

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-21-2022

Examining Sibling Relationships with Older Adults Through Songwriting: Development of a Method

Amanda N. Bysheim
abysheim@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bysheim, Amanda N., "Examining Sibling Relationships with Older Adults Through Songwriting: Development of a Method" (2022). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 533.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/533

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

**Examining Sibling Relationships with Older Adults Through Songwriting: Development of
a Method**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

5/5/2022

Amanda Bysheim

Mental Health Counseling: Music Therapy

Dr. Rebecca Zarate

Abstract

Sibling relationships have a profound influence on development, psychological health, and various interpersonal relationships. Within sibling relationships exists complex dynamics of both warmth and conflict that can easily lead to abuse. Many people could be victims of sibling abuse and not even realize it. Various cultural norms not only dismiss many signs of sibling abuse as normal, but minimize and hide the abuse as well. Despite the growing relevance of sibling relationships in adulthood, there is a significant lack of research on siblings in the field of music therapy. Using an individual, single session model, this research study explored the complexities of sibling relationships with older adults through the use of songwriting. Results revealed themes highly congruent with the literature review, including themes around physical and mental health, conflict and rivalry, and warmth and complexity. The results also provided multiple discoveries which deviate from the literature, including parental influence, marriage, and dynamics between older adult siblings. Findings from this critical review of the literature provide a more holistic perspective of older adult clients within music therapy, as well as deeper insights into critical and unique intergenerational and transgenerational issues of culture, closeness, economics, politics, and sibling abuse in sibling relationships.

Keywords: conflict, complexities, culture, abuse, impact

Examining Sibling Relationships with Older Adults Through Songwriting: Development of a Method

Introduction

Within the life of the family exists the complex world of sibling relationships. A large portion of the human population having at least one sibling, and in various cultures across the world, family bonds are so strong that cousins are often regarded as siblings as well (Bass et al., 2020). As a result of generations living longer, more people getting divorced at older ages, less people having children, and use of cell phones and social media, sibling relationships in older adulthood are becoming more prevalent than ever (Stocker et al., 2020). Even though many cultures around the world recognize the importance of family, people often do not reflect on how influential siblings are in our lives past adolescence.

Sibling relationships can have a profound influence on development, psychological health, and various interpersonal relationships. Patterns of loyalty, empathy, and self-worth are first learned through siblings (Monahan, K., 2010), and aspects of sibling relationships are often repeated throughout life (Bass et al., 2020). Within sibling relationships also exists complex dynamics that are filled with both intense warmth and conflict (Stocker et al., 2020). In the United States for example, concepts of sibling rivalry, aggression, and love are so commonplace that it is often portrayed in movies and television shows that center on families. Shows like *The Simpsons*, *Modern Family*, and *The Goldbergs* show siblings that seemingly hate each other but ultimately help each other in times of need and crisis. While countries like the US are considered more individualist societies, families in general still view themselves as a unit and take responsibility in protecting each other in times of need.

While these characteristics of family life are complicated, the support individuals receive from siblings can be incredibly beneficial to well-being and quality of life. Unfortunately, conflict between siblings can negatively impact quality of life as well and even lead to abuse. In fact, many people could be victims of sibling abuse and not even realize it. Certain cultural norms not only dismiss many signs of sibling abuse as normal, but minimize and hide the abuse as well. In the United States, the idea of sibling conflict and rivalry is so commonplace that various types of aggression are often accepted and even encouraged (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). For example, popular depictions of siblings in the US include competing to be the parental favorite, physically fighting and wrestling, calling each other names, throwing objects at one another, pulling each other's hair, and yelling and screaming at one another.

While this is not all sibling relationships, so many people have experiences such as this that no one thinks of these behaviors as possible signs of abuse. Indeed sibling conflict is expected in family life, especially when siblings are close in age or the same gender, but isolated incidents of aggression can easily lead to abuse similar to the depictions above. Sibling abuse has been hard to define for researchers, but encompasses psychological, verbal, physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse. In simple terms, sibling abuse is any violent or coercive act committed by one sibling onto another. It is important that all mental health professionals, regardless of population or specialization, are able to recognize the signs of sibling abuse in their clients and how such abuse has impacted their overall well-being. Considering the cultural influence on families and the impacts of sibling relationships can help create a more holistic view of our clients, even for clients who report having positive relationships with their siblings. There is a need to explore such a holistic view with the consideration of the impact and influence of sibling relationships in older adults.

Since many cultures often treat cousins as siblings as well, the influence of sibling relationships could apply to an even larger percentage of clients when including older adults. Despite this fact and the growing relevance of sibling relationships in adulthood, there continues to be a lack of research on sibling abuse. In the field of music therapy, research on sibling relationships is virtually non-existent, and research on sibling abuse *is* non-existent. Research that comes close has centered around family violence in general, which seems to focus primarily on parent-child or marital relationships. Recent research from family therapy and social work fields are starting to show how impactful sibling relationships are in adulthood, even with siblings who have since passed away. Still, studies on sibling abuse consistently fail to include clients past middle-age.

My hope with this thesis was to learn more about sibling relationships and their impact in older adulthood. Of the research that does exist on sibling relationships, very few studies involve older adults. Many studies written about older adults typically involve memory, aging bodies, and their children, which leaves the door open to incorrect assumptions that sibling relationships have no influence past mid-life. As a mental health counseling intern working with older adults, I have observed the impacts that sibling relationships have on my clients, regardless of the sibling's living status. Their families have shaped who they have become, and for some clients, their siblings continue to be a primary source of support in their lives.

