



Music therapy: A community approach to social justice

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper demonstrates how music therapy—and more specifically, community music therapy (CoMT)—can contribute to social justice. CoMT is a creative approach that liberates expression, potentially empowering people of all ages, races, and statuses to build a better society. It also reveals how the leadership literature presents the concept of service in addressing social justice and how the fields of psychology and sociology of music shed some light on the use of music for social justice. Finally, future implications for training music therapists for social justice are explored.

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One of the noblest and most exquisite aspects of our human character is our desire to alleviate suffering by expressing our compassion, to care about one another. The field of music therapy attracts exceptionally caring people who wish to serve those among us who are at risk and often in extreme states of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress. (Kenny, 1998, p. 205)

I have been a music therapist for more than 20 years, and my practice has always been influenced by a desire for equality and universal access to human services for children, adults, and elders who are in need. I am inclined toward a depth of practice suggested by Kenny (1988, 2002, 2006), Ruud (1998, 2004, 2005), and Stige (2002a, 2003, 2004), who see the social and cultural role of music therapists from a broad and inclusive perspective.

Our sociocultural heritage is influenced by our personal and working experiences and encounters. My desire to achieve social justice relates directly to my own sociocultural background growing up in a social-democratic country that values equality, democracy, and universal access to health care, education, and social services. I also come from a French culture that has struggled for survival in the midst of a continent with an English-speaking majority.

I was predisposed to peace and social justice issues here and abroad prior to my interest in community music therapy (CoMT). My own contributions have been facilitated through my involvement with the Music Therapists for Peace movement founded by Edith Boxill (1988) (b.1917–d.2005).

In this paper I examine the literature in the fields of psychology, sociology, leadership theory, and music therapy for support of the use of music for social justice in a community music therapy context.

Social justice

Green (1998) writes that social justice is characterized as social and economic equality and democracy and that equality in social justice refers to the concept that societal members have equal access to public goods, institutional resources, and life opportunities. Thus all individuals within a society are treated equally. Furthermore, Green states, democracy responds to inclusive principles where every class of people participates in control and decision-making processes through institutions such as families, schools, and workplaces. Social justice concepts have been expressed through various media, including music, resulting in a growing interest in music from researchers in sociology and psychology.

Music, sociology, and psychology

Sociological branches of social justice and social movements have, in some instances, used arts and music as social tools. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) explore the link between social movements and culture, in particular music, with the theoretical question, “How do social movements contribute to processes of cognitive and cultural transformation?” (p. 9). They elaborate on a cognitive approach that “focuses attention on the construction of ideas within social movements and on the role of movement intellectuals in articulating the collective identity of social movements” (p. 21). Eyerman and Jamison are interested in the cognitive praxis of social movements, particularly with music, as this type of cultural activity contributes “to the ideas that movements offer and create in opposition to the existing social and cultural orders” (p. 24).

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) state that music is, in some instances, “truth-bearing and knowledge-producing” (p. 22) as demonstrated through exemplary actions although they do not

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claim that in all cases music has a truth-bearing function in the social movement. Meaning and identity are articulated through social movements, fostering strong emotional engagement. Culture is viewed, they say, as “the independent variable, as the seedbed of social change, supplying actors with the sources of meaning and identity out of which they collectively construct social action and interaction” (p. 162). This statement embraces the possibility that social movements could play a key role in addressing social justice issues. Eyerman and Jamison also claim that “the music of social movement transcends boundaries of the self and binds the individual to a collective consciousness” (p. 163). As stated by the music sociologist DeNora (2002), music is like social glue that allows for communication and socialization for almost all individuals. Her research investigates the dynamic role of music for social ordering and self-regulation. In another article, DeNora (2005) argues:

Over time, music’s transfiguration of states and conditions gain validation becomes a social achievement and a referent for how collective action elsewhere might proceed. In this respect, musicing may ultimately lead to critical consciousness of “what else might be transformed” (the radical promise often attributed to music and its potential as a medium of subversion and/or social change). (p. 14)

DeNora (2005) adds that music has a strong impact on the individual because it reunites one’s intense personal and subjective experience to that of a culture of the collective.

