

Notes that nurture

Songwriting and recording is providing a breakthrough in helping patients with eating disorders to express their emotional state

Tina Broad

When Katrina McFerran left her clinical work as a music therapist with the Centre for Adolescent Health at Melbourne’s Royal Children’s Hospital she had some powerful songs ringing in her head. The lyricists were all young women with eating disorders who had been hospitalised.

She had spent the last few years sitting by bedsides, talking to troubled adolescents about music, about the songs they loved to listen to and why. Under her gentle guidance, these young people – mostly girls between the ages of 13 and 18 – had expressed themselves through song, writing about their lives in the musical genre of their choice, recording their songs on CD and, in the process, helping the centre’s multidisciplinary team uncover clues as to how each patient had come to this point and how best to tailor treatment.

Now a lecturer in music therapy at the University of Melbourne, Dr Katrina McFerran has just presented the results of a study analysing the lyrics of songs by 14 of these patients, to the 2nd Asia Pacific Eating Disorders Congress in Melbourne. She conducted the study, *A lyric analysis of songs written by adolescent patients with disordered eating*, with Dr Felicity Baker, co-ordinator of music therapy training at the University of Queensland.

The study was undertaken as a clinical audit, to inform the centre’s future music therapy programs for patients with eating disorders.

“We know that adolescent girls regard songs as having an incredibly important function in society,” says McFerran.



Katrina McFerran

“Their musical choices at this age are highly informed and they do have a kind of soundtrack to their lives which is, for them, a strong part of their identity. I always found them to be incredibly responsive to encouragements to express their emotions through songwriting.”

When she was working in the hospital setting with patients, McFerran worked with a guitar or, most often, with a programmable digital keyboard. “I’d say: ‘what’s it going to be? House? Rock? Pop? Hip–Hop?’ They would identify

their genre of choice and we’d go from there. Sometimes they would sing their lyrics, or they would accompany me if I sang for them. We would record to minidisk then download to CD. They would be very excited about the process of making a CD. It was important for them that the process culminated in such a tangible way.”

Fast-forward to McFerran’s new role in academia and her desire to turn her former clinical work with patients with disordered eating into published research to advance the music therapy cause.

Once she’d decided on a content analysis of patients’ songs, she developed a categorisation system which had been applied to similar studies (collaborator, Baker, had recently used category ratings in a lyric analysis of songs by patients with brain injury). McFerran and Baker came up with six areas over which to rate each song’s content. These would help determine how each of the songs explored issues such as identity, relationships, insights into the disorder, emotional expression, aspirations and even how the patient was accessing support for her disorder.

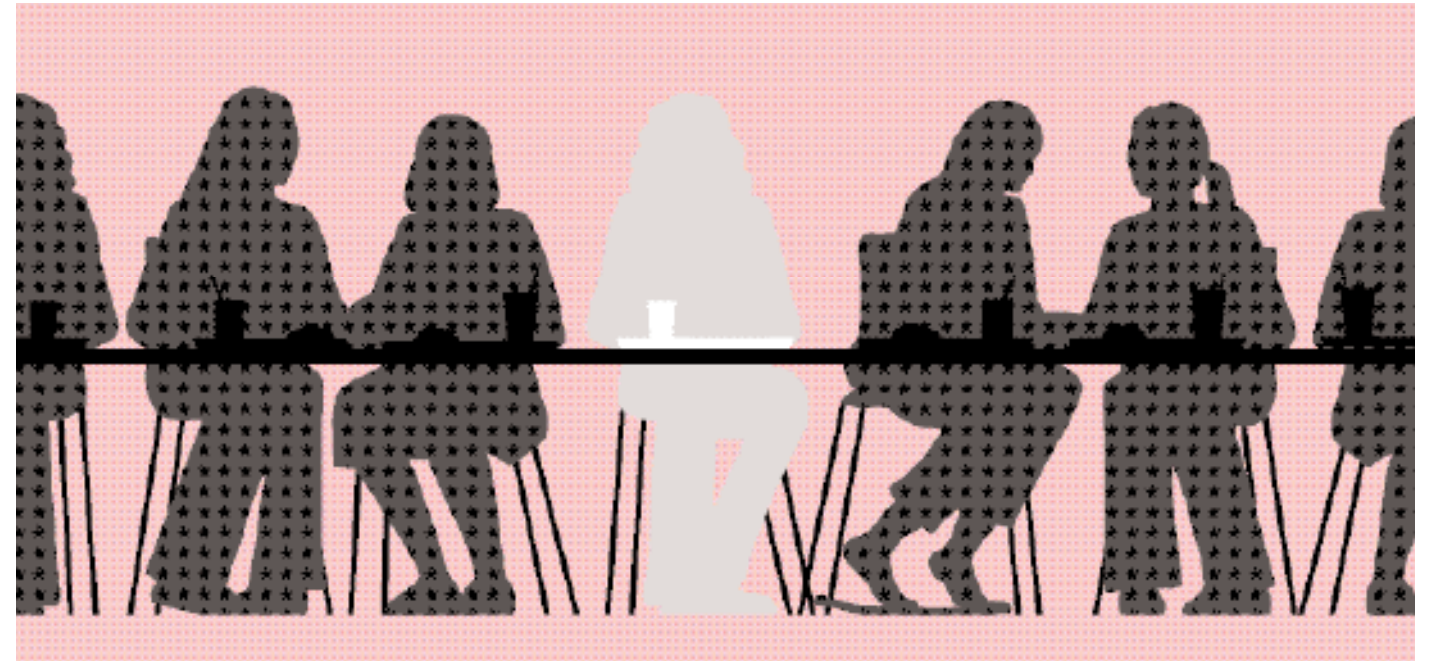
“When we rated the content by category, we found that the three most popular and frequently addressed themes were identity formation, followed by relationship dynamics and emotional expression,” says McFerran.