My individual clients have all reported different levels of sibling relationship quality, ranging from positive, to non-existent, to fond yet distant memories. After knowing my clients for months and engaging in conversation around well-being, mental health, and family, I hope to create a more holistic picture of my clients by learning about their relationships to their siblings. I hope to learn about what aspects of their sibling relationships are still impactful to them today. I

also hope to learn more about the complexities that exist within these relationships through first-hand accounts. In particular, I wish to learn more complexities that exist with clients who claim to have positive relationships but consistently share negative experiences and dynamics with their sibling. Sibling relationships are a crucial source of support for a large majority of the population, and this phenomenon deserves to be researched with older adults as well.

Literature Review

Research across multiple mental health fields have regarded sibling relationships as among the most enduring, important, and longest-lasting relationships one can have throughout their life (Gilligan et al., 2020; Stocker et al., 2020; Monahan, K., 2010). In the US alone, over 85% of Americans have at least one sibling (Stocker et al., 2020, p. 176) and Bass et al. (2006) brings to light that cousins are often regarded as siblings in many families. Bass et al. (2006) has also stated in their research that siblings share a unique genetic, historical, and social class (p. 176), and Whipple and Finton (1995) have emphasized how siblings serve several important functions for one another (p. 136). Many individuals use families, particularly siblings, as personal resources for emotional, social, and instrumental support as well as reflections of self-worth (Fairchild & McFerran, 2018; Whipple & Finton, 1995; Stocker et al., 2020; and Gilligan et al., 2020; Monahan, K., 2010).

The Intergenerational Dimensions of Sibling Relationships

Warmth, Conflict, and Connectedness

Most siblings live together until early adulthood and have emotionally intense relationships that are characterized by both levels of warmth and conflict (Stocker et al., 2020, p. 176). According to Stocker et al. (2020), “family structural variables such as age difference, gender, and parents’ living status contributed to differences in dimensions of sibling relationship

quality” (p. 181). For example, parents still play a large role in keeping siblings connected as adults (Stocker et al., 2020), even if their parents have passed long ago, and perceptions of parental favoritism can hinder sibling connectedness. Stocker et al. (2020) point out patterns of loyalties that exist between different generations of family members and how these ties often conflict with each other. The beliefs and perceptions about such patterns have an impact on relationships between siblings (Bass et al., 2006, p. 89).

Stocker et al. (2020) suggest that as siblings age, these dynamics become less prevalent as frequent contact between siblings becomes positively associated with warmth (p. 179), with frequency of contact in siblings linked to greater life satisfaction (Gilligan et al., 2020, p. 310). In addition to frequent contact accompanied by warm interactions improving the quality of sibling relationships, Stocker et al. (2020) found that marriage status also influences the sibling relationship. For example, Stocker et al. (2020) report that there are lower levels of contact and support between siblings who are both married than if one or no siblings are married (p. 176).

Psychological and Emotional Development

Research from various perspectives have documented the importance of the sibling relationship throughout life and its associations with development, psychological and emotional well-being, and overall health across the life-span (Monahan, K., 2010, p. 362; Stocker et al., 2020, pp. 176-177; Gilligan et al., 2020, p. 310). According to Bass et al. (2006), sibling relationships influence many aspects of human development including: empathy, identity, and attachment (Bass et al., 2006, pp. 89-90). Monahan (2010) states that patterns of loyalty, helpfulness, protection, conflict, domination, and competition are often first learned by siblings (p. 362), and Bass et al. (2006) express that aspects of these early sibling relationships often repeated and expanded upon in adulthood (p. 90). These statements are further solidified as

Gilligan et al. (2020) show in their research that these patterns of association in adulthood are similar to those in earlier developmental periods (p. 310). One important factor to mention, however, is that the health of each sibling may influence the quality of the relationship. Gilligan et al. (2020) state that sibling support can be especially important when one sibling is living with a physical, mental, or developmental disability that impacts their ability to function completely independently (p. 310). Siblings can act as positive influences and sources of support for one another, providing emotional and instrumental support, as well as lessening the feelings of loneliness in adulthood (Stocker et al., 2020).

Interpersonal Development

Interpersonal development and functioning in adulthood is significantly linked to sibling interactions and self-esteem is closely related to the quality of the sibling relationship (Morrill, M., 2014, p. 206). Morrill (2014) reports that there is a clear connection between the development of self-esteem and the belief of how your siblings view you. A positive sibling relationship can promote the development of self-esteem (Morrill, M., 2014), especially when faced with conflict outside of the family. Unfortunately, conflict between siblings can negatively impact quality of life. In the United States, Eriksen and Jensen (2006) state that the idea of sibling conflict and rivalry is so commonplace that various types of aggression are often accepted and even encouraged. Ideas of sibling conflict and parental favoritism were linked to antisocial behavior, risky behavior, and hostility (Stocker et al., 2020, p. 177, 179; Gilligan et al., 2020, p. 310).

Culture, Family Structures and Sibling Relationships

Culture is highly relevant when considering sibling relationships and how they are perceived, and this has a profound impact on family dynamic (Bass et al., 2006). In collectivist

cultures found in Israel, like the Arab and Orthodox Jewish populations of Katz and Hamama's (2017) study, the family seeks wholeness at any price (p. 3661). This has a significant impact on childhood experiences and sibling relationships. In Latino families, Bass et. al (2006) say that social connections transcend time and space, with focus on the familial self rather than individual (p. 91). The message of solidarity is often taught early in childhood, and that compliance is considered highly valued in children (Bass et al., 2006, p. 91). Bass et al. (2006) state that siblings with often serve as primary playmates and bonds remain strong throughout life, offering continued support (p. 91). Bass et al. (2006) also reports that mothers will often reward behaviors that show respect, compliance, and responsibility (p. 91). In poor and working class families, it is considered common for several families to share a home, or for all siblings to sleep in one room (Bass et al., 2006, p. 91). As a result, cousins are often regarded as siblings. This relationship supports family solidarity while maximizing the family resources.

