Book Review


AUS $49.95, 322 pages, ISBN: 978-1-137-49922-6

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Therapeutic songwriting: Developments in theory, methods, and practice is the latest offering from prolific music therapy researcher Felicity Baker. The book is a culmination of four years of research, funded by the Australian Research Council, during which, Baker has undertaken a rigorous investigation of songwriting practices within music therapy across the globe. The book unpacks songwriting on a micro and macro level, situating the intervention historically, theoretically and practically. The substantial amount of data Baker has collected in order to inform the findings of this book, provides a cultural and clinical diversity that guarantees therapists based within any clinical population or theoretical framework should find this book relevant to their work. Extending on the topic of Baker and Wigram’s 2005 edited text on Songwriting, this latest book provides for readers such a depth of knowledge for the therapeutic intervention of songwriting, it ensures this text will become the definitive guide on the topic.

The book is divided into four parts: introduction, factors influencing the songwriting process, songwriting methods, and concluding with orientation. The introductory chapters provide the reader with important foundational information from which this book is constructed. This includes an explanation of the research focus and methodology employed alongside a historical snapshot of the rise in popularity of therapeutic songwriting over the past twenty-six years. Part two systematically unpacks all of the potential factors that impact and shape the songwriting process including environmental, sociocultural, individual, and group factors as well as the role of music. Although some of these factors might feel ‘instinctual’ to the more experienced clinician, they remain important considerations to continually revisit. Furthermore, given the broad nature of these factors, much of the information provided in this section can move beyond being specifically tied to songwriting, to the larger therapeutic space.

Part three interrogates at a micro level the methods that are utilised in songwriting practice across a vast array of clinical populations and practice scenarios. This section organises the ten identified therapeutic songwriting methods into three sub-categories, namely songwriting methods that emphasize lyric creation, lyric and music creation, or music creation. For the benefit of the reader, each method is uniformly explored by presenting a brief literature review for the particular method under examination, followed by a detailed explanation and diagrammatic representation of the process. Particularly useful for planning and reflection in clinical practice is the provision of strategic reasons for choosing each method alongside its limitations.

The final section of the book, titled ‘Orientation’, takes on the immense task of unpacking all of the major frameworks of practice and then defining how and where songwriting sits within these. Baker has managed to pull together this section by drawing upon Bruscia’s proposed orientation categories (outcomes, experience and context) to help organise the findings.
Given the density of information throughout this section, tables at the end of each chapter which assist in comparing and contrasting the frameworks of practice are welcomed.

Baker set out to contribute a book that provided “concrete, descriptive, and clear perspectives” (p. 283), which she has certainly achieved. A particular highlight was the voices of the research participants interwoven throughout the book, helping to punctuate significant points whilst providing real world, relatable clinical examples. The sections that unpack songwriting within rap genres did highlight the need for more discussions around the role and use of technology in music therapy in the twenty-first century. Although Baker did provide some useful follow-up resources for clinicians just starting to enter the technology space, people interested in pursuing this line of songwriting may need to source further material more directly related to this topic.

The practice of songwriting is no doubt a therapeutic intervention of considerable weight, holding the potential to add great value to people’s lives and wellbeing. This has been known for some time now in the music therapy profession. What Therapeutic songwriting: Developments in theory, methods, and practice adds as a text is as Baker puts, “being able to be more specific in naming what we do and why we do it” (p. 283). The models and methods identified throughout the book will in the long term be an important step in further professionalising therapeutic interventions and the language used around these within the field of music therapy. Given this, the book is an essential read for all music therapists, students, and people who engage with music in the health and wellbeing space. Therapeutic songwriting: Developments in theory, methods, and practice is a highly accessible and engaging read which will not only leave readers with a concrete knowledge base, it also provides the space for people to critically reflect upon their own practice.