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Will to Meaning: A Pilot Study on Teaching Existential Theory through Creative Techniques

Abstract

Early career clinicians have reported limited experience utilizing existential concepts in their clinical practice. This deficit may be attributed to a gap in training. Further, utilizing creative techniques to elucidate conceptual understanding has a demonstrated history of effectiveness in the classroom. This study explored whether the use of creative instructional techniques supports student learning of existential counseling theory, and, if so, which specific tools do students prefer. Through pairing existential concepts with creative instructional techniques, the researchers hypothesized that understanding would increase. Students reported a significant increase in their knowledge of existential concepts following the use of creative instructional techniques and notated their preferences. Resources for integrating these techniques in counselor education are provided alongside future research directions.

Keywords

existential therapy, counselor education, counseling theories, music enhancing learning, creativity in counseling

Author's Notes

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There is limited research on best pedagogical practices for training counselors in how to integrate existential therapy into their clinical work (Sotskova & Dossett, 2017). Moreover, Shumaker (2012) observed that early career clinicians do not often have experience with utilizing existential concepts in their practice and that “existentialism does not fit easily into a therapist’s toolbox” (p. 377). In considering both the lack of instructional support for teaching the subject and the inherent complexity of the material, promoting understanding of existential concepts and their clinical application among trainees may benefit from a unique pedagogical approach. Instructional strategies that utilize creativity have a demonstrated history of effectiveness in the classroom (Lawrence et al., 2015), and may be beneficial when applied to the teaching of existentialism.

This pilot study explored the application of utilizing creative instructional techniques in the classroom, pairing 11 existential therapy counseling concepts with music, television/film clips, art, poetry, and passages of Frankl’s (1959) text *Man’s Search for Meaning* to examine if participants’, i.e. trainees in a counseling theories course, understanding of the material would significantly increase. Additionally, in order to approximate which techniques were reported as useful, participants were asked to identify which creative teaching tools were experienced as most effective.

Literature Review

Creativity in Counseling

The arts have long been used as a means of self-expression and there is increasing evidence that the use of creative expression supports the therapeutic process (Gladding, 2016; Malchiodi, 2020; Schore, 1994; Siegel, 2012; van der Kolk, 2006; Weiner, 1999). Furthermore, because experiences in life do not happen solely through verbal communication, the need to process and

explore our experience in a multimodal capacity is essential (Adoni-Kroyanker et al., 2019; Feniger-Schaal & Orkibi, 2020; Weiner, 1999).

Gladding (2016) argued that creativity and the creative arts are highly beneficial for clients, enumerating a variety of psychosocial domains in which client growth is fostered when utilized in counseling. These areas include: promoting connection to deep feelings, uniquely supporting the processing and integration of experience, increasing focus on client goals, establishing a new sense of self, helping conceptualize and duplicate beneficial behaviors, fostering group experience through positive socialization, providing a culturally-informed and subjective experience, and connecting to a sense of universality through meaning making.

On a practical level, the recognition that creativity and creative techniques may have unique benefits within the therapeutic process was evidenced by a shift within the profession of counseling. In 2004 the American Counseling Association officially formed the Association for Creativity in Counseling (Division 19). The goal of this division is to address the growing interest in adopting creative methods in the clinical setting and classroom for counselors and counselor educators, respectively.

Pedagogy of teaching creativity in counseling

Lawrence et al. (2015) suggested the need for counselor education programs to incorporate creative techniques into their pedagogical approaches; counselor educators model the incorporation of creativity for trainees through experiential learning. In doing so, trainees may benefit in two substantial ways. First, utilizing creative techniques promotes divergent thinking, thereby supporting the development of problem solving skills, ideation, and novel idea generation, or originality (Runco & Acar, 2012). Second, exposure during training to creative techniques, and the subsequent gains in developing original thinking, may aid the counselor in adopting a variety

of intervention options, the importance of which Carson and Becker (2004) remark is a “necessary foundation for effective counseling and counselor training” (p. 114). More specifically, counselor educators have suggested that the use of creativity in teaching potentially supports a deeper understanding of concepts, self-awareness, and an expanded worldview (Bradley et al., 2008; Carson & Becker, 2004; Gladding, 2016).