“In 20 per cent of the lyrics, Felicity and I couldn’t agree on which category to apply to the song. I think that says something about the level of intensity and depth with which these young women explored their lives through the songwriting.

“Often the material they wrote was very imaginative and richly metaphorical. In my experience, young women with eating disorders are very creative. They’ve had to find a creative outlet and often turn to music, art, dance, to help them cope.

I want to be like a white tiger
To have the courage to live my life
Not to be savage to other people
Coz that doesn’t make me feel right

Lyric excerpt, song by patient with anorexia nervosa



For a music therapist, that provides a great way in when working with these patients.

“Music can open many doors. Without being false in any sense, you’re able to develop authentic and honest relationships with patients when they’re at a very low ebb.”

This cut-through approach of music therapy is endorsed by centre director and Professor of Adolescent Health at the University of Melbourne’s Department of Paediatrics, Professor Susan Sawyer. She has seen first hand how music therapy can be a more direct route to unravelling a patient’s issues than more traditional approaches.

“I vividly remember spending a few hours with a newly admitted young teen girl with anorexia, slowly building up a detailed understanding of her various issues and concerns. I was very impressed – perhaps even a smidge miffed! – when Katrina McFerran was able to gain the same information through a songwriting session in about half the time. Perhaps more importantly, a number of young people who have refused to speak with members of our mental health team have been prepared to engage in songwriting approaches.

“Young people are very comfortable that songs commonly express powerful, often quite private emotions,” says Sawyer. “Songwriting techniques with a trained and experienced therapist seem to be an easier mechanism for many young people to share their emotional states than simply the words that are the more common currency of emotional exchange with mental health professionals.”

How will the results of the content analysis feed into the centre’s work with young people with eating disorders?

“The study has helped to highlight which issues can be usefully addressed through songwriting,” says McFerran. “When a music therapist is developing songs with a young woman she can guide her through the process, with those issues to the fore. Music therapists work as part of the multidisciplinary team,

She sat in a cafeteria
Bringing all the friends she had to life
The rest of the world just went by
Her cries for help were always
drowned in the crowd
Why is my soul so empty?
Why can’t anybody see?

Lyric excerpt, song by patient with anorexia nervosa

contributing to the holistic care of young people and helping to provide insights and a unique perspective on the current state of patients which help the team work towards positive outcomes for each young person.”

“The [music therapist-guided songwriting] seems an especially developmentally appropriate intervention for young people with disordered eating,” adds Sawyer. “I think it proves the value of having an array of interventions available.”■

Music. Play for Life is the Music Council of Australia national campaign to encourage more Australians to make music. In each issue, *arts + medicine* presents a music therapy case study demonstrating the link between music and wellbeing. For more details visit www.musicplayforlife.org or the Australian Music Therapy Association site: www.austmta.org.au