Small (1998) introduces the term *musicizing*: “To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (p. 9). Furthermore, Small argues that when participating in a musical performance, you are actually saying to yourself and to one another, “This is who we are” (p. 134). The musical performers might have strong influence and control over socialization and communication, but as Small says, who we are is also developed through the choices, values, and relationships the listeners establish with the music.

Music’s active properties may help forge social constructs within a particular cultural context where it reflects specific meanings for its practitioners. DeNora (2003) is interested in how music espouses the role of “socializing medium,” which carries values and competence, and she also argues that music may contribute to perpetrating social differences. In fact, some community music therapists are interested in eliminating these social differences that create barriers through marginalization and exclusion. Music also can be envisioned as a constructive social actor that allows equal access to resources when used in a CoMT context.

Hargreaves and North (1999) are concerned with the cognitive, emotional, and social functions of music, but they place the social dimension of music at the core of music psychology, which has focused on the cognitive and emotional aspects of music while neglecting its social functions. They identify “the management of *self-identity*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *mood*” (p. 72) as the three main social functions of music. Self-identity is reinforced through music, which contributes to self-definition and the creation of subcultures, as seen with adolescents. Composers also assert their identity through their works. Interpersonal relationships are established and maintained through music encounters that reinforce a sense of belonging for subgroups. The authors also note that the music therapist–client relationship is a crucial component that develops through music. Finally, music serves as a mood mediator according to situation, environment, and specific goals.

Merriam (as cited in Hargreaves & North, 1999) describes ten functions of music: emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, enforcing conformity to social norms, physical response, validating social

institutions and religious rituals, the continuity and stability of culture, and the integration of society. Hargreaves and North (1999) reinterpret these 10 functions in relation to their social aspects, asserting that these functions all have social dimensions that could be revisited.

Davidson (2004) examines musical performance in relation to CoMT and finds that the social-psychological processes are complex and comprise the following:

1. Playing with a number of social roles—leader, follower, etc.—and so working as an ensemble to regulate the music as it unfurled.
2. Articulating and presenting ideas through music in an overt form, through illustrative emotional communication and emblematic behavior.
3. Working with a musical narrative, so being inside the music, or . . . being conversational with the musical language itself.
4. Conversely, working outside of the musical narrative, and focusing simply on audience concerns.
5. Being happy to “show off” and to do this through overt display activities. (p. 124)

She reports that social psychology focuses on interpersonal communications, which are demonstrated through subtle non-verbal cues and gestures. She proposes that this information is important for community music therapists in order to better understand the dynamics of individuals and groups in the coconstruction of music. A future theory of CoMT, in her view, should include aspects of identity and the sociocultural impacts of music. Davidson is hoping for a more formal definition of work that includes the various forms of musical engagement and communication through performance or listening.

Leadership

Leadership and social justice

My vision of social justice is inspired by leadership models that value inclusiveness, interdependence, and equal participation like the ones articulated by Bennis (2003), Greenleaf (2002), and Wheatley (1999). Throughout the leadership literature, the philosophical concept of service in our profession and community keeps coming back. I believe it is part of our duty to bring our personal and professional competencies into the service of human beings.

Greenleaf (2002) introduced the concept of *servant-leadership*, in which “the natural feeling [is] that one wants to serve first.” Unlike the *leader-first*, “the servant-first’s ‘mission’ is that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. . . . Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 27). The popular idea that it is not our responsibility or that bad forces are at play when we are faced with no leadership allowing us to dissociate from our own social responsibility regarding the wellbeing of our fellow human beings. Greenleaf adds, “A strong natural servant who has the potential to lead but does not lead, or who chooses to follow a nonservant is the enemy of a better society” (p. 59).

Greenleaf (2002) also talks about *awareness* and the need for individuals to develop their unique creative potential:

Awareness, below the level of the conscious intellect, I see as infinite and therefore equal in every human being, perhaps in every creature. . . . Remove the blinders from your awareness by losing what must be lost, the key to which no one can give you, but which your own inward resources rightly cultivated will supply. (p. 340)

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