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The Use of Song Lyrics as an Expressive Arts Tool in Counseling: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Music has been used as a tool for emotional management in counseling for many years. This review of the literature examines the use of music and sharing song lyrics as tools for emotional processing as a component of expressive arts therapy. Following a brief summary of the historical and clinical context of sharing song lyrics in counseling, empirical literature including the practice of using song lyrics in various clinical settings is explored. Empirical literature related to expressive arts therapy including the use of songs and song lyrics is critically examined, concluding with suggestions for further research and implications for practice.

Keywords: music, lyrics, expressive arts, counseling, techniques

The lyrics of a song tell a story and emphasize strong emotions through the lyricist's themes. Use of song lyrics in counseling is common and effective as an emotional processing tool to evoke deep emotional responses from a client (Gladding, Newsome, Binkley, & Henderson, 2008). While music therapy employs both prerecorded and live music (Amir & Bodner, 2013; Hodas, 1991), this review of the literature focuses primarily on use of songs and specifically song lyrics as a component of expressive arts therapy (EAT). Literature related to counseling and EAT describe popular use of songs and song lyrics in counseling (Atkins & Williams, 2007; Bowman, 1987; Bradley, Whiting, Hendricks, Parr, & Jones, 2008; Gallant, Holosko, & Siegel, 1997), establishing the necessity of examining the existing empirical research lending evidence related to these expressive arts tools.

The bounded literature offers evidence for various counseling interventions employing songs through EAT, including song sharing and lyric interpretation (Atkins &

Williams, 2007; Bradley et al., 2008; Gladding, 1998; Rogers, 1993; Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). Song sharing includes any expressive arts tool involving counselor and client(s) playing songs in session; lyric interpretation is defined by specifically examining the lyrics to the song and counselor or client(s) offering interpretation of lyrics based on emotional connection to the song (Gladding, 1998).

This review of the literature examines the historical context of using music in general, and more specifically, prerecorded songs in counseling. Exploration of the current body of empirical literature provides support for use of songs and song lyrics in various clinical settings. Following summary of historical and empirical literature related to use of songs and song lyrics as a processing tool in EAT, analysis of the existing empirical research provides implications for practice. First, the literature providing historical context for use of music is explored.

Music as an Emotional Processing Tool in Counseling

“Music creates powerful connections between people as it provides a means to communicate, entertain, remember, mourn, or celebrate the lives of people” (Davis, 2010, p. 126). In an effort to explain music's power, scholars have suggested music has a unique ability to communicate emotions in such a way individuals might not typically be able to verbalize (Skudrzyk et al., 2009). Music is an important anchor in peoples' lives, navigating them through challenges, providing strength in struggles, or celebrating the overcoming of obstacles (Gladding et al., 2008). The strong emotional connection most have to music becomes a powerful catalyst in people's lives as they seek higher meaning and healing.

Counselors harness the power of music in counseling as a creative tool for clients to express emotion and communicate mood (Bowman, 1987; Skudrzyk et al., 2009). Considering the powerful connection individuals have to music, Buser, Flannery, Bentley and Gladding (2005) suggested counselors using music as a processing tool to access levels of emotional exploration and meaning not as efficiently accessed through other therapeutic techniques. Beyond use as a powerful processing tool, the researchers found using music in counseling can connect people, transcending boundaries of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or ability. Despite cultural barriers in a counseling relationship, music presents a valuable opportunity to build rapport with clients, fostering a powerful sense of belonging and acceptance (Skudrzyk et al., 2009). In order to harness the power of music, song lyrics are one specific aspect of music counselors can use as a tool.

Music as a Component of Expressive Arts Therapy

In order to examine song lyrics as a processing tool for counselors, it is important to first explore the origins of using music in a counseling setting. Natalie Rogers (1993), daughter of Carl Rogers, developed EAT, employing creative methods and techniques to connect with clients. In an interview about her development of EAT, Rogers described extending the person-centered approach Carl Rogers had developed, incorporating the use of art, movement, writing, and music. She described using art and movement as a language, allowing a client to become more honest in expression of their experience or struggles. Her intent was to use the creation and experience of art to transcend the

defenses of a client and allow them to more effectively explore difficult emotions (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007).