Some creative tools that have been beneficial in the classroom to facilitate these processes include: film, literature and poetry, music, and art viewing and art making. The use of film as an instructional tool in counseling education programs is well documented. Major findings by researchers suggest that, in general, students enjoy the incorporation of film in the classroom (Pearson, 2006; Scholl et al., 2014), can utilize it to increase their ability to identify and interrogate theory within a depiction of practice (Koch & Dollarhide, 2000), enhance their diagnostic abilities (Pearson, 2006), and challenge student perspectives by generating awareness and reflection (Villalba & Redmond, 2008).

Regarding the use of fictional or non-fictional literature or poetry, previous research has found that it can help expound upon concepts as well as foster insight, self-awareness, and professional growth (Bruneau & Pehrsson, 2014; McNichols & Witt, 2018; Whipple & Tucker, 2012). In a study by Bruneau & Pehrsson (2014), graduate counseling students participated in a therapeutic reading assignment during an elective 8-week course on creativity in counseling utilizing literature, journal writing, and self-reflection. Student participants reported an increase in self-awareness and a greater understanding of how personal issues may impact the counseling relationship. Recently, McNichols & Witt (2018) incorporated six poetic activities throughout a fifteen-week counseling practicum and internship class. The study found these activities supported

students in developing greater empathy towards their clients, a deepened understanding of their individual counselor identity, and a higher level of confidence in their counseling abilities.

In regard to the effectiveness of music as a teaching tool, Lenés et al. (2015) found that the incorporation of music videos and lyric creation supported counseling students in examining and discussing sensitive topics in a course on sexuality. Additionally, Jensen (2000) found that pairing music with educational concepts allows material to be better encoded in long term memory. In a counseling graduate course, Davis & Pereira (2016) explored the use of song lyrics to support the development of counseling skills. They found that through the use of music and lyrics, counselors-in-training honed their reflective listening skills and were able to better relate to expressed emotional content.

Viewing and/or creating art was also found to be an engaging instructional strategy (Liberati & Agbisit, 2017; Wood & Pignatelli, 2019; Ziff et al., 2017). A creative exercise where counseling students witnessed an art exhibit on grief and loss was used to support the development of empathy and to practice interpreting and reflecting feelings (Ziff et al., 2017). Liberati & Agbisit (2017) used art-based strategies to support case-conceptualization through having counseling students create a visual storyboard of their clinical cases, reporting that viewing the art story boards allowed various themes to emerge that may not have arisen during a traditional case presentation. In a similar case study by Wood & Pignatelli (2019) a scribble technique was utilized with counseling students to evoke stories related to their work with clients and explore their emerging counselor identity and self-awareness; the technique elicited increased empathy and greater client connection.

Existential Therapy

Frankl (1959) described a will to meaning as living authentically and holding a personal freedom, particularly in the face of death and non-being. Grounded in three tenets: (1) freedom of will, (2) the will to meaning, and (3) the meaning of life, Frankl's (1969) logotherapy is one form of existential therapy. Figure 1 represents the interaction of eleven core existential concepts for counselors to examine with their clients in clinical work. On the left side of the diagram are the existential concepts of anxiety, lacking self-responsibility, meaninglessness, guilt, and isolation. On the right side, freedom, will to meaning, authenticity, self-responsibility, and choice. Both sides are brought together with the denoted penultimate concept of death and non-being. Fear of death influences how a person chooses to live life (Yalom, 1980). Death is inescapable, yet a person has the freedom to choose living in authenticity or living in meaninglessness. That is, we can accept that death is inevitable and live a meaningful life or we can live a life without meaning which may cause distress, anxiety, or guilt (Yalom, 1980).

Frankl (1969) posited that each person is responsible for making choices in their lives, especially during times of suffering, and that the ability to endure is a test of one's inner strength. When we avoid responsibility, we may experience existential anxiety, meaninglessness, and guilt (Frankl, 1969; Yalom, 1980). Meaninglessness, or a void, is often created by the inability to make a personal choice or conform to what society or others expect one to do (Frankl, 1969). Existential therapy encourages the person to find meaning, engage in personal freedom, and make choices that will create change in their existence while concurrently alleviating anxiety and guilt (Iacovou & Weixel-Dixon, 2015).

