

What is the transpersonal experience of Sounding?

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Sounding is a vocal technique that allows spontaneous and improvisational expression of sounds that may or may not involve musical structures. This is interspersed with dialogue, allowing exploration of what happened for the client and therapist in the sounding.

Key words: sounding, transpersonal, sound, voice, music.

Working with the voice and sound has proved to be very effective for the task of healing arrested emotional development through direct expression of emotional material and this is well documented. Campbell (1992; 2000; 2002), D'Angelo (2000), Goldman (1998; 2002), Keyes (1997), Newham (1992; 1999) are examples of people who have been working with the voice for healing purposes in contemporary Western culture.

However, while using the voice and music for healing purposes is gradually becoming more widely known and accessible, it is not recognised as a therapeutic tool with the exception of Music Therapy, such as is offered at Nordoff-Robins in London. However, the focus there is on illness and disability.

There is very little evidence of use of sound and music in therapies and self-growth groups that address mental/emotional development, and while there is awareness of the use of sound and music in transpersonal therapy that addresses spiritual development, there is little awareness of the use of sound and music as a therapeutic tool in its own right.

Spiritual traditions such as Sufism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoga, Native American Indian, Inuit and Aboriginal all use music as a vital element of spiritual practice. But where does this leave many in the West who would like to access sound as a vehicle for change? This study is an attempt to address this.

Aims

The research specifically set out to:

- Inquire whether it is possible to explore within through the use of sound, voice and music?
- Inquire whether Sounding can lead towards the transpersonal understanding that Swami Ajaya (1983, p.125) talks of, *“Conflicts that result from dualities between oneself and others are also transcended when one takes the perspective of unitary consciousness, for one becomes aware that distinctions and boundaries are one’s own arbitrary creations rather than givens”*?
- See whether, while exploring with the voice, in what Stephen Cope (2000) calls ‘transformational spaces,’ the conflicts caused by dualities such as right/wrong, success/failure and subsequently fear, begin to dissolve? Cope defines these spaces as having, *“... certain qualities that are essential to the work of development. Without them we truly cannot find ourselves”* (p. 27).
- Inquire whether people have to be singers in order to express through the voice?

Methods

I chose to work in the area of Qualitative research as this is a search for meaning, and is more in step with how I choose to ask about the world around me. A series of life events 20 years ago led me to seek for deeper meanings in life, as the old meanings had ceased to hold value. This search for meaning became a spiritual search that led, through engagement with counselling as client, counsellor and tutor, to humanistic concepts. This, in turn, led to transpersonal concepts and philosophies. The research was seen as a continuation of that search and is why I approached this project from the Transpersonal paradigm.

However, as Hiles (2002a, p.1) points out, "*Qualitative research is becoming a vast and confusing area,*" and it is possible that choosing Integral Inquiry as a Strategy is a reflection of this confusion as I was drawn to aspects of several models. On the other hand the model of Integral Inquiry would seem to encourage inclusivity. It is looked upon by Braud & Anderson (1989, p. 35) as an expanded method of Disciplined Inquiry, which is advocated by Hiles (2002b, p. 4).

There is another reason I was drawn to, and resonated with, Integral Inquiry. The model I use for counselling is an Integrative one that combines Person-Centered, Psychodynamic, Gestalt and TA, which I feel has led to an ability to synthesise different approaches into a cohesive model. (See Diagram 1).

Hazrat Inayat Khan's (1991) book, '*The Mysticism of Sound and Music,*' proved to be an invaluable resource in terms of understanding the deeper aspects of sound and music and how to approach these in practical terms.

A Human Inquiry group was formed with people who had already shown an interest in working with the voice, in chanting. I approached 7 people, 6 women and 1 man, with an age range of 40 to 60, and a broad socio/economic spread.

This was a small number, but I took the lead from Khan, "*There is nothing in this world that can help one spiritually more than music. Meditation prepares, but music is the highest for touching perfection. I have seen wonders happen through the psychological power of music, but only when there were congenial surroundings. Five or six persons, no more...*" (p.99).

An initial day workshop was held to look at the aims and objectives of the study, and during discussion with group members, it was agreed that a series of 4 weekly sessions, in 4 blocks, thus a total of 16, would be appropriate. Each session was to last for two hours. A schedule was later worked out that was agreeable to all group members, as was a suitable venue. A hall that was acoustically resonant and also had a feeling of intimacy.

During the run of this schedule of 16, two hour sessions, Co-operative Inquiry with the Human Inquiry group generated data in the form of Sounding blocks interspersed with Group Narrative blocks. The narrative was used to derive meaning from what had gone on for group members during the Soundings.

One-to-one, post-session interviews were later carried out between myself and all group members after the schedule of 16 sessions was complete.

The Group Narrative blocks and Interviews were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), seeking meaning for individuals and each other.

I also used aspects of Heuristic Inquiry that Moustakas (1990) advocates, such as a personal Journal throughout the active group session work. The data generated by this was a useful counterpoint to the data generated by Group work.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study I was mindful of the need to ensure safety of group work by aware facilitation, holding to British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines for research with human participants and BACP's Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Pseudonyms were chosen by each group member to ensure confidentiality, and were used throughout the study. I chose to use my own name. During the initial day workshop a copy of an Informed Consent Form was handed out for each member to study at their leisure. These were later signed and returned to myself.

An issue arose around difficulties I experienced in the amount of time I was taking in transcribing both Group Narrative and hour-long interviews. After permission was obtained from each group member in the form of an amended Consent Form, an outside agency was used for this purpose

Findings

Analysis of the Group Narrative revealed:

Emotional Themes that came from the immediacy of the Sounding itself showed individual experiences of *expression* of emotional material such as fear, anger, sadness and joy.

