clinical context and whether ethics approval is required to present them. A case series is a research method that describes patients (or clients) with a similar condition or conditions, the intervention experienced, and the outcome, usually followed by a related discussion. A case report is the same kind of research method, except usually only one patient or client is examined.

Collecting information from a medical history or other kind of client record, with the intention of publishing or presenting the information in a scholastic context (journal, book chapter, conference), meets the criteria of research. It is advised that music therapists consult their organizations’ ethics committees, managers, and journal editors about whether ethics approval is needed for case series and case reports intended for scholastic presentation and publication.

Are Clinical Audits/Program Evaluations Research?
In some organizations music therapists are encouraged to conduct internal audits or program evaluations to improve the quality of their services within their organization. In Australia this is commonly called a “quality assurance” activity. Music therapists may conduct audits on retrospective information (e.g., collecting and analyzing already written music therapy reports) or prospective information (e.g., collecting and examining demographic features of clients who accept music therapy). While these

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1 The American Psychological Association Committee of Psychology Teachers at Community Colleges created a document to help college staff establish their own IRBs. Their document and its links may also assist: http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/undergrad/ptacc/institutional-review-board.aspx#
audits also can be regarded as research they may proceed without prior approval from an ethics committee. This can be a problem, however, if the music therapist auditor/researcher wishes to submit the findings for publication, as some journals will only publish some kinds of research if it has ethics approval. Music therapists who anticipate that they may want to publish these kinds of findings, or present them at a public scholarly meeting, are encouraged to get ethics approval for their “audit” work, or a written statement that the work does not need ethics approval from an appropriate authority in their organization.

How do I get Ethics Approval for Research in Private Practice?
If you are enrolled in a university research program, the university may have an ethics committee. Other options include seeking approval from the ethics committee of your professional music therapy association (if it has one), or seeking a research partnership with a colleague or university supervisor affiliated with an organization that has an ethics committee that can approve the study.

Do Various Journals Have Different Ethical Requirements for Publishing Research?
Music therapy journal ethics submission and informed consent requirements, where available, can be found in the links listed in Table 1. Music Therapy Journal Editors seem to consistently agree that research and ethics committee consent is required for research trials and qualitative research involving research participants who receive a music therapy or music and medicine intervention. Journal policies may reflect standards associated with inclusion in respected databases (e.g., MEDLINE, PsycINFO, CINAHL). Some journals may require that studies meet standards of international quality assurance systems, such as CONSORT, which stands for “Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials.” CONSORT aims to reduce problems in the reports of randomized controlled trials. Further information, including a checklist and a flow chart, can be found at: http://www.consort-statement.org/. Other statements applicable to qualitative and mixed methods research are also available, e.g., Slige & colleagues’ EPICURE (Qual Health Res October 2009 vol. 19 no. 10 1504-1516) and Ken Aigen’s guidelines for publishing qualitative research (Nordic Journal of Music Therapy 21(2): 109-110). These statements can be found in short form at http://voices.no/?q=epicure (Slige et al.) and http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08098131.2012.685274 (Aigen).

The WFMT respects all music therapy journals’ editorial policies and encourages ongoing dialogue and reflection about what is appropriate to ensure ethical and viable research practice.

Final Notes
Music therapy conference committees also are increasingly requesting that authors specify whether proposed research presentations have ethics approval from approved authorities.

In research journal articles and conference presentations, the WFMT recommends that music therapy researchers always state: (a) whether their studies have received ethical approval; (b) whether and how participant consent was obtained; or (c) the authority that said that either of the aforementioned were not required.

References

2 In most biomedical journals, authors of research on human participants must state whether the study had ethics approval and how participant consent was obtained. This is the case even with de-identified “audit type” research. Ethics committees, however, can approve research on patient records, which does not require patient consent. [Further information about rationales for biomedical ethics requirements can be found at: Schröter, Plowman, Hutchings, & Gonzalez, (2006).]

3 Databases contain citations and summaries of peer-reviewed journal articles and, sometimes, books chapters, books, and theses related to an academic field.
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*If you are an editor of a music therapy journal not listed here, please contact the Chair of the WFMT Research and Ethics Commission so that your journal may be included.*