Although existential therapy has been documented to have a profound impact with clients, it is infrequently used due to misunderstood concepts (Furman, 2003). Sotskova and Dossett (2017) report that a major "challenge in teaching an existential integrative model was providing

an overview of existential theory of therapy in a way that was clear, yet did not oversimplify its rich philosophical background” (p. 127). Thus, concepts may be difficult for counseling students to understand in a counseling theory class, requiring a unique pedagogical approach to increase comprehension.

Methods

The purpose of this pilot study was to better understand if creative instructional approaches impacted master’s level counseling trainees’ learning of existential counseling concepts. Our research questions were:

1. Following exposure to creative instructional techniques, do clinical mental health counseling students experience an increase in knowledge of concepts from existential counseling theory?
2. If so, which creative tool(s) do students identify as the most useful in learning these concepts?

Based on positive effects reported in previous literature outlining the use of creative techniques in the classroom setting, we hypothesized that students who were exposed to these techniques would significantly increase in their understanding of existential counseling concepts. Moreover, and central to the relevance of this research, due to the relatively broad literature espousing the effectiveness of creative teaching approaches, we examined which creative teaching tools participants would consider to be the most helpful. We chose to approach this latter data as exploratory considering that no previous research, to the best of our knowledge, has investigated student preference for creative teaching tools in the counselor educator literature.

An institutional ethics approval was granted for this study to take place over the course of two academic years during each Fall semester when the program offered counseling theories as a component of students' prescribed program of study.

Sampling and Recruitment

First-year master's level clinical mental health counseling students were recruited from a small private college in New York State. Purposeful sampling was used in order to ensure that participants met relevant criteria (Merriam, 2009). For this study that meant students enrolled in a counseling theories course taught by the first author, an assistant professor in the program at the time. Participants were recruited via a fellow graduate counseling student (second author), who at the time was an institutional peer in an advanced cohort. In both semesters, the second author came in one week prior to the class on existential counseling theory and the first author left the room to minimize coercion. The second author communicated that the study intended to explore how students learn about existential counseling. Students were informed that participation was optional and assured there was no relationship between participation and their course grade. No incentives were offered for participation. The purpose of the study was intentionally withheld from participants, rather they were generally informed that the study examined how students learn existential counseling theory. This decision was made to bypass any pre-set biases for creative engagement held by participants, and instead presented a broad framework for the exploration of learning.

Participants

Participants ($N = 25$) completed all four components of the study; a demographic questionnaire, a pre- and post-test, and listing preferences of creative teaching tools for learning existential counseling theory. All participants across both years of the study were in their first-year of the master's level clinical mental health counseling program at the college. The group was

predominantly female-identifying ($n = 23$) and self-reported as White or Caucasian ($n = 16$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 2$), Black or African American ($n = 5$), Middle Eastern: ($n = 1$), or Other Identified: Caribbean American ($n = 1$). The mean age of the group was 32.8 years. Two participants indicated possessing a visible or invisible disability.

Protocol

Prior to the class on existential counseling theory, participants were administered a Likert scale pre-test where they rated their understanding of 11 different existential counseling concepts. The 4-point Likert scale was structured as follows: 1 = *I don't know or understand those terms*; 2 = *I have heard the words in an existential context, but could not describe or define them*; 3 = *I understand the terms in an existential context*; 4 = *I could teach the existential term to another person*. Students were then assigned to read the chapter on existential counseling from Neukrug's (2010) *Theories of Counseling* and Part 1 of Frankl's (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*. Students were also asked to bring to class two songs that they felt best demonstrated two of the 11 existential concepts, one song for each concept. The following week in class the first author taught each of the 11 existential concepts (See Figure 1) through near equal use of lecture, film/TV clips, exploring their musical song choices and associated lyrics, poetry, storytelling, discussion of literature, and visual images. Table 1 presents the way that different existential concepts were taught through the use of various creative techniques.