In families across the US, a more individualist culture, sibling conflict and rivalry is commonplace, with relationships becoming positive yet distant as siblings age (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; Stocker et al., 2020; Gilligan et al., 2020). Eriksen and Jensen (2006) report that the notion of siblings as rivals continues to drive most literature on sibling relationships, which minimizes acts of aggression that would otherwise be considered assaults in any other type of relationship (p. 498). Social norms further encourage expressions of aggressive behavior between siblings. Many American parents believe that sibling aggression facilitates their children's learning of how to successfully manage aggressive behavior in future non-family relationships (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006, p. 498).

Sibling Rivalry and Abuse

Feelings of rivalry, conflict, and perceptions of parental favoritism are negatively impact psychological well-being in childhood through middle-age and lead to depression, anxiety, and hostility (Gilligan et al., 2020, p. 310; Stocker et al., 2020, pp. 177, 179). Stocker et al. (2020) state that sibling relationship quality was also significantly associated with loneliness, and loneliness impacted well-being (p. 180). Frequent and warm contact between siblings is linked to greater quality of life and decreased symptoms of loneliness (Gilligan et al., 2020; Stocker et al., 2020). Thus, perceptions of closeness were associated with lower levels of depression (Stocker et al., 2020, p. 176; Gilligan et al., 2020, p. 310). Sibling relationships can be highly influential, and this influence within a toxic home environment can create situations that may lead to abuse (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). While definitions of sibling abuse vary greatly, in simple terms, sibling abuse is any violent or coercive act committed by one sibling onto another. Sibling relationships are so complex that people could be abuse survivors and not realize the relationship with their sibling was or still is abusive.

Numerous research studies and articles recognize the impact of sibling relationships as well as impacts of domestic violence, yet sibling abuse continues to fall under the radar within research literature. For example, in the field of family violence, Eriksen and Jensen (2006) had to conduct their quantitative study on sibling violence using the 1976 version of the National Survey of Physical Violence in American Families (NSPVAF), as a result of it being the only year in which data on sibling violence had been collected in this kind of representative sample (p. 500). The fact that this was the only data of this kind collected in the field of family violence in 30 years is alarming.

Often dismissed or trivialized as normal sibling rivalry, sibling abuse can have lasting impacts on a survivor's development, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and mental health

(Katz & Hamama, 2017; Monahan, K., 2010; Krienert & Walsh, 2011; Morrill, M., 2014; and Bass et al., 2006). Katz and Hamama (2017) also stress the importance of perceived parental reactions to sibling abuse or disclosure of abuse, as this can have a significant impact on survivors. For example, Katz and Hamama (2010) reported that reactions to sexual abuse disclosure from survivors in their study were met with disbelief and unsupportiveness, causing survivors to feel immense shame and fear (p. 3656). Monahan (2010) lists a number of negative impacts of abuse including low self-esteem, adjustment problems, interpersonal difficulties, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, self-injury, and even sexual dysfunction (pp. 361-362). Although Monahan's (2010) research is on sibling sexual abuse specifically, many impacts of different types of sibling abuse are identical.

Risk Factors for Sibling Rivalry and Abuse

Individual, Intrafamilial, and Environmental Risk Factors

There are a variety of individual, intrafamilial, and environmental factors that create a risk for abuse within sibling relationships. Bass et al. (2006) state that some individual factors for abuse include unmet needs and the desire to discharge aggression (p. 90). Eriksen and Jensen (2006) found that boys are more likely to engage in physical aggression, and Krienert and Walsh (2011) found that females are more frequent victims of sexual abuse. Although research conflicts on whether boys or girls are more frequent victims of abuse, multiple studies agree that younger siblings are usually victims of sibling abuse (Krienert & Walsh, 2011; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; Bass et al., 2006; Tener, D., 2021).

One intrafamilial risk factor for sexual abuse, for example, includes the absence of parental supervision in children's daily routines (Katz & Hamama, 2017; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; Bass et al., 2006). Bass et al. (2006) state that intrafamilial factors include, "isolation, a

patriarchal and oppressive father, poor communication, secrets, and blurred roles among family members” (p. 90). Eriksen and Jensen (2006) have also found that sibling violence is embedded within parental violence. For example, parent to child violence and marital discord was shown to have significantly increased sibling violence (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). Eriksen and Jensen (2006) state however, that violence between parents was not an influence over sibling violence, indicating that sibling violence is more of a reaction to parent-child violence (p. 504). Whipple and Finton (1995) have indicated that families often have a pecking order, and teasing or bullying is classified as a “one-down” relationship (p. 136). This further proves that parent-child violence has a significant influence on sibling abuse.

As for environmental risk factors, Eriksen and Jensen (2006) found a negative relationships between income and sibling abuse (p. 502), and that there was less sibling violence in families with higher incomes and higher levels of violence in families with financial troubles.

