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6a. Defining ourselves through music

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Music inhabits a special place in our 21st Century world. It is hard to find spaces where there is no music – it is present in the background as we socialise in public spaces and you only have to look around at people travelling to school or work to see that many of us opt to listen to our own music using personal devices; indeed, accessing all genres of music from around the world is easier than ever before. Televised singing competitions like the X Factor become part of our everyday conversations with others, and experiencing live music events is easier than ever before – whether we attend in person or watch online. What this demonstrates is music is part of our everyday lives and it likely plays a role in how we define ourselves and our relationships with others.

Think about when you meet someone for the first time. How do you describe yourself, and your likes and dislikes? You might tell them that you work at a University, play the clarinet and saxophone, enjoy running, and have two children. This immediately reveals that work, music, exercise and family are an important part of how you perceive yourself, and how you want to be perceived by others – they are different identities that contribute to an overall sense of who you are – a sense of self. Our sense of self consists of multiple identities and these align with the various ‘roles’ we hold in society, for example, as a high school student, a son or daughter, a musician, or an athlete.

We can also have a *musical* identity which relates to our activities as a performer, composer, listener, or music fan. We understand what these roles mean for our sense of self through our self-concept which helps us to understand who we are through observing and evaluating our behaviours, by understanding the behaviours associated with particular roles, by interpreting other people’s expectations, responses and behaviours towards us, and by considering who we hope to be in the future. There are three key ideas here; the first is that our identities are not fixed – they change over time. The second is that our ideas about our future self help us to evaluate who we are now and motivate behaviours that will help us to achieve our goals. And the third idea is that our identities are socially determined.

Consider the last class test you took. How did you feel immediately after the test was over? How did you feel once you received your grade? How did you feel once you found out how your classmates performed?

Comparing ourselves with others offers us a way to evaluate our own performance and we use that information to develop our understanding of our ‘student’ identity – either that we exceeded our own (and perhaps others’) expectations or that we still have some work to do. Achieving a disappointing grade can influence our feelings of self worth – our self-esteem. Our comparisons with similar others and their comments about our abilities or appearance, for example, have a significant impact on our self-esteem and can affect our motivation to continue with particular activities. One way to retain positive self-esteem is through our association with groups of people who have a positive image; associating with the

qualities of an in-group, and rejecting those of an out-group, helps us to develop favourable identities (this is known as Social Identity Theory).

Listening and Connecting with Others Through Music

Think about the music you most enjoy. How do you identify with the artist and the musical style? How frequently, and when, do you listen to music? Do you discuss music with your friends or family? How can you tell what music your peers like?

Music listening is a regular activity in our everyday lives and tends to accompany other activities like tidying up, doing homework or travelling, which suggests that listening to music serves some useful functions – whether the function is to relieve boredom or tension, or as a distraction from effortful tasks. Music listening can also play an important role in identity formation which typically occurs during adolescence. Adolescents have been found to spend a lot of time listening to music, preferring to listen to popular and dance music (rather than classical or folk music) because it fulfills emotional needs, offers enjoyment and creates the right external impression: the choice to listen to pop or dance music relates to the desire to be seen as fashionable or cool and therefore provides a way to create a positive self-image that connects with an in-group – pleasing friends and consequently reducing loneliness. Music becomes ‘a badge of identity’ that can influence elements of behavior, dress code and friendship groups.

Experiencing live music, as an audience member, also offers opportunities for connecting with others and can also help us to define ourselves. Think about the last time you went to a live music event: What did you go to see? In what kind of venue did the event take place? Who did you go with? What did you enjoy most about the experience?

When people choose to go to watch live music they usually go to see a favourite artist or band, to hear a preferred style of music, or because they like a particular venue. They may also choose to attend because they know people who are going or they think it will be a good social occasion. Live music events are usually an opportunity to be surrounded by like-minded people and can allow us to confirm aspects of our musical identity. For example, we might confirm our in-group identity by observing and interacting with similar people (e.g. taking note of their dress or behaviour) or we may meet new people through the shared musical interest. Being in close proximity to the performers, and seeing the music being created in the moment, may strengthen personal identification with the music or the artist and may mean that we begin to perceive ourselves as active participants in the event or the musical community, particularly as we join in by singing, dancing, cheering or clapping. Being part of a live music event is not necessarily defined by being physically present in the venue during the performance; we can watch live performances online, or follow what’s happening on fan websites where we can connect with other members of the community – the in-group. And let’s not forget, after the performance we review the event online, share photographs and publicly identify that ‘I was there’.

Listening to music, at home or at live events, connects us with others and helps us to feel part of a community; it also allows us to understand ourselves better, to evaluate who we are and what is important to us by comparing ourselves with other music listeners or fans, and by reflecting on the importance and value of music to us in our everyday lives.

