



Comment

Additional considerations to the model of musical empathic engagement: Empathy facets, preferences, and openness  
Comment on “Music, empathy, and cultural understanding”  
by E. Clarke et al.

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Recent research has shown that empathy plays an important role in musical experience including perception, preference, and performance [9,11,13,16,17]. Clarke, DeNora, and Vuoskoski's [4] timely review extends this work by establishing a framework for how “music empathic engagement” can facilitate cultural understanding. In this commentary I raise attention to some additional factors that may be at play in their model.

**Cognitive and affective empathy.** Empathy consists of multiple components or facets [3,5]. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another's thoughts and feelings, and affective empathy is the ability to respond to their mental and emotional states with an appropriate emotion and behavior [5]. People with autism typically have difficulties with cognitive empathy, but their affective empathy typically remains intact [2,8,12]. Psychopaths are the opposite; they typically score high on cognitive empathy and have lower levels of affective empathy [1]. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes (cognitive empathy) and responding emotionally to them (affective empathy) are both likely to be involved in the music empathic process, however, they are likely to be involved in different ways. In particular, these two components may be differentiated across the five principal channels presented in Clarke et al.'s [4] model. Cognitive empathy may be more closely linked to the ‘mimetic resonance’ channel, while affective empathy may be more closely linked to the ‘affective resonance’ channel. It is also possible that during musical empathic engagement, that cognitive empathy is required to understand the characteristics of another culture, while affective empathy is required to actually facilitate a changed attitude or feeling toward that culture. Therefore, cultural understanding gained through music could still be possible for a person with low dispositional cognitive empathy as long as their affective empathy is intact.

**Musical preferences.** An additional consideration is the role that individual differences in musical preferences play in Clarke et al.'s [4] model. Though the findings they presented from Vuoskoski, DeNora, and Clarke [15] found

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no direct association between musical preferences and cultural attitudes, there may be more subtle effects such as an interaction between empathy and musical preferences. One hypothesis is that preferences moderate the association between empathy and cultural attitudes. For example, the greater an empathic person's preference for a piece of foreign music is, the greater their attitudes may become for people of that culture. For example, a Westerner who discovers that they like a piece of West African music may associate the musicians and even the people of that culture as being similar to themselves. This associative process involving preferences may help to facilitate their increase in cultural attitudes. This process may also have a reverse effect. If an individual low on empathy enters a musical event with pre-established negative attitudes and stereotypes towards a specific culture, the greater they dislike the music from that culture, the greater their negative attitudes toward that culture may become.

**Openness to experience.** Personality traits may be another factor involved in the process of musical empathic engagement: in particular, the trait Openness to Experience (or “Openness”) from the Five-Factor Model of personality [7]. People who are high on Openness are imaginative, have a wide range of interests, and are open to new ways of thinking and changes in their environment. On the other hand, people who are low on Openness (or who are ‘Closed’) are more set in their ways, prefer routine and the familiar, and tend to have more conventional values. Previous research into the psychology of music has shown that Openness has a pervasive role in music listening and performance. It has been shown to correlate with preferences across multiple genre-classifications and to predict musical ability across multiple domains of musical sophistication [10,14]. Openness also correlates positively with empathy [6] and research shows that both Openness and empathy share similar patterns of associations with musical preferences (e.g. preferences for sad music, [17]).

Openness is also likely to play a role in music and cultural understanding. Not only is an individual who is high on Openness more likely to prefer a piece of foreign music, but they are more likely to be open the customs and rituals from that culture. A person high on Openness might also be more prone to changed cultural attitudes after listening to music from that culture. And a person who scores high on both Openness and empathy may show even greater likelihood to have changed attitudes. It would be fruitful for future research to explore if and how these two factors work in tandem in facilitating cultural understanding through music.

**Conclusion.** I sit writing this commentary from a classroom in the Hamilton Heights section of Harlem, which was once home to the likes of Duke Ellington and Count Basie during the Harlem Renaissance. Today, Hamilton Heights is a unique blend of the African- and Latin-American communities. When walking down the street, you'll hear Latin music playing one minute and hip-hop and Afro-Caribbean the next. A model of musical empathic engagement will have to be very careful to account for the intricacies and realities of cultural diversity and the impact that various socio-economic factors have on the role that music plays in different geographic regions. My intuition is that Clarke et al.'s [4] model may be even more pervasive within urban environments than in areas that are less multicultural.

The scientific evidence linking music to cultural understanding and social change is mounting, and it is our responsibility as music researchers to continue to test this phenomenon with the utmost scientific rigor so that the information gained can help inform the educational and political spheres. Clarke et al. [4] and Vuoskoski et al.'s [15] work is an important step in that direction.

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