In her text, Rogers (1993) formally proposed using various forms of art in order to unlock deeper levels of meaning for clients. Her purpose was to facilitate growth and healing through a therapeutic journey of self-exploration and acceptance. In the use of art in therapy, emphasis was not placed on the creation of the art, but rather on the act of self-discovery and emotional expression demonstrated through the chosen media. Rogers' work as a pioneer in EAT opened doors for counselors to being to utilize creative techniques in their work with clients. Building on Rogers' work, Bradley et al. (2008) explored various media types utilized in EAT. Bradley et al. searched existing literature relating to the use of art, cinema, drama, dream analysis, music, storytelling, and creative writing to present a descriptive summary of some existing uses of expressive arts media. The researchers proposed use of expressive arts media as tools for the expressive arts therapist to utilize in non-verbal or metaphoric exploration with clients. Bradley et al. placed specific focus on the use of music in EAT to help clients cope with depression and substance abuse.

The theoretical foundation of EAT allowed counselors to utilize various media, including music, to encourage emotional exploration with clients. Once Rogers (1993) established a theoretical basis for the use of expressive arts methods, further research could be conducted as to the efficacy of the various creative techniques she developed. The theoretical work of Rogers used music as a component of EAT, providing a foundation to further explore the specific use of music with clients in counseling.

The Use of Prerecorded Songs in Counseling

After establishing the theoretical and historical work in EAT, the focus of this literature review narrows to various uses of prerecorded songs in a counseling setting. Song sharing can be used with clients to both express emotion and help the client gain personal insight (Atkins & Williams, 2007). As a pioneer and promoter of counselors using creative interventions with clients, Gladding (1998) specifically explored listening to song sharing in counseling settings. Gladding stated that use of music in counseling helps clients become more aware, confident, and social. He postulated that by making music the center of a counseling relationship, counselors can utilize the strong connection clients have to various music genres to encourage growth and the building of rapport.

Building on Gladding's work, a qualitative study conducted by Gibson and Cartwright (2013) explored adolescent client preferences and attitudes related to counseling. The researchers interviewed 22 adolescents, ages 16 to 18, about their experiences in school counseling. Gibson and Cartwright conducted a narrative analysis to discover common themes in their preferences. The analysis resulted in finding the clients felt most connected to their counselor when they felt like were an active agent in their own therapy, asserting their own choices, goals, and interests into the counseling interventions used. Several clients stated they enjoyed being able to play songs they liked in session, and it made them feel the counselor was really interested in the things they found to be important.

Kimbel and Protivnak (2010) explored the presence of prerecorded songs in the lives of adolescents as well as implications and techniques for use in a school counseling

setting. The researchers conducted an investigation of popular media at the time, finding the majority of popular video games, television shows, movies, and electronic devices had a common theme of musical focus. Considering the saturation of music in popular media, incorporating songs into counseling can engage students not initially invested in counseling. The researchers suggested song sharing in counseling to be a way of developing a deeper understanding of the client, building stronger rapport, and transcending cultural differences between counselor and client. The researchers stated most counselors could responsibly employ music interventions in counseling as an aspect of EAT without formal training in music therapy.

Goldman (2004) examined existing literature related to grief counseling and offered case studies to demonstrate how counselors can better meet the needs of contemporary youth. She discussed how language interpretation could differ based on the developmental level of the client. Goldman postulated the most pivotal aspect of grief counseling with youth is giving the client a space to express their emotions. She offered abbreviated case study examples of children benefiting from expressive arts techniques being utilized by their counselors. She concluded that children whose counselors incorporated listening to songs into the grieving process are more successful in coping and are better able to externalize emotions.

