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## Phenomenology in the Field of Play: Direct Experience, Aesthetics and Interpretation

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Authors note: I came to know Carolyn Kenny personally during my graduate studies with her in the early 1990's in Vancouver, BC Canada. We maintained a close friendship which began as a mentoring relationship and was the inspiration for my doctoral dissertation: *Wise Guides: Portraits of Mentoring Relationships in Music Therapy* (Merrill, 2009). I came to understand and experience Field of Play theory over the next 15 years and observed ways in which it deepened and performed itself in her work and writing. Later, Carolyn and I attended a Phenomenology Symposium at Duquesne University together in 2013 and had long and interesting discussions about phenomenology – and in particular – why music therapists are well positioned to have intimate knowledge of it due to our proximity to human suffering. The time we spent together discussing her theory and my studies over the years of our friendship left me with precious insights to the interplay of life experience, beauty and the unique and compassionate worldview that made her contributions to music therapy theory significant. Personally, Carolyn has been the most influential person in my career. Her contribution to my life incalculable. It is an honor to participate in this special edition of Voices.

### Music Therapy Theory, Intersectionality and Lived Experience

Carolyn Kenny lived a highly intersubjective and intersectional life. Her intersectionality was performed across a range of interdisciplinary work, music therapy practice, theorizing, writing and in her personal life. She experienced a sense of marginalization across many of these intersections (Kenny, 1996b, 2006). She identified as an interdisciplinarian (Kenny, 2006): philosopher, music therapist, sacred psychologist, poet, indigenous studies scholar, and feminist. Indeed, she proposed a view of music therapy as an interdiscipline (Kenny, 1989, p. 18; 2006, p. 91). Her worldview – that all creation is interconnected (Kenny, 2006 p. 95) – became central to her theoretical contributions and ontological assumptions.

In *The Field of Play* (1989), Kenny describes the aesthetic of the human person – client OR therapist as ‘a field of beauty’— containing a range of individual, idiosyncratic conditions. An environment similar to “the alpine meadow, the swamp, or the prairie, and full of beauty” (p. 74)... “surrounded by beauty and including the individual’s human tendencies, values, attitudes, life experience, and all factors that unite to create the whole and complete form of beauty, which is the person” (p. 75). In today’s parlance, she alludes to a worldview that is intersectional, but in its holistic inner view, all merge as an aesthetic whole. I like to think of Carolyn in this way. As a person, she

was all of her identities, but she was certainly more than the sum of those parts and she expressed and performed herself in the world as an aesthetic whole.

She was concerned with metaphysics (the nature of being) ultimately; and in particular embraced the work of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and later, Hans Georg Gadamer. With these influences and others, her philosophical theoretical orientation embraced both Philosophical Phenomenology and Hermeneutics (Schwandt, 2007). While Kenny certainly began exploring a relationship between theory building and direct experience in her 1982 book *The Mythic Artery*, it is her 1989 work (based on her doctoral dissertation) *The Field of Play: A guide for the theory and practice of music therapy* (Kenny, 1989) that represents a fully fleshed-out theoretical ‘model of being’ based in philosophical phenomenology and to a lesser extent hermeneutics. It also represents the public expression of her thinking on the matter of philosophy as a basis for indigenous music therapy theory. From my perspective, *Field of Play* represents the first fully articulated theory of music therapy, so when discussing Kenny’s contribution(s), it is important to include an exploration of her connection to Phenomenology— which at the time seemed to offer a unique contribution to theoretical discourse within our discipline. To be more precise, in 1987, phenomenology was being utilized as a research methodology by other researchers but to my awareness, Kenny was the first to direct the phenomenological epistemology toward theory building. Her contribution represents an alternative view to ‘outcomes-based extra-musical/ behavioral orientation common in North American practice at the time, to a philosophical focus on the direct experiences of clients and therapists.

## Origins and Influences

Carolyn, in speaking about her intellectual development, first credited her education with “The Jesuits” (presumably at Loyola University where she completed an undergraduate degree) who introduced her to philosophical thought and argument. She would smile and say, “Well, you know, I studied with the Jesuits”. Her interdisciplinary studies Masters at the University of British Columbia embedded her in Indigenous and Mythic perspectives, but it was during her doctoral studies in Psychology at The Fielding Institute where she was a student of famed Qualitative Researcher/Theorist Renata Tesch, that she was drawn to integrate her clinical experiences with philosophical underpinnings. She notes, “If theory serves as the foundations for practice, philosophy serves as the foundation for theory” (1989, p. 46). Tesch most certainly influenced *The Field of Play* (along with Music Therapist William Sears), which began as her Doctoral Dissertation. Yet, she diverged from Tesch (who was primarily a methodologist) and went her own way to establish discipline-specific foundations between Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Aesthetics as they pertain to the theory and practice of music therapy.

