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THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Psychology and Music –
Interdisciplinary Encounters

PROCEEDINGS

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Music That Matters: Unique and Collective Features in Experiences of Favorite Music across Place and Time

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Introduction

Abstract*

I tackle two pressing issues for music psychology. The first concerns contexts and cultures. After many years of focus on largely Western musical traditions, music psychology is developing into an international and multicultural discipline. Researchers are beginning to acknowledge the importance of taking a variety of cultural perspectives into account when looking at how music works for those engaged with it and the importance of working across disciplines and different cultural settings (Jacoby et al., 2020). The second concerns time. Over the past few decades there have been dramatic changes in the ways in which we access music as well as the range of music that can be accessed, with increases in digitized music, low-cost storage and the growth of streaming and recommending systems. Although acknowledged by those working in developmental music psychology and in technology, most research on everyday engagement with music fails to consider how time, and more specifically generational shifts, may affect our memories of favorite music. I draw on a theoretical approach outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) which includes layers of contextual influence and a chronosystem, thus bringing these two points together, to explore new data on personally significant experiences of music. I refer to 4 different studies using a variety of methodologies. Analysis sheds light on not only the breadth of music that evokes strong responses but also the diversity of contexts in which memories are formed and generational differences in musical experience. This theoretical approach begins to explain the various influences on music that matters, and highlights areas where more research is needed to engage with both place and time.

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It is well established that music is a universal aspect of human culture, and we know more now about how shared music can be important in collective experiences (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2017; Spivack et al., 2019). There is a larger body of research on individual preferences for music, which tends to link these to autobiographical memory (Jakubowski et al., 2020; Loveday et al., 2020). Much of this work shows that preferred music shapes our identities (Lamont & Loveday, 2020; Peck & Grealey, 2020). Finally, it is well established that listening to known and liked music has many non-musical outcomes such as soothing, focusing attention, helping with relaxation, encouraging exercise, decreasing anxiety and pain perception (Guétin et al., 2009; Hallett & Lamont, 2015; Mitchell & MacDonald, 2012).

In previous research, two different perspectives can be identified. On the one hand experimental work carefully testing the effects of exposure to a single piece of music shows that exposure leads to enhanced familiarity. Low levels of liking can be raised by repeated exposure to music over days or weeks (Peretz et al., 1998; Szpunar et al., 2004). Following an inverted U-shaped curve, sufficient repeated exposure also eventually leads to a decline in liking (Schellenberg et al., 2008), and this supports the experimental aesthetics perspective (Chmiel & Schubert, 2017).

On the other hand, in-depth qualitative studies tend to highlight a more complex picture we can term the 'spaghetti' model of preference over time. In the short term, listeners vary in how frequently they refresh their mu-

sic listening and the variety of what they listen to (e.g., Conrad et al., 2019; Lamont & Webb, 2010). Longer term, listeners repeat and revisit different music at different rates, prompted by many different factors (Greasley et al., 2013). When talking about music that matters, listeners also reject the idea of their preferences being reduced to genre stereotypes, and variety characterizes much musical engagement even in small social circles (Lamont & Webb, 2010).

This paper argues that a new approach is needed to understand the phenomenon of music that matters.

Ecological Systems Theory

This keynote paper draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1986) to firstly explain the notion of context at a range of levels, and secondly to introduce the influence of time, represented here as the chronosystem.

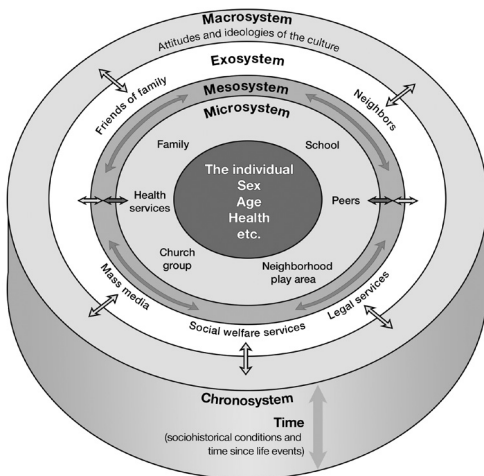


Figure 1. Explaining the music that matters: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Model from Yingst, 2011.

The model in Figure 1 shows a range of different contexts starting from the individual who is placed at the center of the system. The microsystem reflects a range of contexts where this individual directly participates, such as family or school, which will affect the ways they think

and understand the world. The mesosystem refers to the potential relationships or conflicts between these microsystems. The exosystem takes things out a level to encompass more diffuse influences such as the media, while the macrosystem reflects the dominant attitudes and ideologies of the culture in which the individual lives. Finally, the chronosystem represents the dimensions of time, both individual and personal, that affects all of the previous systems.

