

INVITED SUBMISSION | PEER REVIEWED

Carolyn Kenny: In Search for Holos

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A personal note

*I met Carolyn Kenny in 1982, at the seminal symposium in New York – Music in the Life of Man: Toward a Theory of Music Therapy – organized by Barbara Hesser. Carolyn and I shared a common interest in theory and in the next two decades we corresponded regularly, exchanged books and ideas and met at several occasions in USA, Canada and Europe where we had the opportunity to dialogue. After the New York symposium Barbara and Carolyn invited me to join Phoenicia Music Therapy Retreat Community, which met each summer in the Catskills Mountains, upstate New York. Carolyn invited me to give a seminar on 'Music and identity' in Vancouver in 1995 and we both attended the World Conference in Washington in 1999. We also attended Mechthild Langenberg's symposiums on qualitative methods in Berlin and Carolyn came to Oslo as lecturer and external examiner for Karette Sten-sæth's PhD. in 2008. I also contributed with a chapter to Carolyn's edited book *Listening, Playing, Creating* (Kenny, (ed.) 1995), and she helped me to copy edit some of my English articles.*

*When Carolyn asked me to write a forward to her second book, *The Field of Play. A Guide for the Theory and Practice of Music Therapy* (1989), I felt much honored and did my best to introduce and support her effort to put forward her worldview and theories. Although, I must admit I found part of the text a bit enigmatic – and I still do. Perhaps no surprise, since Carolyn herself admits that her fields described in her book «are enigmatic and wait enduringly for the 'conditions' in each unique field of experience and engagement» (Kenny, 2000, p.67). When I now read the forward again, thirty years (sic!) after it was written I can spot this ambivalence in my honouring Carolyn's effort to engage in qualitative research and theory building. Not saying too much about the content of the book, I reinforced my view upon Carolyn as one of the first music therapists to search an alternative to the prevalent positivist hegemony in North American music therapy up till then.*

Two kinds of holism

In my critical rereading of the book I have tried to both understand better what Carolyn is suggesting, as well as to look closer at some of the underlying worldviews that informs and directs her visions. It becomes evident that Kenny's quest for a better theoretical understanding of some of the basic underlying principles in a successful music therapy have to involve a kind of «wholeness». She wants to promote a «holistic theory» in contrast to what she considers as the more fragmentary and reductionist approach advocated by the natural science model behind much music therapy research.

While reading the first chapters I came to remember a text written by my fellow researcher social anthropologist Odd Are Berkaak in a book on contemporary culture we published in 1992 (Berkaak & Ruud, 1992). In the first chapter of this book, Berkaak

reflects on strategies often used in studies of contemporary culture (Berkaak, 1992). We must remember that anthropology was an important background in Kenny's thinking, brought with her from her graduate studies in anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in the mid-seventies (Kenny, 2002, p.157). As Berkaak observes, anthropologists, when they try to understand their observations, often turn to a concept of holism. Holism is not a theory, but a kind of thinking based on the assumption that the universe, living nature and human society is a coherent system of separate, albeit interacting parts, Berkaak states (ibid., pp. 20-21). This wholeness can be understood to be more than the sum of its parts – this «more» is *holos*. Kenny seeks to create a language or find the underlying metaphors to describe this wholeness. This quest for a holistic theory about music therapy is crucial to Kenny's thinking, and she is quite explicit in formulating the main metaphors concerning what constitutes the underlying «order» or structure of this wholeness.

As a meta-narrative the concept of holism is covering a basic distinction between two kinds of holism, a *monistic* and a *dualistic holism*, according to Berkaak. Dualism, in this context, implies how the universe contains two levels of realities – a spiritual, transcendental and a concrete, passing world. Through reflection we may gain access to the upper level, while we access the concrete world through our senses. In the dualistic version of holism, *holos* is a universal order considered as a transcendental structure lying behind our observable reality, a *spirit*, *Geist* or as *logos* in ancient Greek philosophy. For Berkaak it is important to underscore that in order to be transcendental, this *holos* at any moment has already been established. What is actually going on, for instance in our case in an ongoing music therapy session, may then appear to us as a reflection of «something more real».

The monistic view of *holos* contends that the universe only contains the present material world we may gain access to through our senses. In this case, the sensing and experiencing individual is the only instance binding together phenomena in the outer world into a coherent and interacting whole, Berkaak continues (ibid., p. 22). Wholeness then is patterns observed in the space of action created by active agents. *Holos*, then, will emerge from elementary types of relations and symbolic forms towards increasingly more comprehensive connections between systems. This is a basic humanistic form of holism, anchored in the present and at the same time pointing towards an emergent pattern.