Kenny famously wrote her dissertation in ‘the desert’ near Ojai, California, during a catastrophic brush fire. As she described the story to me, she felt that her writing was disconnected from her true experience—written for others; over-intellectualized and distanced from the direct experience of music therapy. So, she consigned the whole of her dissertation (as it was) to the flames and started over in a way that she felt was more resonant with her lived experience as a music therapist. Her understanding of essential links between Phenomenology, Aesthetics and Field Theory resulted in “*The Field of Play*”, which again, is the first published attempt at articulating an indigenous theory of music therapy. It should be noted that at the time of the publication of *Field of Play* (1989), other music therapists were exploring phenomenological inquiry as well. Most notably, Ruud (1987) in Norwegian and then Forinash and Gonzalez (1989) in English. What made Kenny’s contribution seminal among them was the use of aesthetic replication in the *Free Phantasy Variation* (1987, p. 58) and the subsequent extrapolation to theory.

It has been established that Kenny’s thoughts did not develop in a vacuum. It is also important to note that the release of her English language work coincided with a larg-

er disciplinary discourse—in particular the music in the life of man conference. While no one individual discussed phenomenology per se, the collective seemed to be searching for more authentic means of understanding and describing the experience in music therapy (Forinash & Kenny, 2015; Merrill, 2016).

Her experience growing up as a racial minority in the United States caused her to also be interested in liberation through the arts. She believed that engaging in the arts—especially as therapy—gave access to conditions of consciousness where the fully functioning human could access, create, communicate and inter-relate from a place of whole-ness; and in so doing be liberated from oppressive systemic normative values (Kenny, 1996a). This process was mythic in its depth and scope (Kenny, 1982, 1996a, 2006). She believed that modernity and post-modernity as greater social influences alienated people from what it meant to be human and states:

We have outgrown the need to create symbolic forms which reassure us about the continuity of humanity and the world as a whole...what aspect of our personal and cultural development have we left behind in sacrificing value for our mythology? We have left behind an artistic way of being. (Kenny 1980, p. 5)

She did not separate music therapists from those who received music therapy in this. She felt that embracing scientific ethos to the exclusion of the aesthetic and mythic served to separate therapists from their own humanness: those conditions which provide a basis for inter-personal connection and shared consciousness. The therapist, as an explicit, equal and active player in the field of play dynamic, is viewed as a whole aesthetic as well. This was contrary to the dominant narrative of the time, where the therapist strove to distance themselves in order to approach pure objectivity, to eradicate counter-transferences, to create a blank slate or to enforce normative values in the application of stimulus and reward.

Furthermore, Kenny believed that ultimate whole-ing and healing could be authentically accessed through the Arts within a shared space. This is Kenny's Ontology. The path to such whole-ing involved becoming liberated from ideas and frameworks that were rigid and essentialist in nature through a search for essences within the shared aesthetic. This idea is resonant with Husserl's idea of the transcendent reduction (Käufer & Chimero, 2015). In more recent, personal conversations, she maintained that a preliminary and necessary step had to do with awareness – what she referred to in *The Field of Play* as 'a particular state of consciousness' – and described this as "a state of deep concentration and focused attention, yet deep relaxation. It allows a receptivity to new experience, new forms, new sound perceptions in the movement toward wholeness" (Kenny, 1989, p. 88). This idea has a Husserlian parallel in his ideas on intentionality (Käufer & Chimero, 2015). More recently, Carolyn and I were collaborating on a work that was left unpublished when a book on mindfulness in the creative arts therapies was abandoned by the editors. In this draft, she writes,

As I conduct my clinical practice, I release any hierarchical assumptions and perceive everyone, every living entity, as equal. Each person has a special value and unique gifts that were bestowed upon her/him by the Creator. In this sense, my practice is informed by my intention to help my clients to recognize their unique gifts, to express them, and to act on them. My spiritual approach, as a Native American, is egalitarian. I learn as much from my clients as they learn from me. Every encounter is an invitation to change or modulate my own body, heart, mind, and soul. My job, as a therapist, is to assist my clients in the creation of beauty "As one moves toward beauty, one moves toward wholeness." (Kenny, 1989)." (Kenny & Merrill, 2010).

