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Music and Identity Formation in Older Adults

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People inevitably experience age-related issues later in life; however, an increasing amount of research challenges the stereotypes of physical and mental decline that permeated much of the gerontological thinking of the 20th century. New models of "successful aging" promote people's capacities for growth and happiness rather than the mere slowing of time's detrimental effects. Barring ill health, adults may continue to develop their minds and bodies throughout their lives. "Not only does the brain retain its capacity to form new memories [through old age] . . . but it can grow entirely new brain cells;" in addition, personalities and creativity continue to evolve over the course of an individual's life span (Cohen 2005, xv).

For many older adults, retirement poses a challenge to personal identity. Social adjustments in retirement coincide with individuals' reconceptualizations of self-image and sense of place in the world. The loss of networks that defined them for much of their adult lives can engender feelings of sadness and depression even if the change proves advantageous on the balance. Freedoms found in retirement can enrich life; however, they may also contribute to the anxieties that often accompany uncertainties and choices (Luborsky 1994). To offset life change stresses, retirees must develop activities that gratify support needs. Levison and Wofford (1993) suggest that newly retired individuals apply the skills they developed over their lives, continue to engage in familiar, pleasurable activities, and develop at least one new activity that potentially offers a similar level of engagement and enjoyment. Life paths differ, and each person will negotiate the retirement process differently. The concept of "retirement" itself may not even apply to some individuals; nevertheless, successful aging depends on the development of strategies to offset the inevitable physical, mental, and social changes that come with time.

Role of Arts in Later Life Transitions

Aging does not constitute a uniform process, nor do aging individuals comprise a homogeneous cohort. People cope and adapt in their later years in highly variable ways;

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however, noted gerontologist and researcher Dr. Gene Cohen (2005) states that challenge in leisure activities and the establishment of strong social networks reside at the core of successful aging. In research regarding creative activities and health in older age, Cohen determined that arts activities provide particularly potent opportunities for sustained involvement, individual mastery, and social engagement. Sidelnick (1993) relates the capacity for continual personal growth to neoteny, or the retention in later stages of life of juvenile traits including abilities to play, imagine, create, and learn. Regarding visual art in particular, Sidelnick further states that "there appears to be a relationship between neotenous aspects of art and the positive contributions art can make to successful aging" (146) in its capacities to stimulate critical thinking and reflection. Likewise, music can provide significant opportunities for older adults to explore their creative potential and expand their knowledge and skill sets.

The arts can provide focus and new pathways for lives in transition. Taylor (1987) concurs that identity crises often emerge out of the loss of work role status, which can cause decreased perceptions of self-worth and well-being. The author promotes the visual arts as an outlet for leisure and a productive use of free time as well as a medium in which older adults can maintain dreams of the future and openness to possibility. For those individuals fortunate enough to discover a means of music participation, such activity provides unique prospects for growth and identity development in later life. Coffman and Adamek (1999) found that instrumental ensemble participation facilitated older adults' feelings of well-being and accomplishment and heightened participants' perceived quality of life. In a related study, participants in a senior adult band program perceived their musical activities as an avenue to new purpose in their retirements. They described a loss of identity in the retirement transition; one day engaging in work as a chemist, teacher, or some other profession only to wake up somewhat disoriented the next day with a sense of "I used to be—" (Dabback 2007, 58). Engagement with others in active music making provided a sense of inclusion and self in their new social networks.

Frameworks for Identity Construction

In her keynote address at the 2009 *International Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education* in Limerick, Ireland, Lucy Green positioned the field at the intersection of musical meaning, social perception, and the role of social interactions in constructing reality. She

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charged that music education researchers utilizing sociological lenses must proceed beyond mere description and explore how beliefs form and perpetuate. Descriptive research often reports how participants construe, or perceive their locations, beliefs, and identities; however, studies often lack details of the actual processes of construction through interactions and institutions.