Data

I focus on evidence from 4 different studies, each of which has resulted or will result in its own publication. The first is a published interview study with 15 young adults and an online survey with 24 of their 'influencers' (Lamont & Crich, 2022, Study 2). The remainder are new work in progress. The second is a series of studies also with young adults, 2 experiments playing clips of pop music from 1960 to 2014 and a third self-nomination study of memorable music from different life stages (Lamont et al., 2022, referred to here as Study A). The third is analysis of 60 celebrity interviews from the BBC programme *Desert Island Discs* where interviewees choose and talk about their 8 favourite pieces of music (Lamont et al., 2023a: Study B; see also Lamont & Loveday, 2020), and the fourth an analysis of members of the public completing a similar exercise including listening to their favorite pieces of music during lockdown (Lamont et al., 2023b: Study C). For concision full details of these studies are not given here.

In what follows I will draw on this data and bring in other research where appropriate to illustrate and contextualize the different levels of the ecological systems framework.

The Individual

It is well known that many individual differences are involved when it comes to music preferences. The most obvious of these is age: listeners of different ages have been shown to prefer

different types of music (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013; Bunte, 2014; Hargreaves, 1982; Kopiez & Lehmann, 2008). In addition, sex differences have been found: for instance, men prefer ‘hard’, exciting music (Colley, 2008). Another body of work has looked at the relationship between personality and music preference, finding that certain personality types are drawn to different musical styles (e.g., Herrera et al., 2018; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) and preferred musical attributes such as arousal, valence, and depth (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Unusually, qualitative research often ignores such individual differences when it comes to exploring preference or liking for specific pieces of music. There are a few mentions of sex differences in the type of response to music in Gabrielsson’s (2011) exploration of strong musical experiences: men, for instance, were more likely to report perception, absorption, and surprise.

In relation to music that matters, Knox and MacDonald (2017) explored occupation type as a proxy for personality and linked this to the musical genres tested using the MUSIC model and the acoustical features of the music that celebrities from 1942 to 2014 chose as their Desert Island Discs. Their approach is to generalize from the specific data of individuals’ occupations and their 8 music choices, and they found some connections. For instance, those in Artistic occupations (artists, writers, musicians, and so on) were more likely to include Sophisticated music (including classical music), while those in Realistic occupations (e.g., gardeners, cooks) were more likely to include Unpretentious and Intense music. Artists also chose music with the lowest mean energy and loudness and often more negatively valenced, while Realistic occupations chose music with the highest mean energy, loudness, fast tempo, and positive valence. In our own exploration of a subset of these participants (Study B), a few connections were similarly apparent, but there were more generalizations: a greater likelihood of sophisticated music choices overall and those in Enterprising occupations showed more Unpretentious music choices.

Another individual difference factor can, I argue, be the use of music for mood regulation, which is well-established as a general finding (Henry et al., 2021; Saarikallio, 2010; Thomson et al., 2014). In our data we found examples of reflections about favorite music used for mood regulation, particularly in adolescence. For instance, one participant talked about “listening to a lot of KT Tunstall after bad days at high school” (Lamont & Crich, 2022, ex. 1), and another talked about a more pivotal identity moment with music:

I wanted a separating mechanism, and punk rock was that early separating mechanisms [...] Penetration released their second album, but on it, was a track called Shout Above the Noise, and this one track has been the mantra for my entire life. (Study B)

Microsystems:

Family, Peers, and Relationships

In relation to family, research has mostly focused on the influence of parents on their children and sometimes vice versa (Boer et al., 2011; Krumhansl & Zupnick, 2013; Morgan et al., 2015; ter Bogt et al., 2011). Our data also support this with many participants recollecting musical experiences in childhood that were shaped by their parents. For instance, referring to her own favorite music, Jemma (aged 40) talked about a connection with her son:

I used to often put this song on when at home alone with my son, and I would pick him up and dance with him, I remember often being moved to tears! If he hears it now (aged 7) he will say “this is our song mummy”, which makes me feel simultaneously sad and happy. (Study C)

In addition to parents, we also found a substantial influence of siblings in musical influences, with the older sibling often the more influential (Lamont & Crich, 2022). We also found extended family members, sometimes taking on closer family roles, influenced participants.

Peers have also been long recognized as influential in shaping musical taste, particularly in adolescence (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006; Boer et al., 2011; Selfhout et al., 2009). In our data friends were the second most common influencers after parents, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood (Lamont & Crich, 2022). Friends were identified at a range of different contexts including childhood, school, university, and ‘best friends’.