Malchiodi (2008) further examined the uses of prerecorded songs in counseling. He suggested song sharing is a powerful tool to develop a feeling of connectedness amongst people and can be effectively used to express emotion and thoughts. He postulated that song sharing could be used as a tool for catharsis and processing of emotion in grief and trauma counseling, leading to the development of coping skills for symptoms of grief. The literature at the time of the study showed support for his claim of using songs and song lyrics as a tool for cohesion, catharsis, and coping in most arenas of counseling as an aspect of EAT without extensive formal training or certification. Malchiodi also utilized songs in conjunction with cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques to emphasize behavior modification resulting from appropriate emotional identification. He found the most profound use of song sharing in session is the incorporation of client-chosen song selections with overwhelming evidence of success in the emotional identification, catharsis, and coping of clients.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this body of literature related to formalized training, context, connection to clients, and emotional processing. Counselors could use song sharing in counseling as a component of EAT without formalized training in Music Therapy (Gladding, 2010). The literature examined offers evidence that listening to prerecorded songs in counseling may also help to engage clients with a negative attitude towards the counseling process, such as adolescent clients (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Thus, emotional processing through song sharing was used most often with youth or adolescent clients as a means of rapport building, considering popular culture is saturated with musical themes (Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010).

Lyrics as an Emotional Processing Tool

The use of song sharing can be a powerful processing tool when used as an aspect of EAT. Another aspect of music explored in the literature is song lyrics. Having explored the evidence for prerecorded songs and song sharing as a processing tool as an

aspect of EAT, the focus shifts to establishing the basis for using song lyrics as an emotional processing tool in various clinical settings.

First, Buser et al. (2005) investigated the impact lyrics can have on individuals. The researchers conducted a qualitative study sampling 28 graduate students from a CACREP-accredited counselor education program at a private Southeastern university. The sample was predominantly Caucasian females in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties who had the option of participating as part of their course. The purpose of the study was to measure the students' emotional reactions to song lyrics and to examine the emotional response connected to particular songs. The researchers gave the students two surveys listing popular songs from current and previous decades asking participants to mark which songs from each year were familiar to them, then denote specifically songs with lyrics holding a special meaning for them. The participants identified meaningful song lyrics and identified the emotion connected to that lyric. The researchers conducted an analysis of the lyrics provided and the emotional explanation of the meaning associated with each lyric.

Based on their surveys, Buser et al. (2005) discovered three themes unifying the emotional responses associated with certain song lyrics. Their analysis found songs were meaningful to participants because the lyrics offered a personal connection to life events, the participants felt empowered by the importance of the message conveyed through the lyrics, or they felt relaxation and joy inspired by the chosen lyrics. The results showed some chosen songs matched multiple themes for the participants including hope, empowerment, happiness, sadness, relaxation, and peace. The researchers determined a song being familiar does not necessarily transcend into the song being emotionally meaningful for a client, but rather the client finds meaning in lyrics about topics evoking emotional responses.

Later, Gladding et al. (2008) explored how lyrics of popular songs can be utilized in session to constructively convey emotions with clients. The researchers explored what makes songs memorable or impactful for clients and how counselors can use this emotional connection to song lyrics therapeutically. The study focused on lyric use in counseling grief and restoration work. The researchers discussed the uses of particular song lyrics found to express either restoration or sorrow, grief, and pain. It was suggested clients experience a cathartic release when they feel another is sharing their feelings of grief, pain, and hurt through the lyrics of songs. The researchers also suggested discussing with clients the shared emotions they are having as reaction to the emotions reflected in the words the lyricist chose in order to connect with their counselor and find resolution of sorrow resulting in restoration and healing.

Gladding et al. (2008) proposed having clients edit or rewrite lyrics of existing songs to better describe their life and foster an even stronger emotional response to lyric use. In addition to recreating lyrics, the researchers suggested using lyrics as coping skills by having clients construct a playlist of songs whose lyrics will motivate them when needed or offer emotional catharsis when overwhelmed. They emphasized that counselors should allow clients to choose the song lyrics discussed within counseling and invite clients to describe the emotions in the lyrics, life events similar to the ones in the song, or events they wish were more like the ones in the song.

Hendricks and Bradley (2005) had similar experiences when they used song sharing and lyric interpretation in family sessions. They published a case study of a

family who sought family counseling in order to help their 15-year-old son who was exhibiting signs of depression. The counselor described a clear lack of communication and understanding between the adolescent and his parents. The counselor used song sharing in sessions, finding the adolescent male listened to certain songs to cope, resulting in reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety. The counselor had the adolescent bring a song to his family session and play it for his parents; then the counselor challenged the parents to describe the lyrics of the song and how the parents had connected to the lyrics themselves.