Cultural Risk Factors

Since culture is highly significant when considering the impact of sibling relationships on family dynamics (Bass et al., 2006), it should also be important to consider when recognizing signs of possible abuse. Studies gathered for this thesis have conducted research with American (Whipple, et al., 1995; Stocker et al., 2020; Gilligan et al., 2020; Monahan, K., 2010; Krienert & Walsh, 2010; Morrill, M., 2014; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006), Latino (Bass et al., 2006), Australian (Elliot et al., 2019; Fairchild & McFerran, 2018, 2019), Arab (Katz & Hamama, 2017), and Jewish (Tener, D., 2019; Katz & Hamama, 2017) individuals and families. It is important to note that many research articles with “American” individuals do not specify any cultural details. Additionally, the Bass et al. (2006) study on Latino families was also conducted in California,

USA. Thus, it is possible that these researchers were operating under the cultural norms of Caucasian Americans, creating cultural biases within research.

After thorough review of the literature, there are multiple cultural norms in various cultures that enable the continuation of abuse, minimize the impact of abuse, and seek to hide the existence of sibling abuse, which only damages the well-being of the survivor and the family as a whole. Now that the dynamics and influence of the sibling relationship have been established, these complexities of the sibling relationship need to be put in the cultural context of sibling abuse. It has already been identified in this paper how commonplace aggression is in American families yet families are also seen as a unit. This can create a space where physical and verbal abuse is accepted, and sexual abuse is hidden within the family.

While children from the Katz and Hamama (2017) study described their sibling relationships as loving and strong, the authors bring to light how families in collectivist cultures seek wholeness at any price (p. 3661). Bass et al. (2006) corroborate this as they report how solidarity is taught at a young age in Latino families, and that compliance in children is a highly valued trait. As previously mentioned, in poor and working class Latino families, siblings are known to sleep in one room or bed together (Bass et al., 2006). Considering that Bass et al. (2006) conducted research in LA, and siblings are sometimes depicted sharing rooms in popular US films, it is safe to say it is not uncommon in the United States to have children share rooms. When combining this sibling relationship dynamic with the relationship of income and violence, this cultural norm opens the door to sexual and physical abuse. Sibling bonds are so strong and family unity is so emphasized, that victims of sexual abuse, who are often younger siblings, are put in situations where they cannot say no (Katz & Hamama, 2017).

Music Therapy and Sibling Relationships

The Research Landscape

Although strides are being made to bring awareness to the importance of the sibling relationship, there continues to be an overwhelming lack of research on sibling dynamics and the sibling relationship throughout the life-course. In the field of music therapy, research around sibling relationships is non-existent. The only research that comes close is centered on family violence (Fairchild &McFerran, 2018, 2019), which is not specific to siblings or relationship dynamics. There is some research that exists on siblings' musical play and prosociality at home (Cirelli et al., 2019), but this research was technically conducted in the field of psychology and not with board certified music therapists. Within the research that does exist on siblings, there has been a call for further examination of sibling relationships themselves (Katz & Hamama, 2017; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; and Monahan, K., 2010), as well as more research with adults (Fairchild & McFerran, 2018, 2019), in order to create a more well-rounded view of sibling dynamics.

Benefits of Music for Sibling Relationships

While research on siblings is limited in the field of music therapy specifically, important information has been found about the benefits of music with siblings and families. Cirelli et al. (2020) discuss the importance of the sibling relationship in early development and find through research that musical play between siblings could be linked to prosociality and social development. Specifically, Cirelli et al. (2020) recognize that children spend more free time with their siblings than anyone else, sibling relationships are complex and influenced by various factors, and sibling relationships provide a unique space for social and emotional development (p. 965). When combined with the fact that music plays an important role across the lifespan in

social identity, emotional regulation, and interpersonal bonding (Cirelli et al., 2020, p. 965), it is worth acknowledging how impactful and beneficial music can be to the sibling relationship.

In the field of music therapy, Fairchild and McFerran (2019) used songwriting to uncover what music means to children experiencing family violence, and discovered that music was described as a significant personal resource by survivors (p. 101). Fairchild and McFerran (2018) also used music therapy to uncover personal resources for children experiencing family violence, and discovered that many children listed family as being a resource to them (p. 258). Although this research is about family violence and not specifically sibling relationships, it highlights how important of a resource music can be, as well as how important family still is, for those experiencing intrafamilial conflict. Stocker et al. (2020) point out that sibling relationships contain both intense warmth and conflict, and based on the combination of these findings, it is also possible that music therapy would benefit clients with sibling relationships in general.

Music Therapy, Older Adults, Songwriting, and Single-Session Work

There has been plenty of research that highlight the benefits of music therapy with older adults for both cognition and overall quality of life. Abrahan et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study with older adults after half of the participants attended eight months of music therapy. The research shows significantly higher quality of life reports for those who attended the program than did not (Abrahan et al., 2019), emphasizing how music therapy is highly beneficial for older adults. Regarding cognition, Ahessy (2017) highlights that musical memory is believed to be partly independent from other memory, and that music therapy can motivate older adults to stay active, increasing communication and providing space for emotional expression (p. 24).

Even though Ahessy's (2017) research focuses on songwriting with dementia clients, he discusses the benefits of songwriting in music therapy. Ahessy (2017) states that songwriting is used less frequently with older adults by music therapists, but then states that songwriting can provide an opportunity for support, emotional self-expression, and lived experiences of clients to be shared (p. 25). Songwriting can stimulate cognitive function, communication, and social interaction, creating a powerful tool for reminiscing and validating identity (Ahessy, B., 2017, p. 25). Research around songwriting with older adults is still lacking, but the research that does exist is promising.

