

If “the profession of music therapy is not for everybody,” who is it for?

Jessica Leza, MA, MT-BC

January 11, 2022

I am subscribed to a listserv for music therapists in the southwestern region of the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA). Recently I witnessed yet another dialogue forming in which young professionals were advised not to take low paying work. I have seen this perspective represented so many times over the years, often coming from the same elders in the field who write from a position of having been financially stable for decades and even on the cusp of retirement. And just as in the past, I involved myself in the discussion to offer the perspective of working class music therapists whose options are to take low paying music therapy jobs, or to take a job outside the music therapy field and let the degree and credential go unused.

I have taken multiple low-paying music therapy positions over the years because these are predominantly the jobs on offer. Sadly, the people who determined that credentialed music therapists should earn low wages have as often as not been music therapists themselves. In one instance, I worked for a company owned by a non-MT that was purchased by a MT after I had worked there for around five years. The first thing this music therapist did was lower my pay rate for documentation, ARD meetings, and other responsibilities that require a MT credential to a mere \$12/hr. The facility still paid the same rate for my services, but the business owner simply wanted to keep more of the money earned by my labor for herself.

This is not a one-off issue within the field. There are a significant number of music therapists who found that they could best secure their own financial stability by exploiting the labor of fellow music therapists. So each time an elder music therapist coming from a position financial stability writes a long screed directing young professionals not to accept the low paying jobs on offer in favor of largely imaginary well-paying jobs in healthy, safe workplaces, it brings up two questions:

Is it ethical for a music therapist to exploit the labor of another music therapist?

And, how can we, as music therapists, expect non-MTs to pay us fair wages when MTs themselves MTs low wages?

Beyond these questions there is a hard truth: the music therapy profession in the United States has a serious diversity problem. We have been through years of scandal after scandal as racism, queerphobia, ableism, and other social ills burn a path of harm through our conferences, research journals, training programs, and clinical spaces. To deny the fundamental and unreformed issues of prejudice towards marginalized people is to push one's head in the sand deeper and deeper each year.

The reality is that our field is dominated by privileged, cishet, abled white Christian women; and it is not this way by accident. Overt and covert forces have worked together to create and maintain a profession after a certain image.

One of these forces is the normalization and acceptance of low wages, and a blindness to issues of economic class and the ways that other marginalized identities intersect with class. After all, if the only people who can afford to stay in the profession are people being financially supported by a high-earning spouse or well-off parents, then necessarily, the only people who will remain in the profession are those with the most privilege.

And may I present to you, the music therapy profession in the United States - predominantly abled, neurotypical, cishet white women, particularly from a Christian background.

* * *

“Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.”

- Banksy, political activist and street artist

Advocacy that demands reforms or change from people in positions of power will never make the people in power or their allies comfortable. It is simply not possible to make real change that doesn't also result in powerful people and their allies having *Feelings*. People in power and their allies are notorious for playing the game in which no matter how gentle you are, if there is a risk of change, they will always chastise for yet more gentleness. No matter how quietly an advocate speaks, the powerful will always lament over the loudness. No matter how indirect, the powerful will always cry out that they are being attacked. The only thing that satisfies power is for all challengers to step away meekly. I am not the first to observe this: Martin Luther King Jr famously wrote of the phenomena in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* when he identified “the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action.’”

"If you want me to be your ally, you have to make me comfortable," is a stereotypical refrain, and one that has been rebutted enough times that I wonder why it still needs to be said. The reality is that the defensiveness of people in power who call for gentleness in advocacy and who prioritize a superficial public appearance is a strategy for defanging advocacy and slowing change, and it should be recognized as such.

And so I am never surprised when the issue of low-paid jobs in music therapy is individualized, just as so many MTs adopt a model of disability in which the individual must change themselves to more sufficiently conform to and thus survive the abuses of society. I am not surprised to see comfortable white women who dislike naming their privilege tell working class music therapists that their poverty is a choice, because “your degree is what you make of it.” I am not surprised to see music therapy business owners feign helplessness over the wages they pay out by saying, “it is what it is.” I'm not even surprised to see someone offer the absurdity that low wage jobs are legal, and activists should seek change through legislation.

What I did find rather shocking was to see a white woman respond to the issue by writing, openly for all to see, that “the profession of music therapy is not for everyone.”

At this point, I should be shocked by very little, but this statement stuck out and stayed with me. It’s been a week and I am still recoiling from its overtness.

“The profession of music therapy is not for everyone.”

It echoes, a standalone indictment of a profession.

“The profession of music therapy is not for everyone.”

If the profession of music therapy is not for everyone, who is it for?

The AMTA workforce analysis is a statistical profile of AMTA members (ironically, the most recent 2020 and 2021 reports are behind a paywall for \$25 each, but the 2019 AMTA workforce analysis is freely available). The 2019 workforce analysis describes music therapists in the following ways:

Female	87%
Male	12%
Gender queer / gender nonconforming	1%

White / Caucasian / European	85.1%
Asian / Asian American	5.8%
Hispanic / Latino	3.7%
Multi-racial	2.6%
Black / African American	1.9%
American Indian / Alaskan Native	0.3%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	0.0%
Other / not specified	0.7%

There is no data about disability, because the AMTA does not even bother to collect information about disabled music therapists. The word “disabled” appears 28 times in the 2019 workforce

analysis and each time it is used to refer to music therapy clients. Disabled music therapists are invisible at best, presumed to not exist at worst.

If “the music therapy profession is not for everyone,” who is it for?

87% cis women,

85.1% white,

Disability never even acknowledged as existing.

Here is the truth, we know who the profession of music therapy has been for, historically, and currently.

Here is the question we need to ask if we want to expect a more diverse workforce of music therapists in the future:

HOW is the profession maintained as ‘not for everyone’ - specifically, how is the profession for cis het, abled, white women?

There are many “hows,” but for today I bring your attention back to the matter of wage. And I will say again: the normalized and accepted practice of music therapy business owners paying low rates with an “it is what it is” blame-the-employee attitude towards labor exploitation maintains the profession as the domain of privileged, cis het, white abled women.

What can we do about this?

First, we must establish a professional culture that has the capacity to identify and label exploitative labor practices, and we can develop the skills to publicly and openly discuss wage-related issues. The status quo does not disrupt itself. We must develop enforceable ethical standards for music therapy businesses in regards to their behavior towards employees, including guidelines for ethical pay and compensation.

“The music therapy profession is not for everyone” is a choice. Each day, our profession has the choice to pursue change, or to stay the same. The choices we are making today have long-term repercussions for the field and the people who receive music therapy services.

What will our profession choose in 2022?

Read more:

AMTA. (2019). Workforce analysis.

<https://www.musictherapy.org/assets/1/7/2019WorkforceAnalysis.pdf>

King, M. L. (1963). Letter from Birmingham Jail.

<https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf>

Norris, M. S. (2020). Freedom dreams: What must die in music therapy to preserve human dignity? *Voices*, 20(3), 4. <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/3172>

Reese, T. Developmental stages of racial identity.

<https://collaborate.consulting/all-blog-posts/identitydevelopment>