Kenny's view on *holos*

It becomes evident, both from Kenny's own systems of values and influences from her indigenous background, as well from the many references she makes to scholars within different disciplines and traditions, how she places herself within a dualistic holism. In her first book, *The Mythical Artery: The Magic of Music Therapy* (Kenny, 1982), she regards music as carrying implicit healing patterns for human development, «identified spontaneously by patients in a psychiatric setting» (Kenny, 1989, p.6). In this early work she focussed on the «death-rebirth myth» and in *The Field of Play* she brings the content of a myth – or as she adds in a parenthesis – «an exemplary journey or inspirational story communicating *human constants* (my emphasis) even in pure sound» into an abstract ritual form, for therapeutic use (loc. cit).

This belief in a pre-existing order, an already established structure takes many forms. Borrowing from the more esoteric New Age theory, Kenny is referring how «every particle in the physical universe takes its characteristics from the pitch and pattern and overtones of its particular frequencies, its singing. And the same is true of all radiation, all forces great and small, all information», according to Georg Leonard (ibid., p. 8). And Kenny comments the quote by stating «there is an exquisite beauty in patterns seemingly unknown, yet sensed, felt and experienced». In other words, there is an underlying pattern, some kind of *holos* operating here. We can perceive it and act upon it, and put it to work in therapy.

At the end of this introductory chapter, Kenny comes up with another underlying metaphor for holos, namely *energy*. This time Kenny borrows from Argüelles book *Earth Ascending: An Illustrated Treatise on the Law Governing Whole Systems*, where the author addresses the issue of art and consciousness: «Art is a function of energy. Given the unity of mankind as a single planetary organism, art is the expressive connective tissue binding together the individual organisms through energy transformations focused in the emotional centres of those organisms» (ibid., p. 20).

Holos here seems to equal energy, and art is a function of energy. Kenny further links this to aesthetics and beauty. In this way the primary element of her fields becomes *The aesthetic*: «The aesthetic is an environment in which the conditions include the individual's human tendencies, values, attitudes, life experiences and all factors which unite to create the whole and complete form of beauty, which is the person» (ibid.:75) In other words, the person by becoming the aesthetic (art – energy – beauty) has the function of the binding force which holds the parts in this universe together. But, as we will see, there are more primary elements in this system of fields.

The language of immediacy

Kenny often refers to the term «language of immediacy». «Our words mirror, if not replicate, our music therapy experience», she states (ibid., p. 47). With a reference to phenomenology, she will seek to reach the essence of the music therapeutic experience. Kenny wants to come close to the clinical experience. It seems like she wants to gain direct access to significant moments in music therapy and she advises us to start theory building from the immediacy of the moment. In an article in *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* from 1999, that is ten years after the publication of the *Field of Play*, Kenny again takes up her project of «developing general theory of music therapy», as it is stated in the subtitle of the article. This time she lists and comments upon a whole new set of concepts and principles in addition to Aesthetics, like intersubjectivity, empathy, uniqueness, representation, symbol and metaphor (Kenny, 1999).

In a comment to this article, two Swedish researchers – a philosopher of ideas and a musicologist/music therapist – have reflected upon her article (Bärmark & Hallin, 1999). One of their remarks concern the notion of immediacy or the idea of «direct perception» and how this requires being experienced in the relevant field of thought in order to perceive meaning, form and unity: «Coming very close means handling phenomenological data, which is immediately given. But what is immediately given is given to a subject with appropriate personal knowledge and skills. We are not coming empty-handed to a meeting. We are not coming with an empty bucket to be filled by experiences from the sessions in music therapy. We are coming with the search light of our embodied theories and personal skills. Nothing is given if we are not theoretically prepared», Bärmark and Hallin comment. Instead of «immediacy» they would rather speak of the «experiential knowledge» we may gain from resting in the experience (p. 139).

This again seems to clarify a difference between monistic and dualistic holism. While the dualistic mode seems to obtain knowledge (directly) from a pre-given structure or field, the monistic approach would strive for holism through building upon experiential knowledge gained from actual empirical settings or meetings with clients. This is actually not necessarily a disagreement about the search for a holistic theory. It is rather different opinions about how and where to go about to find it.

Kenny was concerned about creating a theory based upon her clinical experience. In that sense we could interpret her work and theory building within a model of monistic holism. From Chapter Five in *The Field of Play* – «The interplay of the fields» – she outlines a clinical practice based upon clinical improvisation much in line with standard procedures and philosophy of clinical improvisation as it has been practiced after Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins. In her visit to Nordoff/Robbins Centre in London in the mid 1980s, Kenny was much impressed when she observed Rachael Vernay improvising at the piano with one of her young clients (Kenny, 2002, p.165). When Kenny

writes about improvisation, she mentions elements like ritual (in the sense of repeatable forms), a particular state of consciousness, power (in the sense of agency) and creative process. She seems to be much in accordance with current empirical thinking about clinical improvisation. Her alignment with other psychological theories also comes through in the 1999 article on theory, where she mentions other fields of conditions known to most clinicians like intersubjectivity, relationships, and so on. We must not forget, however, that all these fields or conditions were based upon a firm belief in the idea of the person as Aesthetic. And further, how the person was seen as a self-organizing process towards some kind of primordial wholeness or implicate order.

