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Depending on music to feel better: Being conscious of responsibility when appropriating the power of music☆

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the beliefs held by young people about the power of music to help them feel better during challenging times. Participants included 40 young Australians, aged 13–20, who described their relationship with music and were progressively asked to recall times where music had not been helpful as well as when the consequences of engaging in music had been beneficial. Grounded theory analysis generated a theoretical explanation of why young people's beliefs about the positive consequences of music are so strong, even though the experience of young people with mental health problems sometimes contradicts these views. Implications for professionals are offered; with a particular emphasis on the importance of young people accepting responsibility for the ways they appropriate music in contrast to seeing the music as the source of power.

Researchers have increasingly explored the potential for negative dimensions in the relationship between young people and music since it first attracted the attention of parents and activists in the 1980s. Although the establishment of an adolescent popular music market in the 1950s already generated concern in the hearts of parents (think of reactions to Elvis Presley's gyrating pelvis) (Bennett, 2001), it was the successful campaign of the Parents Music Resource Centre (Chastagner, 1999) to censor popular musical material and limit access to music that might pollute the minds of young people that inspired a stream of research into heavy music that continues across a number of disciplines this day (Brown, 2011). Research in the decade immediately following this campaign attempted to determine whether what North and Hargreaves (2006) later labelled as 'problem[1]' music did indeed lead to antisocial behaviours.

Correlations were consistently identified between unhappy youth and preferences for problem music, but depending on the researcher, these patterns were interpreted differently. Music therapists pointed to the potential value of allowing young people with mental illness to express themselves through their preferred 'problem' music, with one study showing that this freedom led to improved mood and facilitated the therapeutic relationship (Wooten, 1992). In contrast, other researchers approached investigations from a basic, rather than applied perspective, using questionnaires as the main source of data and interpreting the connections between music preferences and problem behaviours to be dangerous (Singer, Jou, & Levine, 1993; Stack, 1998; Stack & Gundlach, 1992; Stack, Gundlach, & Reeves, 1994; Took & Weiss, 1994). Despite this, a recent systematic review of the psychology literature by North and Hargreaves (2008) clearly showed that there was no basis to claim causal relations from non-empirical research. However, these experts did note that the combination of data from a range of studies consistently revealed that vulnerable young people are more attracted to problem music than their healthy peers.

Meanwhile, scholars from cultural and sociological disciplines probed more deeply into the nature of the reported relationships, using in-depth interviews and situated observations to generate more contextually informed theories about young people and music (e.g. Arnett, 1991; Epstein & Pratto, 1990). The notion that music was a 'badge of identity' (Frith, 1981) was quickly adopted and later explorations of the functions of music within youth culture suggested that shared music preferences for problem music also fostered bonding and created a social network for those who felt isolated (Halnon, 2004; Roe, 1999; Snell & Hodgetts, 2007). This emerging literature clearly advocated tolerance rather than the restrictions suggested by the Parents' Music Resource Centre, emphasising positive dimensions that had not been identified in controlled studies of music's influence.

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[1] This term will be used here to refer generally to metal, hard rock, hip hop/rap, and punk as defined by North and Hargreaves (2006, p. 582) and refers to the way these styles are typically grouped together by academics and protest groups, NOT to suggest that the music itself is problematic.

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Despite the diversity in the existing literature, few researchers have asked young people to provide information about the ways that music impacted their mood and lives. This gap in knowledge came to the authors' attention after a small-scale survey investigation in Australia where young people described what music they chose in different moods and how they felt afterwards (McFerran, Garrido, O'Grady, Grocke, & Sawyer, 2013). Analysis showed that those rating as having the highest levels of distress also achieved the worst results from music listening, with some young people feeling worse after listening when in a negative mood. A surge of small scale investigations of sad music occurred in synchrony with the informal reporting of these results (Huron, 2011; Schubert, 2012; Van den Tol & Edwards, 2011), before another Australian study provided empirical evidence to further elucidate this correlation. Garrido's (2013) investigations showed that depressed people were more inclined to use music to support rumination rather than successfully processing experiences, resulting in mood decreases. Results from studies of healthy youth painted a different picture however, with Saarkallio's (Saarikallio, 2011; Saarikallio & Erkkila, 2007) Finnish research highlighting a capacity to use music to self-regulate mood, and a Norwegian study describing how adult participants used iPod listening as a health resource (Skanland, 2011). A further perspective on gender differences has been highlighted through studies of French-Canadian youth, where young men seem to benefit when using music to distract from their problems, whereas young women appear to cope better when using music to delve into and process their problems (Miranda & Claes, 2008).