This practice opened a dialogue with the family about emotional expression and how the adolescent felt most comfortable expressing himself. The parents related to a time when their own parents disapproved of their song choices and realized this was being recreated with their son. The adolescent became engaged and connected to the counseling process, whereas he had previously felt counseling was pointless. They found through 12 weeks of family counseling utilizing lyric sharing, among other interventions, the teen became more comfortable expressing himself to his parents. The client later described difficulty adjusting to moving, not fitting in at school, and general issues associated with identity development. The parents were able to connect with the client and find commonalities and better understanding of his struggles through song sharing.

The connections clients have to lyrics are powerful and can be extremely useful in building rapport with a client and as a means of emotional expression (Gladding, 1998). Considering the saturation of music in popular culture, clients could be very connected to themes expressed within the lyrics of songs (Buser et al., 2005). Use of lyric sharing in counseling can be a valuable tool for emotional expression and communication resulting in a cathartic experience for clients in a counseling setting (Gladding et al., 2008; Hendricks & Bradley, 2005).

Group Counseling

Having established evidence of sharing song lyrics in counseling as an effective tool for emotional expression with individual clients, the focus shifts to the use of song lyrics as a tool for emotional expression in group counseling. Group members can build relationships through sharing songs and the connection the group members have to the lyrics (Skudrzyk et al., 2009). Lyrics can be used for emotional release, education of group members, fostering empathy, managing stress, or inspiring others (Buser et al., 2005; Hendricks & Bradley, 2005). Through lyric sharing, clients may realize they are not alone in their pain leading to acceptance and resolution of pain (Gladding et al., 2008). The literature next provides support for using creative interventions through group work.

First, McFerran, Roberts, and O'Grady (2010) conducted a study with a mixed methods design to investigate using song sharing and lyric interpretation techniques in bereavement counseling with adolescent clients. The researchers identified a school reporting a high number of grieving teenagers. They contacted the school and recruited teenagers to participate in a bereavement group. Parents gave consent for students to participate in the group. The study had 16 volunteers with an average age of 14, divided into two groups.

The first group consisted of mostly males; the second group of participants was mostly females, all of whom had lost a close relative. Researchers conducted 90-minute groups weekly. Group one lasted 12 weeks and group two lasted 14 weeks. The groups utilized several creative interventions including the sharing of prerecorded songs and song lyrics. Many of the students brought their iPods and mobile phones to the group to share songs. Researchers encouraged participants to bring songs related to themes of grief; however, the researchers found the students also enjoyed the opportunity for sharing of their identity and individuality through the songs chosen. The researchers also found the second group enjoyed adapting the lyrics to existing songs to describe their grief.

McFerran et al. (2010) gave participants questionnaires, assessments, and conducted interviews in regards to the participants' attitudes towards the EAT techniques. Their results yielded significant change in the post-tests for their questionnaire and assessments. The interviews suggested themes of the youth feeling more comfortable expressing grief through song lyrics with their peer groups than with parents or teachers.

Using similar techniques, Kimbel and Protivnak (2010) explored how the sharing of songs in groups could engage the group members in the counseling process. The researchers published a case study of a counseling group for struggling students. Researchers invited students to bring in a particular song with which they had connected. The participants would share with the group and then discuss what the lyrics of the song meant to them, followed by a group discussion about how the lyrics of the song had affected each group member differently. The counselor facilitated a discussion with the group to examine how the lyrics represented a piece of their life story. The group as a whole responded positively to the sharing of songs and the discussion of lyrics in the counseling group. Kimbel and Protivnak found an increase of students who sought individual counseling in the school to further explore topics discussed in the group once they had the option of sharing song lyrics with the counselor.

In summary, the use of song sharing and song lyrics in groups can be a powerful way for participants to express their individuality with others (Gladding et al., 2008). Sharing lyrics could be a unique way for clients to explain circumstances or emotions to the others in a group and to help engage the group members in the counseling process (Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010; McFerran et al., 2010). The use of song lyrics can also be very useful in allowing group members to communicate with each other. Song sharing can be powerful in a group setting to set the tone of the group or allow group members to find where they fit amongst their peers (Gladding, 1998). There are many possibilities for the use of lyrics in group activities or interventions. Empirical evidence demonstrates themes of understanding and connectedness in the group sharing of song lyrics in self-expression.

