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Music Therapy as Cyclical Participatory Inquiry: revisiting a project after 25 years

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The presenter will pose the question: how can weekly music therapy be framed and experienced as cyclical inquiry?

In the paper she will summarise and discuss the cycles of a year of Music Therapy Participatory Action Research involving minimally speaking people with a history of institutionalisation as they adapted to life in the community. This project took place in 2001, a time of historical social change in the UK and was the focus for the first doctoral study involving both Music Therapy and Participatory Action Research in the world (Reason and Bradbury 2001; Warner 2026).

Revisiting this project allows it to be reframed within a critical disability perspective, with influence from the paradigms of feminist theory, emancipatory research and anti-oppressive practice (Pickard 2023). By positioning the 'voices' of the participants through description of their music, timings, actions and choices, counterbalanced by reflexive perspectives of carers and therapists, the audience can make up their own minds about what was communicated by each participant.

The inquiry involved both highly ambivalent and highly committed engagement, unique instrumental, vocal and sensory encounters and clear evidence, through many tiny changes, of a deepening sense of community. The non-speaking participants were described at the time as having 'profound intellectual disabilities and severe challenging behaviour'; this characterisation will be critiqued. The audience will be encouraged to explore how this approach might inform contemporary practices of co-production of services through direct comment by minimally speaking people.

References

Pickard, B. (2023). **Moving towards anti-oppressive practice in music therapy.** *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*. [Online] 32 (4), 287–289. [Accessed 11/9/25]

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001). *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: Sage.

Warner, C. (2026). *Involving Minimally Speaking Communicators as Collaborators in Group Music Therapy and Research: Listen to Me!* London: Routledge [in press]

Biography

Catherine Warner, PhD, was Senior Lecturer and Course Leader of the MA in Music Therapy at the University of the West of England. Her clinical practice as a music therapist has spanned work in community mental health, bereavement and palliative care, neuro-rehabilitation and intellectual disabilities. She has been particularly interested in non-oppressive practice, service-user consultation and barriers to access in therapy and training. Now retired, she is a cellist and pianist and enjoys playing as an improvising musician as well as in the Western classical traditions of chamber music and opera.

Recent Publications

Warner, C. (2026) **Involving Minimally Speaking Communicators as Collaborators in Group Music Therapy and Research: Listen to Me!** *London: Routledge* (in production: due for publication January 2026)

Warner, C., Sloboda, A. (Editors) (2025) **Music Therapy Supervision: Diverse Perspectives on its Cultures and Practices.** *London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers***.**

Watson, T., Warner, C. (2024) **Contemporary Issues in Music Therapy Training: A Resource for Trainees, Trainers and Practitioners.** *London: Routledge.*