While single-session songwriting may not be able to provide as much data as multiple session songwriting, single-session work can still produce rich data for research. Additionally, individual single-session songwriting may be able to provide more in-depth data than group songwriting in a single session. Fairchild and McFerran (2018, 2019) did two different studies using single-session songwriting models, with the 2019 study as group songwriting and 2018 study as individual work. Fairchild and McFerran (2019) received important data on what music means to individuals experiencing family violence, but could not go into each participant's personal experiences and sacrificed some of the overall message of the song for aesthetics within the lyrics. It is important to note that individuals may all have different experiences with family violence, which can influence a group songwriting intervention. Fairchild and McFerran (2018) were able to receive rich data from each individual participant on their experiences, and produced 10 different songs to analyze for research. If Fairchild and McFerran had used individual, single-session songwriting for their 2019 study, it is possible that receiving more information on personal experiences could have provided more options for song lyrics, eliminating the need to sacrifice the message of the songs produced for lyrical aesthetics.

Using Music as Arts-Based, Qualitative Inquiry

Arts-based research offers a unique way of collecting data that embodies participants' experiences in a systematic way (Beer, L. E., 2015, p. 33). Beer (2015) expressed that "arts-based research values the ability of the creative arts to transform perceptions and expand consciousness through dialog and the aesthetic engagement" (p. 33). By using music as research, music therapists are able to bring to light valuable information that might be missed by other research methods. For example, while family was listed as a personal resource in the brainstorming portion of the Fairchild and McFerran (2018) intervention with children experiencing family violence, the resources and themes identified in the music were: wanting to feel safe, seeking refuge, feeling cared for, being self-determined, and hoping for a better future (Fairchild & McFerran, 2018, p. 263). Since many of these themes are typically found within the family dynamic, it makes sense why children would list family as a resource, even in instances of family violence or conflict. Without the use of music as an arts-based, qualitative inquiry, this insight might have been missed.

At the end of both of their research articles, Fairchild and McFerran (2018, 2019) state a need for future research around collaborative songwriting with adults, an arts-based research method. Although Fairchild and McFerran (2018, 2019) focused on children and family violence, arts-based research can provide the same opportunities for insight for adults and sibling relationships. Since sibling relationships are impactful throughout life even if one sibling has passed away (Stocker, et al., 2020), songwriting with older adults could provide valuable qualitative data on sibling relationships.

Method

For this thesis, collaborative songwriting in a single session model was used as an arts-based research method to explore the dynamics, complexities, and impact of sibling relationships with older adults.

Participants

One individual at a low-income residential home in the greater Boston area was invited to participate in this single session intervention. The participant was a 60-year-old straight, white female with Multiple Sclerosis. The participant was a resident of the building who was recruited using a community sample strategy. Inclusion criteria for this intervention consisted of being an older adult and having one or more siblings.

Materials

The materials used for this arts-based intervention are simple and include:

1. Paper
2. Writing Utensils
3. Acoustic Guitar
4. Small drums

Procedure

The intervention took place over one sixty minute session and consisted of an open discussion and songwriting to express the participant's experiences and emotions around sibling relationships. For the first portion of the method, a semi-structured questionnaire was used to facilitate an open discussion around the complexities of the sibling relationship that touches on various parts of the literature including: conflict, connectedness, development, impact, and culture. Once the discussion was finished, the author asked about any emotions that surfaced

from the discussion and wrote them down as a starting point for the songwriting exercise. The author then worked collaboratively with the participant to decide the tone of the song by providing various chords to choose from meant to evoke different emotions. Once a guitar chord progression was chosen, the author worked collaboratively with the participant to create lyrics and a vocal melody. By creating the instrumental music based on emotions felt during the discussion, the author hoped this would allow for a better flow of lyric creation without compromising message for aesthetic quality. With permission attained from the participant and the internship supervisor, the music part of the session was recorded for the purposes of this writer being able to use it as a reflection tool for journaling. The material was destroyed after this writer's journal was complete. The author and participant recorded the final creative product together and ended the session by discussing how it felt to engage in this songwriting activity.

Record Keeping and Data Collection

Before starting the session, the participant signed a consent form so the researcher could record the session and creative product. Recording of the session was used to listen to while the researcher made clinical notes after the session. The recording was kept in a secure folder for 10 days after collection to be reviewed with a supervisor, then permanently deleted immediately after review.

The author kept a personal journal in addition to clinical notes in order to process personal feelings and experiences regarding the intervention and topic. The author also sought supervision from their modality and clinical supervisors to further discuss and process the experience. By doing so, the author was able to consolidate findings and deepen their reflections on observations with licensed professionals. To deepen understanding of the song created with the participant, the author created their own visual art while listening to the finished creative

product. Lastly, after time away from the artistic engagement, the author engaged in one musical improvisation and process the experience in their personal journal. In summary, the data collected by the researcher consisted of clinical notes taken (for general reflection of observations, but not directly from the participant's words, actions, or behaviors), a journal reflection, visual artistic reflection, and one musical improvisation.

Results

Using a general inductive analysis approach, the researcher extracted salient themes from one day after the session, and an artistic reflection comprised of a visual response from listening to the client's creative product and a musical response to process the activity afterward. The researcher analyzed each piece of data three times, consolidating findings and themes with each analysis. The artistic reflection used a similar inductive analysis approach as the journaling, except the themes extracted were related to each art form created. The results of each set of data are displayed below.

Journaling from Session

After multiple close readings and coding of the text, the following prominent themes emerged: conflict and rivalry, warmth and complexities, parental influence, physical and mental health, and impact on the self. Examples from the themes are displayed in table one below.