Figure 1

Existential Concept Diagram Created by Author One Based on Frankl's Theory

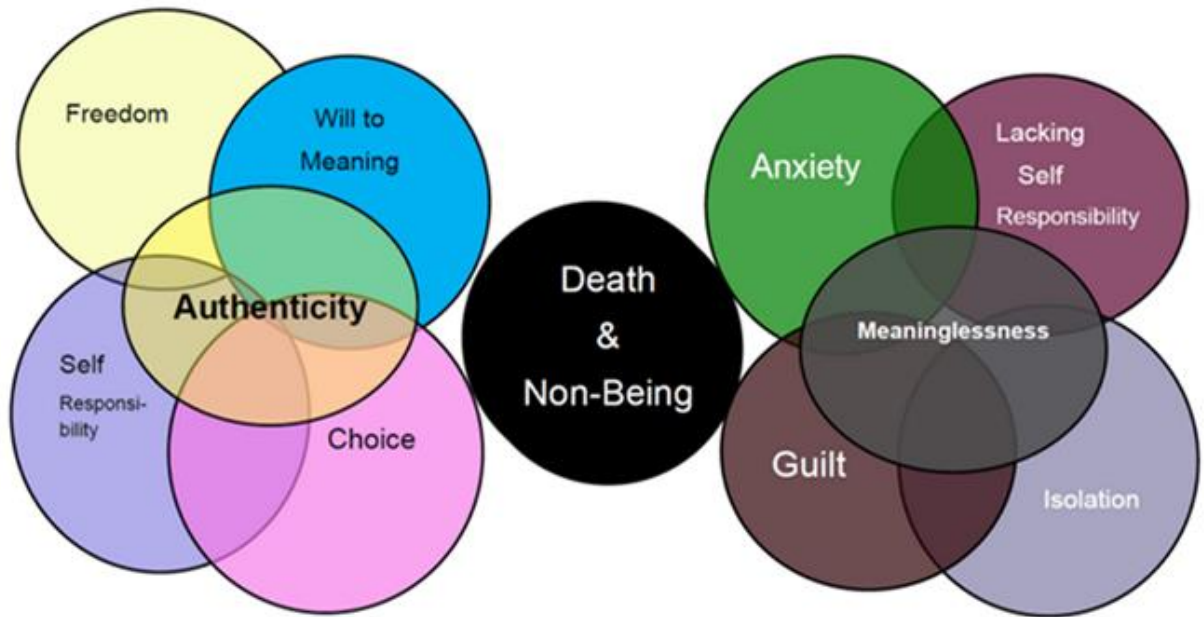


Table 1*Breakdown of 11 existential concepts taught and associated creative tools used with examples*

Existential Concept	Creative Tool Used	Example
Death and Non-Being	TV/Film	Parks and Recreation; The character of Chris Trager (Daniels, 2012)
	Personal Storytelling	Professor shared a story of the first time she realized the concept of death anxiety
Freedom	Music	Shambala; song by Three Dog Night (Moore, 1973) (example of student selection; see Figure 2)
Self-Responsibility	TV/Film	It's a Wonderful Life: Scenes featuring George Bailey wishing he was never born (Capra, 1946)
Isolation	Art	Isolation (Williams, 2017)
Meaninglessness	TV/Film	Groundhog Day; Scenes featuring character of Ned Ryerson (Ramis, 1993)
Angst	Art	The Scream (Munch, 1893)
	Music	Soil, Soil; song by Tegan and Sara (Quin, 2007) (example of student selection; see Figure 2)
Guilt	Art	The Guilt (Michaels, 1999)
Will to Meaning	Literature	Discussion of Frankl (1959) passage
Authenticity	Poetry	Hafiz; We Have Not Come Here to Take Prisoners (Ladinsky, 1999)
	Clinical case vignette	Presentation to students
Choice	Literature	Frankl (1959) passage
Lacking Self Responsibility	Music	Bittersweet Symphony; song by The Verve (Ashcroft, 1997) (example of student selection; see Figure 2)

At the end of the class, participants were again provided a clean version of the previously completed Likert scale, now serving as the post-test, to assess any change in self-reported knowledge of existential concepts. In addition, there was a single question that inquired: “*please list any tools used in class that you believe helped you better understand the existential concepts that were taught, if any. You may list as many as you felt were helpful, please be as specific as possible*”. In order to ensure anonymity, at the completion of both surveys, participants gave themselves a unique number written at the top of both the pre- and post-test so they could be matched correctly. Participants then individually sealed their surveys in an unmarked envelope prior to collection by the second author.