In this way, it is not surprising that her work embraced field theory: dynamic, moveable, open to and inclusive of individual differences and ambiguities, subjective and intersubjective.

## Phenomenology

Carolyn Kenny's theoretical model arose from a phenomenological inquiry into her direct experience of being from her entire field of existence (1989). She attempts to demonstrate the "phenomenological attitude", which she describes briefly in "The Earth is our Mother" (Kenny, 2006).

The phenomenological attitude is a formal term in phenomenology. It indicates a perceptive capability that is free from the mere appearance of things and favors the lived experience of perception. It is distinguished from 'the natural attitude', which is more influenced by sensory data or the limitations of the physical world (2006, p. 89).

What was it about phenomenology that attracted Kenny at that time? What awakened her to the possibilities within that philosophy for music therapy? I speculate that there are a few key intersections between her direct clinical experiences and the phenomenological framework that resulted in a feeling of resonance for her. First, Husserl's notion that meaning is made through the apprehension and conscious awareness of 'essences' of experience (Kenny, 1989, Käufer & Chimero, 2015). Husserl argued that essences are subject to change over time and are contextually and culturally bound. Husserl does not limit the focus of phenomenology to concepts only but acknowledges non-conceptual features of consciousness. Finally, he makes space for subjectivity in the apprehension of experience (Käufer & Chimero 2015). All of these ideas were relevant to Kenny in 1989 and remain relevant to our discipline today.

Second, Kenny addresses the problem of language and description— this was also one subject of discussion at the "Music in the Life of Man" symposium in 1982—in The Field of Play in 1989, and the discourse is relevant today. Husserl at times refers to his methodology as "descriptive psychology" and proposed arriving upon essential meanings through careful, elaborate description of experience (Husserl, 1965). Kenny elaborates on this in *The Field of Play* and specifically introduces a musical term: *variations* to her phenomenological language as follows:

The heart of this method is examining various possibilities of what may be examples, pictures or images of the phenomenon in order to determine what are its essential elements. These variations need not be restricted to the factual or the possible, but may be purely imaginative, or represent pure perception on the part of the observer. (1989, p. 58)

Third, Kenny explicitly acknowledges Husserl in the notion of phenomenology as an act of consciousness. She chooses to use Grossman's (1984) definition of phenomenology as "the study of the essence of consciousness" (pp. 54-55) but also cycles back to Husserl with the reminder that phenomenology grew out of transcendental philosophy—which was concerned with raising consciousness. Reflective of Husserl's assertions that essences can be embodied and non-conceptual, that phenomenological methodology involves conscious intention and the suspension of pre-understandings, she incorporates this notion of consciousness into her model as connected to the mind-body-sense (p. 57) and writes, "In this figure the new element is consciousness, now joined to sensation. The link liberates consciousness from the realm of the abstract and expands it to include the world of concrete experience or sensation" (p. 56).

Husserl outlines his methodology as a science of consciousness through a number of stages. Relevant to Kenny's work are the 'reductions'. The first is *transcendental reduction* – which is an act or process of conscious intention. The task is to suspend previous experience, judgements, ordinary or stereotypical beliefs. This is what is meant by the phenomenological terms 'bracketing' and 'epoche' (Käufer & Chimero, 2015). In Kenny's case, she was required to shift her clinically informed, stereotypical view of her client Debbie — who changes in Kenny's mind-perception from 'Drooling Debbie' to a 'field of beauty' (1996, p. 57).

The second reduction is termed *eidetic reduction*, and Kenny explains this as the means through which essences are perceived. She introduces Husserl's 'free phantasy variation' as epistemology. Under her guidance, I engaged a free phantasie variation

in my master's thesis *Rise up Singing: A model for consciousness through the therapists' reflections on an improvisational music therapy group for persons with end-stage dementia* (Merrill, 1998). In this study, I replicate Kenny's methodology through my own aesthetic replication and use free-verse poetry, art (mandala drawing), and analysis across several bracketed music therapy sessions (recorded) in the search for essences. These culminated in a proposed model for consciousness which may be accessed by individuals with Dementia through improvised music.