Table 1

Categories from reflection journal one day after session

Conflict and Rivalry	Warmth and Complexities	Parental Influence	Physical and Mental Health	Impact on The Self
Close in age with siblings Close proximity in living space (eg sharing one bathroom with all siblings).	Conflicting perceptions of sibling relationships	Strict and Distant Parents	Debilitating diseases of siblings with short life expectancy	Quiet characteristics from a young age Never likes to be serious Overachiever who values intelligence

Daily interpersonal conflict and displaced aggression	Practical jokes between siblings during formative years	Intense beliefs of parental favoritism in siblings	History of family trauma and mental health issues	Low tolerance for conflict in friendships but high tolerance for conflict in romantic relationships
Passing judgment on personal lives	Emotional and financial support for siblings in times of crisis	Parents divorced during formative years	Experiences of death impacting mental health development	Distorted views of gender and acceptable behavior
	Concern for overall sibling well-being	Parents both died at a young age		Permanently strained sibling relationships,

Table 1 cont.

Categories from reflection journal one day after session

Artistic Response/Reflection

Visual Response

For the visual response of the reflection, the researcher listened to the client's creative product on repeat while engaging in canvas painting. The final result of this artistic engagement is displayed in the image below.

Figure 1

Visual Response to Client Song



Using the same inductive analysis approach as the journaling but for artistic aspects, the following salient themes were lifted out of the visual response: contrast, distance, curves, hope/yearning, and sorrow. Demonstrated in table 2 below are descriptive examples in the artistic response of each theme.

Table 2

Categories from visual response to client's song

Contrast	Distance	Curves	Hope	Sorrow
More use of light than dark, but light catches the eye first	Islands are separated by rough water	Every paint stroke of the landscape is curved	Multiple shooting stars in the sky	Water is deep blue, with even darker waves within
Sky is black with scattered white stars that vary in brightness	Waves and stars vary in distance from each other	Flow of all curves move in the same direction	Boat has white sails in ready position (white flags)	Sky behind stars is completely black
Color of islands is a stark contrast from the water and sky	Large space between islands and first row of stars	Water forms a bell shape to separate the islands	Boat is resting in the water, waiting to set sail	Colors from water and sky seep into each other

Musical Response

For the musical response, the researcher processed how it felt to do the visual response through musical improvisation on a table drum. Below is a link to an audio recording of the musical response:

https://soundcloud.com/amanda-bysheim-934888921/musical-response?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Using an inductive analysis approach similar to the visual response but for musical components, the following themes were lifted out of the musical response: silence, pain and anger, intensity, reverb, and determination. Table 3 gives important examples of each theme.

Table 3

Categories from musical improvisation

Pain and Anger	Intensity	Silence and Reverb	Determination

Silence in beginning followed by long sigh of frustration	Improv starts with low but steady 4/4 beat	Long amounts of silence throughout improv	Drumming begins with slow and steady beat
Drumming increases in volume whenever beat speeds up	Speed of drumming increases when volume increases	There is a boom the drum between each beat besides the middle of the improv	Hands sometimes struggle to find beat but continue to drum
When hands become synced, the volume increases	Drumming sometimes resembles a racing heartbeat	Whenever drumming drops out, the drum rings out until silent	Downbeat is always steady throughout improv
Each beat of the drum is hard and physically hurt the researcher to play	Cat scurrying in the background as speed and volume increases	Second hand echoes the first hand throughout the improv	

Table 3 cont.

Categories from musical improvisation

Discussion

Using a collaborative songwriting intervention in an individual, single session model, the researcher explored the dynamics, complexities, and impact of sibling relationships with older adults. The inductive analysis of journaling and artistic response that followed the session revealed information that mainly supported the literature review but made important discoveries that slightly deviated from the literature.

To start, the analysis results were highly congruent in relation to physical and mental health. Gilligan et al. (2020) and Stocker et al. (2020) acknowledge that siblings can provide significant sources of support for one another, with Gilligan et al. (2020) mentioning that this support can be especially important when one sibling has physical or mental health issues that impact their daily living. Gilligan et al. (2020) mention that the health of siblings may influence the quality of the relationship. Analysis reveals that physical illness with multiple siblings and a family history of trauma and mental illness have a profound impact on sibling relationship. Displaced anger was common during formative years, and later diagnoses of physical illness created a complicated dynamic between siblings. The dependence of those with physical illness

creates conflict and pressure within the sibling relationship, especially once both parents have passed away, leaving the sibling(s) as the primary caregiver(s). The healthy sibling may view their relationship as burdensome, while the ill sibling may feel the need to prove their independence; and this is evident within the results. The sense of determination from the participant was felt through the analysis results of the musical reflection.

Themes related to conflict were the most prominent throughout the results and revealed important elements congruent with literature review. Stocker et al. (2020) mention age difference as a variable contributing to sibling relationship quality, and Bass et al (2006) mention how close proximity is a risk for conflict and abuse. Analysis revealed the majority of conflict occurred between siblings closest in age, as well as multiple siblings sharing one bathroom as a large source of conflict. In addition, results showed that daily interpersonal conflict occurred and displaced aggression was viewed as normal sibling behavior. In the literature review, Eriksen & Jensen (2006), Stocker et al. (2020), and Gilligan et al. (2020) emphasize that sibling conflict and rivalry is commonplace within US families, creating a social norm within these sibling relationships. Eriksen and Jensen (2006) highlight that the idea of siblings as rivals minimizes acts of aggression that would be considered abusive in any other relationship. Given this and the distorted view of conflict within the data, the analysis results reveal the possible occurrence of at least verbal abuse within the sibling relationships.