Data Analysis

To measure whether a self-reported increase in knowledge about existential concepts occurred, we selected a paired samples *t*-test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference before and after instruction utilizing creative tools (Ravid, 2019). The *t*-test was run in Microsoft Excel 2016 on the pre- and post-test data. Additionally, we aggregated and rank ordered, according to frequency, from most frequently cited to least frequently cited, all the techniques listed that participants reported as supporting their learning. We then calculated associated percentages for each technique to determine proportional representation.

Results

A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to compare changes in participants’ self-reported understanding of existential counseling theory from pre-test ($M = 1.84, SD = .74$) to post-test ($M = 3.04, SD = .45$), resulting in a statistically significant increase, $t(24) = -9.29, p < .05$, and a confirmation of our hypothesis. While this is a fairly expected result since students were exposed

to the existential content from pre- to post-test, our primary interest, and what may be highly useful for counselor educators, is the participants' notation of preference for creative teaching tools.

The single, structured question in which participants were asked to list which techniques they found to be most useful resulted in seven different identified techniques: (1) music or lyrics, (2) film/TV, (3) skill of professor, (4) viewing art, (5) storytelling or case vignettes, (6) reading the textbook, and (7) the Frankl reading. Calculated percentages for each clarified which techniques participants found beneficial in facilitating their learning of existential concepts according to a group hierarchy. These seven areas were recorded a total of 45 times. Listed in descending order of frequency from most to least, they were: music and lyrics (37.7%, $n = 17$), television and movie clips (33.3%, $n = 15$), skill of professor (15.5%, $n = 7$), art/diagram (4.4%, $n = 2$), storytelling/case vignettes (4.4%, $n = 2$), textbook reading (2.2%, $n = 1$), and Frankl's book/passages (2.2%, $n = 1$). Notably, although used as a creative instructional teaching tool, poetry was not identified by any participants as beneficial to their learning.

Discussion

Existential counseling offers essential concepts that can stand alone or be paired with other counseling theories to support clients in critical meaning making as a part of their counseling process. Therefore, employing creative strategies in the counseling classroom that support the learning of these challenging concepts is critical to counselor education. In our discussion section we will focus on the top three findings reported by participants as being the most beneficial to their learning process.

Music and lyrics was the most frequently cited tool in facilitating learning of existential concepts. Storr (2015) stated that music is fundamental and there is not a single culture that has been discovered that does not make music; with its universal appeal, music allows diverse groups

the ability to explore and connect (Davis & Pereira, 2016). This perhaps also explains why students who have typically felt overwhelmed by existential counseling theory may experience music as a gateway to connection and understanding, making the unfamiliar accessible. Music has also been observed to operate in multiple neural networks in the brain, facilitating bilateral integration, which may also contribute to learning (Tomaino, 2012). Specifically, regarding the use of music in teaching existential counseling, Storr (2015) noted that babies in utero respond to noise and music and proposed that this is the first way the baby recognizes that there is something beyond what they are currently experiencing in the womb; their first experience of meaning making. Furthermore, music has been documented in being effective in memorization and recall of information and influencing emotional arousal (Salimpoor et al., 2009; Standley, 2008; Tesoriero & Rickard, 2012). Therefore, when students are deep in the emotional process of learning about existential concepts, and then encouraged to pair this emotion with music, their learning process may be enhanced.

Film and television were ranked as a close second by students in facilitating the learning of existential concepts. Film has been well documented in supporting learning in other fields of study for its capacity to tap into the use of visual and narrative expression (Champoux, 1999). In other disciplines film has also been shown to increase student motivation and reinforce the learning of concepts (Mateer & Stephenson, 2011). It may be that when we engage in watching Film/TV we are drawn to the archetypal characters in which we recognize ourselves. Viewers have the capacity to live out fears and fantasies with aesthetic distance (Landy, 1994), a state in which we can feel simultaneously connected to our emotions and cognition without being overwhelmed. This ability is afforded through the process of imagination wherein we mentally portray ourselves as the character(s) while reminding ourselves that we are not actually the character(s). In an

instructional context, the use of aesthetic distance when encountering existential concepts may help to bypass students' induced anxiety and subsequently facilitate a more concrete understanding of the existential concept at hand.