Making Music

Do you play an instrument or sing? Do you write your own music? Do you play in a band or orchestra? Have you previously played but decided to give up? Think about how you first became interested in music and what has motivated you to develop your interest, or to stop learning.

Starting to Learn: Music in School

The factors which influence our musical development have been widely researched and include aspects of social influence, motivation, practice and learning styles (which you can read about elsewhere in this book). In addition, our identities have an important role to play in our musical learning. For example, studies have shown that gender identity influences musical instrument choice, with girls tending to select stereotypically feminine instruments (like the flute, piano, and violin), whilst boys are more attracted to stereotypically masculine instruments (such as the guitar, drums and trumpet). Once we have started learning, our beliefs about the roots of our ability (our self-concept as a musician) play an important role in determining our motivation and progress. If we have entity beliefs (the belief that musical ability is fixed and that some people naturally have more ability than others) then we will tend to prioritise and value outcomes such as grades or external recognition. If we have incremental beliefs (believing that musical ability is malleable and can improve with practice and effort) then value is attributed to hard work, effort and the process of learning. This has important consequences for our resilience when we are learning and can influence whether or not we persevere when we don't perform as well as we would like.

The context of learning also has an important role to play. It has been argued that if schools offer inclusive musical experiences and actively promote musical participation then children are more likely to have positive musical identities. A positive and inclusive musical context at school or home can foster incremental beliefs which influence our musical identity: the vital ingredients for musical learning are therefore dependent upon our belief that musical activity is worthwhile and offers personal satisfaction, that it is supported and shared by significant others (such as teachers, parents, peers), and that our personal skills and resources will enable us to progress and succeed.

Making Music as Adults

Self and identity play an important role in the decision (or not) to pursue a career and to do so successfully. For aspiring professional musicians, music becomes a vehicle for self-expression, providing an emotional outlet often not offered by other activities. It is also central to self-concept as it helps musicians to understand and evaluate themselves – whether that is positively or negatively. For

example, in one of my studies an aspiring professional musician said “Because it’s such a big part of me, I kind of see myself through the music, so if I’m doing well then that’s good and when I’m not doing well, then that’s terrible”. Finding new hobbies provides a break from music once it becomes the focus of working life and this protects the self (our self-esteem) against the potentially negative psychological impact of the tumultuous transition into the music profession.

The perceived ‘fit’ between a particular career (a possible ‘future self’) and our awareness of ourselves and our values is also important. Some musicians decide that they don’t want to become a professional musician because their image of the profession does not match their self-concept. For example, one of the participants in my research said “There’s just no certainties at all, and the rejection is just so hard, you know, if it is your life, that for me would be impossible, you know, I have to have stability”. The interaction between our different identities and our overall sense of self is a complex one: our musical identity serves as a mode of self-expression, a means to evaluate and define the self, and ultimately as a motivator for (or against) behavior.

Most people do not seek a professional performance career, but music is still an important part of who we perceive ourselves to be. Making music with other people connects us to a community of like-minded people, interested in developing musical skill whilst also having fun. The regular rehearsals provide a means of escape from the pressure of work, a way to express emotion, and sometimes to feel motivated and enthusiastic about a different challenge that helps us to learn something new about ourselves. One of my research participants described his musical activities as being “at my core... I feel very much a three part person, split between sort of education, music and the family, I really feel that, and that’s sort of driving me throughout the three of them probably”. Musical participation can provide a way to evaluate and moderate our different identities; with society’s recent focus on how we can support and promote psychological wellbeing, greater understanding of musical identities might help to explain music’s potential value and importance in this arena.

Conclusion

Music provides numerous ways for us to define ourselves - whether we are a performer, a composer, an avid fan or a listener; a professional or an amateur. Our musical identity is just one of many identities which combine to create who we are – our self. Creating and listening alike provide opportunities for us to express ourselves, to explore our emotions, and to feel a sense of belonging within a community. Our musical identity interacts with our other identities – when we have negative experiences at school or work, for example, our musical identity provides a reminder that we have other skills – it offers a way for us to express our emotions, to take comfort in another aspect of our lives and to escape from those difficulties, even if for a short while. Our musical identities provide a way for us to connect with others, to join communities of people with similar interests and in so doing to confirm our identities or to develop them further. There is a danger in assuming that the prevalence of music in everyday life means that it is, by default, something special and unique; it is music’s capacity to allow us to express ourselves, to release and regulate emotion, to connect us to others and to provide

a sense of belonging, to help us represent ourselves externally to others and to understand ourselves internally that ultimately means that music is a vehicle through which we define ourselves and our identities.

References and Further Reading

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