A Relational Alternative to the Study of Music and Emotion

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Abstract Background

There has been considerable research studying the relationship between music and emotion. Although researchers agree that the most common reason individuals listen to music is to influence emotions, there is little consensus as to how music affects emotion (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010; Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Researchers have proposed a number of different theories to explain relationships between music and emotion (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010). The majority of these theories have maintained an abstractionist theoretical approach.

Abstractionist frameworks are marked primarily by assumptions of efficient cause, atomism, reductionism, and quantification. Efficient cause leads the researcher to view the emotional response as fully explainable by stimulus-response chains. Although the use of this assumption has proven useful, it may not be sufficient to explain all emotional response to music. Atomism and reductionism lead researchers to try to eliminate context in order to examine factors that determine emotional response. It is impossible to eliminate context altogether, however, because even experimental scenarios create context. In addition, quantitative research paradigms that seek to quantify relationships between music and emotion may be insufficient to explain participants' experience.

To date, few studies have critically examined how adequately abstractionist assumptions explain the relationship between music and emotion. As a result, few alternative theoretical frameworks have been considered. As Slife, Reber & Richardson (2005) noted, "these fundamental ideas [assumptions] often seem less compelling and certain than they once did" (p. 4). Relationality has been proposed as an alternate explanation to expand current understanding of relationships between music and emotion.

Aim

The aim of the current project is to present relationality for the study of music and emotion. Relationality is based on assumptions of final cause and holism. Final cause considers a person's goals and desires as essential determining factors in emotional response to music. Holism recognizes that it is essential to understand the context in which emotional response occurs. The current proposal explains how considering emotion and music within a relational framework can add to our current understanding of individuals' emotional experience with music. In addition, the

value of qualitative research methods to investigate the relationship between music and emotion will be examined.

Contribution

This presentation will explore how relationality, an alternative framework to study emotion and music, could ultimately lead to a more complete understanding of the way individuals experience music. This work will hopefully suggest a new dimension to existing research.

Implications

This presentation could be the beginning of a paradigm shift away from the exclusive use of abstractionist assumptions to a more pluralistic approach. If the relationship between music and emotion is more fully understood, then therapeutic interventions using music could become more effective. The authors can be reached at pwsanders7@gmail.com or peterreschke@gmail.com or jeff reber@byu.edu

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