A surprising and unexpected outcome in the study was that the skill of the professor was identified by participants as the third most beneficial creative tool in supporting their learning. This finding can be contextualized by looking at the Duffey et al. (2009) work on relational competencies and creativity in counseling. The authors posited that creativity and relationship are directly related to one another, and that when supportive relationships are in place, creativity can flourish, which is essential in providing freedom and openness to explore. Using this framework, we theorize that while not written into the creative protocol in class, the creative relational nature of the instructor allowed students to more deeply connect to the existential material. Through an intentionally relational style, it may be that the instructor created an atmosphere that allowed students the courage to engage with the creative materials at hand, providing an open, non-judgmental space to freely explore and deepen their relationship with the concepts.

Limitations

Despite taking place over two academic years, the number of participants is lower than optimal. This is likely due to the study being conducted at a school with a small counseling program (i.e., less than 60 students enrolled in the program at one time). Additionally, as the study was solely based on participants' self-report, results should be considered prone to bias. Regionality is also a challenge to potential generalizability; while the sample of participants was diverse, it covered one specific area in New York State. Lastly, the first author is comfortable with creativity in the classroom and incorporating multimodal approaches to teaching, which may not be true of all educators, thus posing an obstacle to replicating the study.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Given the finding regarding the use of music in teaching existential counseling concepts in this pilot study, alongside other studies that have successfully used music to teach concepts, the first two authors of this paper have developed an on-line database of songs paired with the different existential concepts as a resource, which we have included a sample of in Figure 2. We invite individuals to contact us with additional suggestions to be included, ideally opening the database to more diverse and representative voices.

Future studies may want to consider broadening the geographical location, as well as exploring outcomes with different educators. A stronger design could be constructed with the inclusion of a control group that does not use creative instructional techniques when teaching existential concepts. Additionally, a mixed methods design that includes gathering qualitative data beyond the listing of techniques students found helpful could provide more rich information. As music was listed as the most frequently cited helpful tool for learning the concepts, a deeper exploration of the use of music and teaching existential counseling is also warranted.

Figure 2

Existential concepts and sample music selections

Freedom	Self- Responsibility	Guilt
The Redemption Song Bob Marley (Marley, 1980)	Make Your Own Kind of Music Mama Cass (Mann & Weil, 1969)	Fallen Sara McLachlan (McLachlan, 2003)
Closer to Free BoDeans (Neumann & Llanas, 1993)	The Heart of the Matter Don Henley (Campbell et al., 1988)	Trouble Coldplay (Berryman et al., 2000)
The Freedom Song Jason Mraz (Reynaud, 2005)	Rise Up Andra Day (Batie & Decilveo, 2015)	Lead Me Sanctus Real (Rohman et al., 2010)

Isolation	Lacking Self-Responsibility	Will to Meaning
Lucky Britney Spears (Martin et al., 1999)	Company Car Switchfoot (Foreman, 1999)	Swim Jack's Mannequin (McMahon, 2008)
I am a Rock Simon & Garfunkel (Simon, 1965)	Numb Linkin Park (Bennington et al., 2003)	Do You Realize The Flaming Lips (Coyne et al., 2002)
Boulevard of Broken Dreams Green Day (Armstrong et al., 2004)	Bittersweet Symphony The Verve (Ashcroft, 1997)	Closer to Fine Indigo Girls (Saliers, 1989)

Choice	Authenticity	Existential Anxiety
Fast Car Tracy Chapman (Chapman, 1987)	Tiger Paula Cole (Cole, 1996)	Soil, Soil Tegan & Sara (Quin, 2007)
Imagine John Lennon (Lennon & Ono, 1971)	Shambala Three Dog Night (Moore, 1973)	Eleanor Rigby The Beatles (Lennon & McCartney, 1966)
If 6 was 9 - Jimi Hendrix (Hendrix, 1967)	I am What I am - Gloria Gaynor (Herman, 1983)	Live Forever – Oasis (Gallagher, 1994)

Meaninglessness	Death & Non-Being
The World At Large - Modest Mouse (Brock, et al., 2005)	1-800-273-8255 – Logic (Hall II et al., 2017)
Nowhere Man - The Beatles (Lennon & McCartney, 1965)	Oblivion – Labrinth (McKenzie & Furler, 2019)
Dust in the Wind – Kansas (Livgren, 1977)	Mad World - Gary Jules (Orzabal, 1982)

Note. The existential music database has been crowdsourced from students, conference attendees, and the authors. All suggestions featured in the database have been added with consent.

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