It is important to note that conflict was so salient within the journaling, that it influenced the presence of conflict in the artistic response. The theme of sorrow was integrated into the visual reflection as a response to the conflict found within the data from both sets of notes. Dominant themes of pain, anger, and intensity within the musical reflection were representative of the emotional processing of such conflict as a therapist, researcher, and sibling abuse survivor.

The literature review mentions that sibling abuse, including verbal abuse, can have lasting negative impacts of development, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and mental health (Katz & Hamama, 2017; Monahan, K., 2010; Krienert & Walsh, 2011; Morrill, M., 2014; and Bass et al., 2006), which are all evident within the analysis of the clinical and non-clinical notes. The impacts on personality and perception of others related to sibling conflict and rivalry are that the participant: never likes to be serious, is an overachiever who values intelligence, has distorted views of gender and acceptable behavior, and has a low tolerance for conflict and friendships.

The second theme most prominent was related to the warmth and complexity of the sibling relationship. The literature places a much needed emphasis on the complexities within sibling dynamic, and the results of this study show just how complex sibling relationships are, even with individuals who report having strained relationships with their siblings in older adulthood. Starting with the basics, the literature review mentions that most siblings live together until early adulthood and have emotionally intense relationships that are characterized by both levels of warmth and conflict (Stocker et al., 2020, p. 176). The research from this study highly supports this statement, as high levels of conflict and warmth were present in all sibling relationships of the participant. Multiple research studies within the mental health field regard sibling relationships as one of the most enduring, important, and long-lasting relationships throughout one's life, as many individuals use siblings as personal resources and reflections of self-worth (Fairchild & McFerran, 2018; Whipple & Finton, 1995; Gilligan et al., 2020; Stocker et al., 2020; Monahan, K., 2010), and this was also evident within the results. While much of the participant's sibling relationships were filled with conflict, major life events have kept the siblings connected by relying on each other for emotional and instrumental support. The impact

of the sibling relationship within the analysis results also show that the participant's view of their own self-worth was highly influenced by their siblings' perceptions of them.

Established in the literature is the fact that, although conflict and aggression is commonplace in many households in the US, families are also seen as units. In many cultures across the US, individuals characterize their sibling relationships as loving, even in instances of family violence. This idea is highly evident in the analysis results, as the participant gave many conflicting perceptions of their sibling relationships. The sibling relationships were initially described as strained but still have strong concerns for overall sibling well-being, provide emotional and financial support in times of crisis, and are filled with warm memories during formative years. This warmth and complexity was felt as significant to the sibling relationship and was reflected in the artistic response as well, as a response to the client's creative product. Themes most present in the visual reflection include contrast, hope, and curves, which were all attributed to warmth and complexity. Within the musical reflection, themes of silence and reverb were representations of such complexities as well, with the boom of the drum relating to the resonance that warmth creates among sibling relationships with high conflict.

One important theme from the results that was underestimated in the literature was the impact of parental influence with older adults. The results present numerous examples of parental influence throughout the life span. Compliance was taught from a young age, which is highly congruent with research from Bass et al. (2006). The literature discusses the important roles that parents play in sibling relationships, including connection. Stocker et al. (2020) state that parents play a large role in sibling connectedness and that perceptions of parental favoritism can hinder sibling connectedness. This was strongly evident in the findings with regards to perceptions of parental favoritism still hindering the sibling relationship well into older

adulthood, even after parents have since passed away. Feelings of rivalry and perceptions of parental favoritism in the literature were negatively associated with well-being (Gilligan et al., 2020; Stocker et al., 2020), which was strongly represented within the results. Stocker et al. (2020) and Gilligan et al. (2020) report that sibling conflict and parental favoritism are linked to antisocial behavior and hostility, which is reflected within the theme of impact on development in the analysis results. The participant of this study still feels strongly about the difference in treatment between siblings, leading to distorted perceptions of themselves and their siblings.

The relation of parental influence in the results to the literature shows high intrafamilial factors to sibling abuse. Bass et al. (2006) explain that a patriarchal and oppressive father, poor communication, and blurred roles among family members are all risk factors for abuse, and all three of these factors are present in the results. Intrafamilial trauma is present within the father's personal history, and has influenced how the participant's siblings were treated during formative years. Eriksen and Jensen (2006) have found that sibling conflict and violence is embedded within parental violence, with Bass et al. (2006) highlighting individual factors for abuse that include unmet needs and displaced aggression. While parent to child violence was not confirmed in the analysis results, there appears to be a connection to the conflict between siblings and parenting style. The participant views the father's intrafamilial trauma as justification for his actions during the participant's formative years, and displaced aggression was commonplace within the participant's household. Marital discord was also present within the results, which has been shown to significantly increase sibling violence (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006).

Another factor of the results that supports the literature is in relation to the arts-based method chosen. The literature discussed the benefits of individual, single-session models and songwriting with older adults, and the results of this study support such benefits. The participant

reported feeling more comfortable with the individual intervention as opposed to a small group model, leading to richer data collection. Beer (2015) mentions how arts-based research allows the creative arts to expand consciousness and transform perceptions, and this was highly evident in both the songwriting exercise and the musical reflection that followed the clinical and non-clinical notes of the session. Both the researcher and the participant were able to deepen their understanding of the participant's relationships to their siblings and the impact through the use of music.