Finally, shared music in romantic relationships is becoming recognized as important (Harris et al., 2020). We found many instances of significant romantic relationships when participants were reflecting on music that matters. For instance, one celebrity mentioned her husband in relation to a music choice:

I think on the desert island I’m going to miss my husband a lot, and this is a piece of music that we both like and listen to together. (Study B)

Together this underlines the importance of considering all kinds of relationships in terms of the social interactions that shape our favorite music. It is noteworthy that there were few examples in the data drawn on here of influences from school, although school friends were frequently mentioned, and little from other cultural or social groups people could have been involved with, although one example is given in the next section.

Mesosystem

The interactions between the various microsystems have been rarely studied in previous work, although there are some suggestions that congruence of musical taste between a person, their peers and their parents could lead to lower negative affect (Miranda & Gaudreau, 2011), and that conflicts between ‘home’ and ‘school’ music can lead to disengagement with school music (Green, 2008; Smolarczyk et al., 2022). In our data there were a few instances where overlaps between the microsystems led to positive outcomes. As Nick (59) described:

As an adolescent growing up in Stockport my musical world was dominated by brass bands. My father played in one, I played in one, my friends played in them, and I listened to the music in preference to Radio 1 or any pop music. (Study C)

Comparing influences from our content analyses of descriptions of influential musical memories at different time points, we can also see different influences between parents and peers at different time points (Study A). Parents were more influential in memories from age 5–11 and their influence steadily declined over time, while peers became increasingly more influential up to age 16–18 and held that influence into early adulthood.

Exosystem

As noted earlier extended family had not featured much in the literature to date, and work on wider exosystem-level influences such as neighbors is virtually non-existent. A few key musical memories invoked the importance of the wider community in shaping preference. For instance, Richard (age 55) noted:

As a 13-year-old growing up in a small village which had just one Black single parent family in it (Mother and a Son who was a few years older than me) they were my next door neighbors. The son must have heard me playing The Clash, he brought around some Ska & Reggae for me to listen to. At a time of racial tension in the late 1970’s this song and my neighbor showed how people of different backgrounds can come together. (Study C)

Although often cited as a potential influence (e.g., ter Bogt et al., 2011), little research has yet explored how the media might influence music preference. Media can be divided into two: musical media such as the radio, YouTube, Spotify, and similar, and non-musical media, referring to music used in television and film. Young adults referred to a very broad range of musical media as sources of their musical influence. For instance, Eleanor (age 22 in Lamont & Crich,

2022) mentioned Sky, TV music channels, YouTube, the radio, Spotify, downloads, Twitter, the Charts, and Deezer as sources of influence. In times when access to music was less ubiquitous, participants talked about how they were affected by what they heard particularly on the radio, and the idea of searching out music that was inaccessible or had been inaccessible was a frequent theme. As Ellymoo (age 40) said:

This was before the days of ipods, MP3s and streaming. We tuned into the local radio and listened to Dave DuForest on Island FM who played the uncensored version [Eminem, My Name Is] several times a day. (Study C)

In terms of non-musical media, while there is plenty of research on how music affects mood and cognition when it comes to film (e.g., Boltz, 2004), there has not been much research on why music experienced in film or television might become meaningful. One exception to that would be Hepper's (1991) studies of how early exposure to the Neighbours theme tune led to later recognition in infancy. Celebrities often referred to music used in film: both those who had a lot of engagement with music and those with less seemed to find film a good frame of reference for explaining their music choices. These were often tied up with the narrative of the films:

One of the things that had a profound effect on me was the movie of 2001. There's some very strange stuff on the soundtrack [Ligeti's Requiem] that was very, very hypnotic and very strange and affected me a great deal. And I was astonished to discover later on that it was actually composed, rather than just sort of random noises.' (Study B)

Songs from films often reflected major life events such as loss, divorce, or falling in love, which likely also contribute to the significance of the music (Study C).

Macrosystem

This level of broader cultural influence relates to the call-in music psychology to explore culture at a broad level (e.g., Jacoby et al., 2020).

Favorite music has been firmly linked to identity (Loveday et al., 2020), and in our data we find place is strongly bound up with the music that matters. For instance, a Welsh participant noted "it's bound to be about my home valley [Rhonda]... the Welsh are very clannish" (Study B).