Analysis of the more reflective, post-session interviews, revealed:

The above emotional expressions were accompanied by more complex *experiences*, in the form of **Emergent Themes** that included:

- The importance of aware facilitation
- That Sounding allowed real-time contact with the inner self
- That individuals experienced spontaneous visualisations that were accompanied by feelings of well-being
- That change and self-growth were experienced, and
- The importance of the group to individuals.

The richness and depth of sub-themes within the Emergent Themes revealed the transpersonal experience of group members.

The emotional movement that happened within in the Human Inquiry group, from fear to joy, is of course experienced in many group settings. But there are some interesting factors here. The work itself was done over a period of 6 months, encompassing 16 planned two-hour sessions, but with only 14 actually taking place. The *depth* of movement shown in that

time was marked, and is unusual in my experience as a counseling tutor at Diploma level with 'Here & Now' groups, and group facilitator of self-growth Workshops.

These two blocks of evidence show movement from egoic-based fear towards the joy of union with others.

This would appear to indicate expansion of consciousness.

Answers to the question posed at the beginning were,

- Yes, it is possible to explore within through the use of Sound, Voice and Music.
- Yes, this leads towards the transpersonal understanding of transcending dualities.
- Yes, Cope's 'transformational spaces' facilitate dissolving of dualities.
- No, people do not have to be singers in order to express through the voice.

Summary

The vocal technique of Sounding emerged from the Group work, and appears to operate in a place that might be best thought of as the gap between sound and music
In the thesis I described it as,

"In a very real sense this is music, but maybe not music as we understand it in the West. The word dissonance applies but it is far more than that. Individuals have found themselves in a space where it is OK to be themselves, to sing whatever comes up and not worry about whether it harmonises with others. And in that not worrying, so a harmony of a very different order emerges. A harmony that is based on being together as individuals."

The use of Sounding as a technique appears to facilitate levels of intimacy and connection that are not experienced in dialogue exchange, and the role of Facilitator was crucial here, especially in the beginning of the work. The author used Cope's ideas on 'transformational spaces' and the Taoist concept of 'Wu-Wei' as underlying principles in his approaching to this role in this context.

Engaging in the vocal technique of Sounding in a group setting, appears to be what Fromm (2002) described as 'meaningful,' or 'enlightened' activity.

It would appear to not only promote psychological growth for individuals in areas that are traditionally addressed by counselling and psychotherapy, but also spiritual growth, the domain of the transpersonal.

It is maybe in the richness and depth of the sub-themes contained in the **Emergent Themes from interviews** that indications of transpersonal experiences are found.

That in a safe place, sounds emerged that were truly expressive of the inner self. That there was a direct connection to the body that allowed an opening to life itself. This led to release of repressed emotional material. This in turn led to experiences of visualisations that were unbidden, spontaneous and removed from normal, cultural inhibitions. These were accompanied by feelings of self-affirmation, power and strength that were also spontaneous and from deep within.

Exploring through Sounding led to an opening up vocally, awareness of a deeper purpose and a desire to find the 'real me.' And finally, after direct connection to self was achieved, so this allowed real contact between individuals that began to dissolve egocentric boundaries. Individuals began to connect with each other in a way that was direct and an intimacy was allowed take place that was beyond the normal experience. An expansion of consciousness that strongly suggests transpersonal experience.

Sounding appears to be a new therapeutic tool.

Implications of the findings for counselling practice, and considerations for further research

Group dynamics were a very important factor. The group was selected based on my intuitive processes and this proved to be a very good guide for this initial study. Most of the group had been studying Yoga and involved in chant groups of some kind.

How the technique of Sounding would be experienced by other groups, who may not have had previous experience of self-growth, is a question that only further research can answer. Certainly the possibility exists that this technique could be used in various settings: prisons, addiction Treatment Centers and human development groups. I am unsure in which direction this work may take me, but I am staying open to possibilities and will remain so.

The development of the technique of Sounding brought together different elements within myself in a unique synthesis.

My experience as a professional singer and songwriter, combined with that of professional counsellor, tutor of counselling courses and workshop facilitator, means that within me there is a blend that is not common. However, I feel that while this blend may have been necessary in order to begin this work, this particular blend of experiences may not be necessary for others who wish to attempt to duplicate the study.

I feel that a background of counselling experience is necessary, plus an experience of facilitating groups for the full benefit of this technique to be exploited. While a background of being a professional singer and writer may not be necessary, there does need to be ease with the voice and the use of it. I feel that those who may follow do need to have worked with her/himself and others in the area of vocal expression so that members of a group can feel ease from her/him. A willingness and ability to go into risk areas is necessary.

Another important aspect of Sounding is that of dissonance. Allowing ourselves and others to be who we/they are in our/their voice. Harmony will come and go, and can we let that happen? To shift from chaos into order and then back to chaos without becoming attached to order is not easy. But this is what needs to be done and what makes Sounding so unique. I have found no evidence of this aspect in the way others are working at the present moment, and feels that Sounding has real potential as a therapeutic tool.

An end note

I have recently begun to use the technique of Sounding in my counselling practice on a one-to-one basis with a long-term client who I have been seeing for several years.

After a few sessions, I asked the client how it felt to be working with Sounding. The client responded,

“This is good. This is very different. I can use words, and hide. I’m good at that. But there’s no hiding with the voice.”

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About the author

Russell Stone is registered with the BACP and UKCP as an integrative counselor and transpersonal therapist, and is a skillful group facilitator. As well as having an MA in transpersonal counseling and psychotherapy, he has taught on trainee therapists for many years. He combines all this with a wealth of experience from a successful international career as a composer and musical performer with some of the world’s best known artistes. Russell uses Sounding to help individuals, groups and organizations to explore beyond their own boundaries, and evolve towards their highest potential.