Systems theories

Carolyn Kenny was open to ambivalences and contradictions, and she admits the dilemmas she was confronting in her theory making, as she replied in her comment to Bärmark & Hallin (Kenny, 2000). It will also be unfair if we did not recognize her inclusion of systems theories into her theory building. To make a personal digression: By the time Carolyn was taking her masters degree in anthropology and interdisciplinary studies at Columbia University in Vancouver in the seventies, I was about the same time taking my Masters degree in Music Therapy at Florida State University. I had to engage in studying techniques of music and reinforcement within a behavioural regime. When practicing my music and behaviour modification skills at a local State hospital among clients with various mental and behavioural (I should like to add «social») difficulties, I could often point to how various kinds of deviant behaviour was the result of the asylum condition itself, not something born out of illness or handicap. In other words, within a systems theory approach (which I had not heard of at that time), it could be wise to start revising the system, rather than fix the symptoms.

My choice was to act politically upon the situation. Changing the system could mean a radical transformation of some of the conditions patients were given in a State Hospital. We found a language for this in the sociology of deviance, for instance Tomas Szasz, Erving Goffman, Thomas Scheff, Michel Foucault, as well as in the British anti-psychiatry movement (Donald Laing, David Cooper)(See also Ruud, 1980). The gradual movement of music therapy into community music therapy and the presentday user-oriented practice and approaches based upon recovery theory are indications of how systems have evolved and changed since then.

This brings to the fore what elements (or fields) we ought to consider in a system. As Kenny brings to our awareness, the set of fields and conditions may extend far beyond the primary field she has outlined. It might be, however, that her point of departure, that is, her own clinical experience has set up a territory, which limits the horizon. There will always be a question if it possible to make a *general theory* of music therapy from an individual music therapy work based upon improvisation, as it is seems to be the case when Kenny makes some of her clients her initial starting point for reflection. On the other hand, some primary basic elements of the music therapy process may appear, and Kenny certainly has traced many important elements in this process.

The strength of systems thinking lies in the observation of the circular determination inherent in holism, «how effects of events at any point in the circuit can be carried all around to produce changes at that point of origin», as stated by Bateson, (1972, p.116). Models based upon linear relations among elements cannot comprehend all the phenomena involved in a music therapy situation. When Kenny goes to cybernetics, structural thinking and systems theory, she acknowledges the problem of building a general theory based upon a linear determinism, like behaviour theory, which gives ontological and causal priority to a particular set of phenomena.

When Kenny introduces «systems» as part of her philosophy in Chapter three in the *Field of Play*, she refers to Ken Wilber's notion of how the universe is not a collection of physical objects, but rather a complicated web of relations between the various parts of an unified whole (Kenny, 1989, p. 62). On the next page she goes on to quote Ervin

László, the pianist and system theorist, how systems are «goal-oriented, self-maintaining, and self-creating expressions of nature's penchant for order and adjustment».

This idea of the person as a self-organizing system seems to be important to Kenny and an important part of dualistic holism. «Movements towards wholeness reflect the logic of the self-organizing system», she writes (1989, p.101.) Kenny recognizes the importance of dialogue as well as the role of the therapist in responding to the needs of the client. One may ask, however, if the self-organizational processes towards some kind of pre-established implicate order miss the centrality of the other person in the process of becoming. There is an inherent individuality in this kind of humanistic psychology that does not take enough notice of how we are thoroughly formed through our relations with other. As demonstrated in Kenneth Gergen's relational psychology we might have to rethink the role of how self-organizing principles really reflects the dialogic relationships as they evolve throughout a therapeutic process (Gergen, 2015).

Via Mircea Eliade, the philosopher of religion, Kenny finds support in how the system is a scheme or structure of a kind «in which one is constantly asking oneself about the *essence* of a set of phenomena and about the *primordial order* that is the basis of their meaning» (ibid., p. 63, my emphasises). Then Kenny makes another leap into the whole systems theorist and New Age writer, José Argüelles, who thought we had lost the primordial order suggested by Mircea Eliade. Kenny refers to how Argüelle contended that we have lost the sense of the natural order through a state, or *holonomic amnesia* (Kenny's emphasis). Argüelle defines this amnesia as a state of forgetfulness of the primordial order, the order that existed before technological advance. Kenny refers how Argüelle «claimed that this sense can be recovered only through allowing our consciousness to travel through what he called *aboriginal continuity*, an intuitive level of awareness which retains the sense and structure of the primordial order and which is a necessary and critical complement to the *civilization advance*, which reflects our logical and technological knowings» (ibid., p. 64, Kenny's emphasises).