This is particularly important for those who move around over their life course. National identity has been long recognized as important in relation to music (e.g., Morra, 2013), and there is a recent move to recognize the multiple contexts and cultures people find themselves in and their globally shared references (Folkestad, 2017; Lidskog, 2017). Our own data shows how music literally takes people to different places:

The beginning of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony which I remember transporting me unexpectedly from the kitchen sink to the wind-tossed grasses of the tundra one day. (Study C)

Even for participants who have not travelled themselves, a diversity of musical styles is apparent in their influences, and such multiculturalism in music taste is important to acknowledge. For instance Eleanor (Lamont & Crich, 2022) referred to the following broad list of music in her favorites: soul, house, country music, American rap, hip hop, Jamaican basement music, RnB, grime, indie music, mainstream pop (listing many artists including Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj, Jason Derulo, Rihanna), and Nigerian music.

Despite this diversity it is important to note that music that matters has some cultural similarities. It tends to be repeated and revisited across the lifespan after its first encounter, it is often associated with important relationships and connected with identities, and it often engenders powerful emotions of all types (and often mixed).

Chronosystem

The final part of the model refers to the influence of time and its interaction with the other levels. As noted in the Individual section, age is a clear influence on music that matters. Ado-

lescence has long been recognized as a critical period for developing lasting musical memories (Jakubowski et al., 2020; Loveday et al., 2020; Rathbone et al., 2017). The reminiscence bump, sometimes known as the self-defining period, represents better memories for events in adolescence and early adulthood than other times in life. Loveday et al. (2020) found it responsible for over 50% of personally relevant music choices, with general memories of a person and emotional responses most commonly cited. Alongside the development of self-identity, this is also ascribed to differential encoding happening at the first-time events occur (e.g., falling in love, moving away from home) and to active re-sampling of these key life events (Rathbone et al., 2017).

Our data show that different influences dominate at different stages of development. Parents are responsible for the majority of musical memories in childhood (age 5–11) while peers are most influential at age 16–18 and into early adulthood (Study A). Repetition, well known to be key in shaping familiarity (Conrad et al., 2019; Margulis, 2014), is often at the forefront of people's minds when selecting music that matters to avoid potential staleness, although first time encounters are followed by much revisiting over time which links back to the spaghetti model (Study B). Music that matters provides a narrative for organizing the life story, both for the celebrity data in Study B and the public data in Study C. It is less surprising that this is the case for celebrity data as the aim of the radio interview is to tell the life story:

thinking back over one's life, little bits of music fit in and remind you of different parts of your life and I do think that the particular 8 that I've chosen have a sort of connection with different parts, or different countries. (Study B)

However, this narrative approach is also found from members of the public (Study C), who were aware of the rationale of the radio program but were also aware that no interview or broadcast was going to take place for themselves. For instance, Michael noted:

hadn't realized that my first 3 (and my fourth) songs were going to be so obviously pinpointed to those junctions in life. Seems a little predictable, but oh well, that's how it has worked out in this 8 track selection.

There are many aspects where the influence of the chronosystem can be seen, but one that is particularly prevalent is the ability of music that matters to transport its listeners to different times and places. This reflects the well-known ability of music to evoke nostalgia (Sedikides et al., 2022), and many accounts of this transporting are found:

This song in particular means so many things to me: it takes me back to my angst filled teenage years, listening to it on my headphones lying on my bed with eyes closed, yearning for release and love and tenderness. (Alejandro, age 42, Study C)

The specificity of these recollections is also a key feature. Rather than generic memories of childhood or a summer holiday, people often reflected very specific times and places that the music was able to transport them to. For instance, Liz, aged 43, explained her reasoning for one of her choices:

Imagine it was us it's the Into the Groove of the 2010s, it is my *It's Friday night!* song, and it takes me back to a particular Friday night, a hard week, and catching a train at the end of it to go and visit a friend in Oxford, this was the song that came on as the train pulled out of Leicester station and I looked out of the window, beer in hand and said hello to the weekend. When I listen to it, that feeling is recreated, troubles melt away and good times are ahead. (Study C)

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how Bronfenbrenner's ecological system allows us to explain the music that matters by bringing together a range of different influences and exploring the interrelationships between them. This systematic analysis also helps illustrate the areas where

more research attention is needed. There has been a great deal of research on the individual and social influences in isolation, with research also focusing on the interaction between the individual factors and time. More work is needed to explore the relationships between these, and especially the influence of the exosystem and macrosystem in relation to subcultures and broader cultures.

This analysis also shows that while there are creative approaches to research within each of the specific areas more creative methodologies are needed to explore something that is so highly individual. Furthermore, theory may need to broaden out to include a wider range of factors. Musical engagement over the lifespan is complex, and our explanations of it may also benefit from more complexity.

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