School Counseling

Using song lyrics to connect with clients can also be a powerful tool for counselors in a school setting. For school counselors struggling to connect with clients, lyric sharing can be a window to the client's world and struggles lying within it (McFerran et al., 2010). King and Schwabenlender (1994) used expressive arts techniques to teach children coping methods for strong emotions. They shared songs for

the children and found the children enjoyed the use of music and found it to be an effective means of stress management. The researchers suggested song sharing could be useful in a classroom setting to help children relax and be more expressive. As a result, school counselors have shared songs in classroom settings to process issues as a group while fostering social development and teaching social skills (Camilleri, 2000).

Sawyer and Willis (2011) conducted a pilot study utilizing the concept of digital storytelling using songs and other creative outlets. The goal of the study was to encourage self-reflection and increased self-awareness in the students. The researchers trained educators in a large suburban high school to utilize digital storytelling with their high school students, seeking to have the high school students create digital stories and share them with elementary school students to teach social behavior and coping strategies. The participants were 60 junior and senior high school students who were taught to create digital stories as an assignment for their class. Then students had the option of submitting their digital story for participation in the study with parental permission. Thirty students submitted their stories for inclusion in the study.

Researchers instructed the students to create a multimedia story illustrating the use of positive coping techniques and socially appropriate behavior. The stories utilized art and photography to illustrate the concepts. The students chose songs whose lyrics reinforced the suggested behaviors and coping strategies. The students specifically used song lyrics to convey the tone of the digital stories and convey the emotions represented within the various coping strategies and social behaviors. The researchers discovered through the created stories song lyrics can be a powerful way for adolescents to express their views to others.

Sharing songs and lyric interpretation can be an effective tool for both school counselors and teachers as a method of emotional expression with students in school settings. Schools offer a large population of students already utilizing these expressive arts tools for emotional expression (McFerran et al., 2010). Capitalizing upon the popularity of music among youth counselors can connect with students in schools through song sharing and lyric interpretation to encourage communication of distress (King & Schwabenlender, 1994). Song sharing and lyric interpretation in schools can both be a tool for emotional expression and also a means for helping students identify difficult emotions they may be experiencing (Sawyer & Willis, 2011). Discussions of the meaning of lyrics or emotional reaction to the songs can be a powerful lesson for students (Kimbrel & Protivnak, 2010). As a result, song sharing and communication through song lyrics offers school counselors and teachers a creative tool for connecting with students.

Summary of Research

To summarize the presented body of literature, counselors in various settings use songs and song lyrics as unique and powerful tools for emotional expression. This review of the literature discovered historical and foundational works establishing music as a component of EAT. Rogers (1993) developed EAT as an extension of Carl Rogers' person-centered counseling approach. Gladding (1998) later encouraged counselors in various setting to use songs and song lyrics as expressive arts tools. The bounded literature offered evidence for various counseling interventions employing songs and lyrics through EAT, including song sharing and lyric interpretation (Atkins & Williams,

2007; Bradley et al., 2008; Gladding, 1998; Rogers, 1993; Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). Thus it was established that counselors can use songs and song lyrics as an aspect of EAT without formal training in music therapy (Eckhardt & Dinsmore, 2012).

Many new creative EAT tools for counselors included the use of both creating and listening to music in session. Bradley et al. (2008) offered later guidance into the various types of media, including prerecorded songs, available to use in counseling. The specific use of songs and song lyrics as EAT tools in counseling was shown to be powerful, especially considering popular culture is saturated with musical themes (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013; Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010). Clients who can express themselves in counseling using songs or song lyrics are better able to externalize emotions, helping counselors build rapport and empathize with clients (Goldman, 2004; Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010). Song lyrics specifically are a useful tool for non-verbal emotional expression in various counseling settings (Buser et al, 2005; Hendricks & Bradley, 2005; Malchiodi, 2008). Communicating through song lyrics can offer clients a cathartic release followed by the instilment of hope (Gladding et al., 2008). Counselors can empower clients to express difficult emotions through EAT interventions using songs and song lyrics, including song sharing and lyrics interpretation (Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010).