Kenny's dualistic holism clearly emerges in her references to Argüelle's model of a unified field theory understood as a universal resonant mechanism. Kenny is in accordance with Argüelle's vision about unifying aboriginal continuity and civilization advance. Art and creative processes should become of great importance to do away with holonomic amnesia. We know how Carolyn Kenny was closely connected to aboriginal thought and aesthetics through her identification with her mother's indigenous background as a Native American. In 2002 she defined herself as «an indigenous scholar» (Kenny, 2002, p.160). We may understand how she found Argüelle's system thinking so fascinating and fit to unify her own values and knowledge obtained through her broad interdisciplinary studies in addition to her interest in the arts and clinical experiences as a music therapist. In Argüelle's thinking she must have seen a system of thought that resonated with her quest for the unification of aboriginal values and academic thinking.

Odd Are Berkaak has a remark concerning the interest among anthropologists in holism on the background of the industrialization and technological advancement that took place in the last century. Many intellectuals saw these advancements as a threat to a form of life belonging to the pre-modern man who supposedly lived in a state of harmony and organic unity with his environment. Modernity was seen as a threat to this «primordial order». This led to a sort of mournful longing for holism, a culture of pessimism and a search for some kind of transformation or remedy. For Kenny, art and beauty could become the means in this project. «As one moves toward beauty, one moves toward wholeness, or the fullest potential of what one can be in the world», becomes the first principle of the aesthetic in her field of play (1989, p. 77).

Spirituality

In her response to Bärmark and Hallin Kenny defends her use of concepts like «the sacred» with a reference to Native American worldview (Kenny, 2000, p. 66): «The world is sacred because of the presence of dynamic energy or vitality which in the indigenous

world represents the presence of spirit». Kenny recognizes how many music therapists «loathe to consider the idea of spirit (vitality) when it comes to music therapy. They feign its presence as unprofessional» (loc. cit.).

Kenny might be correct in her observations. Due to Giorgio Tsiris' research for his PhD.-dissertation, we now have both statistical and observational data concerning the widespread of spirituality among music therapists (Tsiris, 2018). Kenny does not seem to be the only one sensing «a 'feeling' that there must be something else». In an age where many people now declare themselves as «spiritual, but not religious», a phenomenon British sociologist of religion, Grace Davie has called «believing without belonging», many music therapists also seek to perform spirituality in their daily work. Although, as Tsiris observes, sometimes as «undercover spiritual agents» in order not to be considered as unprofessional, as Kenny also observed.

However, spirituality comes in many forms, it is «a boundary object», Tsiris states. Tia DeNora (2014) speaks about a «reality that goes beyond our intellectual frameworks» and the quest for finding the language and metaphors to express this sense of «something else» seems to have been the prime motivator for Kenny's project. «Is it possible to formulate a language to describe the music therapy experience and create one of many possible general models which accurately reflect music therapy process, yet can be understood and used by professionals in their fields?» This was Kenny's initial question in the opening of her book *The Field of Play* (1989, p. 7). We may notice the formulation «one of many possible general models». This leads us to our final remarks.

Perspectivity and meta-epistemology

Kenny herself was ambivalent to the task of creating a unifying theory. She saw theories as reductionistic, something that can remove us from what is important. In their comment to Kenny, Bärmark and Hallin would rather prefer to say that theories are perspectivistic: «...they focus on one aspect of reality and reality has many aspects. Theories always are also tentative» (Bärmark & Hallin, 1999, p.141). There is a danger within a dualistic holism that we cannot do much to change this *primordial order*. Those who believe in the monistic holism would rather build a kind of wholeness stepwise from experiential knowledge through some kind of empirical testing, qualitative or quantitative. We should follow Kenny's advice to make explicit our idiosyncratic epistemologies, our basic values and worldviews. But we should also become aware how deeply such epistemologies will influence how we describe the clinical territory we work in, how we come to ask questions, what to look for and in what language we describe our experiences, as was recently demonstrated by the South-African music therapist Andeline dos Santos in her monumental dissertation where she compared the affordances of two paradigms in a meta-epistemological study (dos Santos, 2018). By comparing a phenomenological approach with one based on the philosophy of French thinker Deleuze and social constructivist psychologist Kenneth Gergen, dos Santos has given an illustrative evidence of how deeply our epistemologies may influence our research as well as our clinical approach.

Searching for essences versus a post-qualitative deconstruction of music therapeutic territories will reveal how deeply we are affected by our own epistemologies and how careful we must approach the task of building theories. And I might add – theories in music therapy should perhaps not to be general, but local and situated?

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