Two important discoveries were made from the results that add to the research within the literature review and provide a different perspective on older adults. First, Stocker et al. (2020) report that marriage status influences the sibling relationship, with evidence of lower levels of contact and support between siblings who are both married. The results do not support marriage status as an influence in contact or support, but what was rather influential was conflict between siblings and spouses. Conflict between the participant and her sibling's spouse negatively impacted their sibling relationship quality. Second, Eriksen and Jensen (2006), Stocker et al. (2020), and Gilligan et al. (2020) all suggest that sibling relationships become positive yet distant as siblings age while also acknowledging that sibling conflict and rivalry are commonplace in many families. The results from this study show that sibling conflict has lasting impacts on relationship quality, regardless of age, and that distance is a primary factor in older adults reporting positive relationships with siblings that have high levels of conflict.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations within this study. First, restrictions were in place due to the pandemic, and the study was adjusted multiple times to fit a community sample of one. The study and originally been designed as a multiple session, individual model with for participants

then transformed to a small group, before settling on an individual, single session model. This limited the amount of time spent fine-tuning the method and intervention. Additionally, the participant mostly spoke of their sibling relationships as a collective, rather than discussing each individual sibling relationship. As a result, the data collected was not as rich as the researcher had originally intended. A discussion prepared for this scenario, with specific follow-up questions related to each individual relationship of the participant, could have provided more depth to the results and much needed distinctions in relation to sibling dynamics. Lastly, the study was conducted with a cis-gendered, straight, white female of middle class socioeconomic status. This limits the cultural expansiveness of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

One important recommendation for future research would be for researchers to work towards cultural competency. Certain studies found for the literature review did not place any importance on cultural considerations or mention the cultural biases of the researchers. This study has established that culture can be an influential factor in the sibling relationship. It is important to be mindful that even if participants seem to be from the same culture as each other, researchers cannot make any assumptions.

Future research is also needed around sibling relationships with older adults is a primary need. There are numerous misconceptions around the impact of sibling relationships in older adulthood, and more research is needed to challenge these ideas. Studies carried out with older adults show more positive relationships in adulthood, with frequency of contact linked to greater life satisfaction (Gilligan et al., 2020), and this study has shown that this is not so true. Issues of conflict, rivalry, and parental favoritism are still influential in older adult sibling relationships and more research is needed to reflect this.

References

- Abrahan, V. D., Jaramillo, A. L., & Justel, N. (2019). Benefits of Music Therapy in the Quality of Life of Older Adults. *Revista Ciencias de la Salud*, 17(3), 9-19.
<https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/revsalud/a.8349>
- Ahessy, B. (2017). Song writing with clients who have dementia: A case study. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 55, 23–31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.03.002>
- Bass, L. B., Taylor, B. A., Knudson-Martin, C., & Huenergardt, D. (2006). Making Sense of Abuse: Case Studies in Sibling Incest. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 28(1), 87–109.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-006-9697-0>
- Beer, L. E. (2015). From Embedded to Embodied: Including Music in Arts-Based Music Therapy Research. *Music Therapy Perspectives*, 34(1), 33-40. doi: 10.1093/mtp/miv006
- Cirelli, L. K., Peiris, R., Tavassoli, N., Recchia, H., & Ross, H. (2020). It takes two to tango: Preschool siblings’ musical play and prosociality in the home. *Social Development*, 29(4), 964–975. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12439>
- Eriksen, S., & Jensen, V. (2006). All in the Family? Family Environment Factors in Sibling Violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, 21(8), 497–507. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-006-9048-9>
- Fairchild, R., & McFerran, K. S. (2018). Understanding Children’s Resources in the Context of Family Violence through a Collaborative Songwriting Method. *Children Australia*, 43(4), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2018.45>
- Fairchild, R., & McFerran, K. S. (2019). “Music is everything”: Using collaborative group songwriting as an arts-based method with children experiencing homelessness and family violence. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 28(2), 88–107.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2018.1509106>

- Gilligan, M., Stocker, C. M., & Jewsbury Conger, K. (2020). Sibling Relationships in Adulthood: Research Findings and New Frontiers. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 12(3), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12385>
- Katz, C., & Hamama, L. (2017). From My Own Brother in My Own Home: Children’s Experiences and Perceptions Following Alleged Sibling Incest. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32(23), 3648–3668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515600876>
- Krienert, J. L., & Walsh, J. A. (2011). Sibling Sexual Abuse: An Empirical Analysis of Offender, Victim, and Event Characteristics in National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) Data, 2000–2007. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 20(4), 353–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2011.588190>
- Monahan, K. (2010). Themes of Adult Sibling Sexual Abuse Survivors in Later Life: An Initial Exploration. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 38(4), 361–369. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-010-0286-1>
- Morrill, M. (2014). Sibling Sexual Abuse: An Exploratory Study of Long-term Consequences for Self-esteem and Counseling Considerations. *Journal of Family Violence*, 29(2), 205–213. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-013-9571-4>
- Stocker, C. M., Gilligan, M., Klopach, E. T., Conger, K. J., Lanthier, R. P., Neppl, T. K., O’Neal, C. W., & Wickrama, K. A. S. (n.d.). *Sibling Relationships in Older Adulthood: Links With Loneliness and Well-Being*. 12.
- Tener, D. (2021). “I Love and Hate Him in the Same Breath”: Relationships of Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse With Their Perpetrating Siblings. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(13–14), NP6844–NP6866. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518821462>

Whipple, E. E., & Finton, S. E. (1995). Psychological maltreatment by siblings: An unrecognized form of abuse. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 12*(2), 135–146.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01876209>

THESIS APPROVAL FORM**Lesley University****Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences****Expressive Therapies Division****Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Music Therapy****Student's Name:** Amanda Bysheim**Type of Project:** Thesis**Title:** Examining Sibling Relationships with Older Adults Through Songwriting:
Development of a Method**Date of Graduation:** *May 21st 2022*

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: *Dr. Rebecca Zarate*