Client choice in music can help transcend cultural barriers, helping counselors to communicate in the client's language (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell, 2007). Song and song lyrics can be used as tools in counseling to help clients communicate emotional messages in a universally accessible way (Bradley et al., 2008). Sharing of client chosen songs and lyric interpretation can help counselors and clients communicate emotional experiences despite cultural differences (Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010; King & Schwabenlender, 1994; McFerran et al., 2010; Sawyer & Willis, 2011). While empirical evidence demonstrates the power of overall use of songs and lyrics use in counseling, the meaning and interpretation of songs shared in counseling will be individualized based on the client (Gladding et al., 2008).

Evaluation and Recommendations for Future Research

A critical review of the literature yields concerns in methodology and participant populations used. The studies utilizing evaluation measures reported researcher creation of measures or measures not accurate in measuring the efficacy of songs and song lyrics as an emotional processing tool (Buser et al., 2005; Klein & Silverman, 2012; McFerran et al., 2010). These studies stated the creation of an evaluation method reliably measuring the impact of song lyric use in counseling would help strengthen the results of further research. Additionally, empirical evidence was based largely on participants comprised of graduate students. All of the studies included in this review stated their results were limited by small sample size as well as lack of diversity in the participants.

Within the empirical studies examined, there was a great deal of inconsistency as to methodology and populations used. Based on the literature found, it can be determined that further research needs to be conducted to corroborate the findings and demonstrate consistency in the populations, techniques, and methodology used to evaluate the efficacy of using songs and song lyrics as a processing tool in counseling settings. As the majority of literature available to determine best practices in use of song lyrics as an aspect of

EAT are conceptual, there is a clear need for further empirical study. Further research could explore efficacy of counselors using songs and song lyrics in various counseling settings and client populations.

Implications for Practice

Researchers discovered that counselors used songs and song lyrics as powerful tools for emotional expression in counseling (Buser et al., 2005; Iwamoto et al., 2007; Klein & Silverman, 2012). Sharing and interpreting songs and song lyrics can be a method for the members of a group to communicate and connect with one another (Amir & Bodner, 2013; McFerran et al., 2010). Additionally, song lyrics can be used as a means for group members to express struggle and pain to other members of the group, resulting in increased cohesion (McFerran et al., 2010). Based on this and other evidence in the bounded body of literature, counselors could utilize songs and song lyrics as a means for group members to express emotion to others in a group counseling setting.

Song lyrics can also be a method for school counselors to connect with students (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013; Sawyer & Willis, 2011). As music is so popular in the media, school counselors can utilize the strong connection adolescent clients may have to songs and song lyrics to offer alternative means of expression (Buser et al., 2005; Kimbel & Provitnak, 2010). Gibson and Cartwright (2013) suggested using song lyric sharing as a means of non-verbal expression in a school setting to reach students who may not have otherwise sought help from the school counselor. These findings suggest school counselors offering a group employing song lyric sharing could encourage students to seek individual counseling.

Finally, literature suggests counselors working with culturally diverse clients can benefit from the use of song lyrics (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Iwamoto et al., 2007). Gonzalez and Hayes (2009) suggested counselors could use rap music to connect with students from inner-city schools. The researchers also proposed differences in slang terms or speech can be overcome with non-verbal communication through sharing song lyrics. Iwamoto et al. (2007) advocated counselors working with diverse clients can ask clients to share ethnic music in session, emphasizing that counselors be open to any kind of music to which the client feels connected. The researchers implored counselors to focus on the client's connection to the songs brought to counseling as opposed to the counselor's feelings about the type of music shared by the client. They postulated that by extending unconditional positive regard to the songs clients shared with counselors, the counselors would be able to build strong rapport with clients from different cultural groups.

Conclusion

Overall the review of the literature yielded historical basis and empirical evidence for EAT, including sharing songs and song lyrics for counselors in various settings. Further research is necessary to determine the specific impact of sharing songs and song lyrics in session. However, popular expressive arts tools using prerecorded songs, including song sharing and lyric interpretation, have been established as a powerful

means of client emotional expression and transcending cultural boundaries in various counseling settings.

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