## The problem of interpretation

Kenny began as a pure phenomenologist and eventually understood that there could be no process of induction or deduction without an inherent and associative hermeneutic or interpretive process. Eventually for her, the two became an inseparable part of meaning making in music therapy - direct experience through the senses (aesthetic phenomenology) and interpretation and analysis (hermeneutic). She writes (and it is really her voice here in this collaborative piece):

It is virtually impossible to separate hermeneutics from phenomenology, since the practice of phenomenology also requires a deep reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Like hermeneutics, phenomenology keeps returning to the subject of the study and continues to reanalyze and reinterpret data until essences have been discovered, or as some might say, the essences have been revealed." (Kenny, Langenberg & Loewy, 2005, p.342)

This view is reflective of the hermeneutic view that 'to exist is to interpret' (McNamara, 1999, p. 164). Over the many years of Carolyn's mentoring of me, she indeed linked phenomenology and hermeneutics in a kind of partnership of inquiry that was a framework and way of understanding symbolic experiences in music therapy. She taught me that Art is inherently hermeneutic in the sense that it is interpretive in nature.

She was interested in the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty early on and these philosophers are represented in *The Field of Play*, where she begins discussing hermeneutics (1989, p. 59). She was attracted to the idea of holistic perception and reflection on that perception. In 1989, she spent very little space explaining hermeneutics, but later contributed to a longer, more detailed description in collaboration with colleagues Mechtild Jahn-Langenberg and Joanne Loewy (2005). In more recent years she embraced the work of Hans Georg Gadamer (personal conversation) and encouraged me to delve into Gadamer's hermeneutics myself, especially in preparation for a phenomenology symposium we attended together in 2013. Given what I know to be her profound connection to Gadamer, it is surprising to me that she did not publish more extensively on his work and its relevance to music therapy theory. What is clear is that she felt this work to be deeply informative for our discipline. I will try to summarize what I believe to be the parts of Gadamer's work that most resonated with Carolyn Kenny.

Gadamer is associated with research in the performing arts (McNamara, 1999). He argues that human science must engage a methodology that is unique and different from that used in natural science; and that methodology must explore the process of interpretation (Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer is openly anti-objectivist, and explicitly turns to the subjective in the search for meaning. Inherent in this methodology is an interchange between the pre-understanding of the interpreter and the phenomenon itself in its context (culture, performance space, etc). This is key in Kenny's attraction to this work. Given her theory— that places the relationship between the music therapist and the 'client' and the music that arises between them at the center of the theory— there could be no more resonant philosophical grounding for her work than this. Further, that meaning and interpretation of meaning can be arrived upon through the shared musical experience (Merrill, 1998).

Kenny agreed with Gadamer's assertion that we exist in a symbol-rich phenomenological world. It is not possible to have an experience of 'the world' that is 'outside the network of symbols and make up our culture' (McNamara, 1999 p. 164). Kenny

believed that alienation from meaningful symbol systems was a root cause of suffering associated with modernity and post-modernity and, along with Spretnak (1991), advocated for reclaiming meaning through reconnecting with traditional symbol systems (1980). Symbols and symbol systems are the vocabulary of the arts: music, dance, visual art, poetry, writing; and can be extended to include non-verbal body movements, gesture and vocal inflection as expression, which I argue is the vocabulary of music therapy.

## Conclusion

Carolyn Kenny *lived* phenomenologically and hermeneutically. Rather than being influenced by these philosophies, they became a part of her way of being in and knowing her world-experience. Indeed, she embodied the phenomenological attitude. Becoming aware of and mindfully suspending pre-understandings, opening up the consciousness to essences was a way of being for her, not simply a cognitive exercise or research methodology. This attitude permeated her being in the world, in her work, in her teaching and mentoring, and in her writing. While she was influenced tremendously by Husserl, Kenny's understanding of Phenomenology in all of its permutations was prodigious and nuanced.

When I reflect on the contribution that Carolyn made to music therapy theory through articulating her depth interpretation of Phenomenology (and its inherent hermeneutic), a part of a Sikh sacred prayer comes to mind. One interpretation is: "their faces shine with illumination, and they take many others with them across the world ocean". Carolyn Kenny took many of us across the world ocean with her and will continue to do so.

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