It is possible to see the results of these rich and diverse contributions as contradictory. An attempt to synthesise 33 investigations published between 2000 and 2011 investigating adolescents, depression, and music revealed conflicting findings between self-report and indirect testing measures used in different studies (McFerran, Garrido, & Saarikallio, 2013). However, a critical analysis revealed that assumptions underpinning methodological decision-making were implicated in these contradictions, with researchers from a range of disciplines selecting strategies most likely to confirm their expectations.

The unintentional manipulation of research findings via the selection of specific methodologies that confirm researcher expectations can have dire consequences for vulnerable young people. Music therapists have reportedly been restricted in their ability to incorporate preferred music into therapy processes by management in youth mental health facilities who have read about the associations between certain types of music and poor mental health. This contradicts best practice, since "often the patient/client's preferred music genre is the most effective music to use" (Grocke & Wigram, 2007, p. 19). Songs are frequently used by music therapists working with adolescents (Cheong-Clinch, 2009; Derrington, 2012; Tervo, 2001), and asking "What kind of music do you like?" often serves as the entry point for the therapeutic relationship (McFerran, 2010, p. 87), whether active or receptive music therapy methods are then selected to foster understanding, offer acceptance, facilitate development, or encourage participation. A systematic review of music therapy practices with young people identified that pre-recorded music was used in 25% of the identified literature (McFerran, 2010, p. 37), making understanding of the nature of the relationship between young people and their preferred music critical to therapy practice.

Analysis of existing research reveals a need for further perspectives that deepen our understanding of the relationship between young people, music and mental health. This is particularly important with access to music rising significantly due to the digital revolution (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011) and young people reportedly spending up to 7.5 h per day accessing media (including, but not restricted to music), often multi-tasking with more than one medium simultaneously (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Substantive, contextually located theoretical contributions are needed to shine light on the field, and the research reported in this article specifically explores why young people believe that music is a reliable tool to make them feel better, even though the contradictory evidence from the literature makes it clear that this is not always the case.

Method

The need to better understand the interaction of factors behind the correlations consistently identified through survey designs informed the decision to use in-depth interviews as a method of data collection in this study. Rather than utilise a generic qualitative inductive analysis (Hood, 2007), grounded theory analysis was chosen in order to explore the specific question of why a contradiction seemed to exist between young people's self reports about the positive power of music and the results of indirect testing. Techniques of theoretical sampling and axial coding suggested in the pioneering work of Strauss and Corbin (1998) were utilised to this end, and the influence of Charmaz's (2003, 2006) constructivist position can also be felt in the way the theory is situated in relation to individual and social context. The privileging of theory development as the central focus of analysis was key to the way grounded theory was enacted in this investigation (Dey, 2007).

Data collection

Forty teenagers were interviewed in this study, although three of the volunteers were identified as being more than twenty years of age and therefore their perspectives were not included in the analysis. Ethics approval was received from the University of Melbourne (#1135548), the Department of Education (#2011_001144) and the Catholic Education Office of Melbourne, and young people were invited to participate by school staff that who were not vested in the project. Some young people made contact independently in response to media reporting of a previous study (McFerran, 2012a).

Theoretical sampling informed the selection of participants for interviews, meaning that the immediate analysis of each interview influenced decisions about the target for subsequent interviews, both in relation to questions asked and demographics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). New iterations of the interview pro-forma were developed whenever it became clear that particular perspectives would contribute to the development of theoretical concepts. After 22 interviews with students from mainstream schools, the context for interviews was varied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 210) to recruit young people receiving support for depression and anxiety through HeadSpace, Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation (http://www.headspace.org.au/), as well as students in alternative school settings for young people with emotional and behavioural challenges. Not surprisingly, some young people in mainstream contexts appeared to be struggling as much as some who were accessing mental health support. In order to discern the impact of mental health in our analysis, young people in all school contexts were asked to answer a series of questions which were combined with the researchers' observations to designate a subjective rating of mental health (not mental illness) ranging from 1 = poor, 2 = moderate and 3 = good. Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics with identifying information removed.

Codes and categories

Analysis commenced on the data from each interview immediately after it was transcribed. In vivo coding was undertaken quickly