Theories of social psychology provide many of the underpinnings of research in music and identity formation. Roberts (2000) suggests that symbolic interactionism serves as the most pervasive model for identity research in music education. Studies in this tradition examine how actions and meaning emerge from contextual and interactive communication, interpretation, and role taking. In this framework, identity becomes a "symbolic construction, an image of ourselves, which we build in a process of interaction with others" (Mach 2007, 54). Identity formation comprises more than individual choice; adults develop identities through reflexive socialization processes shaped in relationships with others (Sandstrom et al. 2010; Roberts 2000). Psychology and sociology share important commonalities regarding the relationships that create identity. Both disciplines approach self-concept as active and actively created and embrace the reciprocal nature of self and the social world. Whereas sociological models of social psychology tend to focus on the antecedents of self-conception that emerge from patterns of social interactions, psychological models focus on the products of those processes (Gecas 1982). Gecas distinguishes between processual and structural symbolic interactionism. The former features flexibility and negotiation based on social situation; the latter depends on the internalization of a hierarchical system of roles. At any given time, an individual selects the most salient option, which connotes behavioral expectations. In a music context, Hoffman (2008) applies and distinguishes social identity from role identity in her study of middle school band students:

> Social identity may be described as the ways in which individual students see themselves in a range of contexts: as part of their instrument section, the larger ensemble (band), or as a member of their middle school community. A role identity may be the individual interpretation of what it means to be a flutist, or an instrument section leader, for example. Role identities may also serve to delineate the interpersonal communications between classmates or between the teacher and students. Role identities inform our understanding of the relationships between individuals (such as the teacher and student) that may not be easily defined as part of a larger group process. (Hoffman 2008, 21)

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Identity Construction and Music

What is musical identity? North and Hargreaves (1999) suggest that adolescents use music engagement and consumption as a means of social identification. They define themselves through music in both public and private spaces. As Hoffman (2008, 21) states, "adolescents listen to music and wear clothes that reflect particular musical groups and genres as a way of portraying their identities to those around them." Music becomes the medium through which these young people access and reflect specific cultural knowledge and behaviors. In this, they develop identities *through* music.

Research with older adult populations strongly suggests that music engagement facilitates identity development. In Erikson's eighth stage of development, individuals negotiate the tensions of integrity and despair through reflection on the paths, purposes, and successes of their lives (Erikson 1997). In a study that utilized Erikson's epigenetic theory of identity to frame the experiences of participants engaged in learning in a New Horizons band program for senior adults, Dabback (2007) found that engagement in the instrumental music program helped participants stave off feelings of stagnation and facilitated their development of identities as healthy older adults. Specifically, program involvement provided structure to daily, weekly, and monthly living that facilitated an awareness of time, anticipation of program events, and a perception of improved health and well-being. Minichiello (2005) found that music served as a medium for older adults to express their inner selves. For his study participants, performing, composing, or listening to music conveyed individuality, and "as such, a way of defining *self*" (440). Participants in Minichiello's study also expressed a strong connection between music engagement and memory. Data revealed that particular music choices evoked life experiences, events, and their associated emotions. The researcher concluded that "participants used music as a symbol for defining the own sense of *self* and identity. Music is a symbolic representation of 'who' the participants are and how they would like to be perceived by others" (439).

Not all individuals who listen to music, or even actively engage in music making, perceive themselves as musicians (Kruse 2007); therefore, self-image of oneself *as* a musician constitutes an alternative view of musical identity. Participants in the New Horizons Band appeared to follow one of three paths toward the formation of "musician" identities (Dabback 2008, 2009). Many individuals with past musical experience who were returning to music after a long period of inactivity picked up the instruments of their youth and *reclaimed* their

identities. Others chose to *revise* their identities by choosing different instruments and claiming new roles within the ensemble. For those participants with little or no musical background, the program offered an opportunity to *construct* a musical identity late in life. The latter label serves a purpose in identifying a particular pathway in a specific study; however, as Lucy Green (2009) states, identity construction comprises more than participant perception. In addition, unlike Erikson's overarching concept of self, the lenses of social psychology allow for "evolving, multiple identities that emerge in relation to group, or social, identities" (Holland and Lachicotte 2007, 104). What processes lead older adults engaged with music to their identity conceptions?

The Roles of Music

According to Green (2009), music comprises more than social perception; it possesses enough autonomy to act back on people's beliefs, values, feelings, and behaviors. Hargreaves et al. (2002) suggest that music can define and mediate interpersonal relations, regulate mood, and contribute to a sense of identity. Much of the research regarding musical preferences and identity examined adolescents for whom issues of private and public self and social identifications hold great significance. "It is often easier from the point of view of sustaining the group and one's position in it to remain silent . . . or to appear neutral concerning a majority view counter to one's own position, and to reserve one's true position for another time" (Crozier 1997, 71). The same consideration may or may not apply to older adult populations; however, research suggests a strong relationship between music and social identity. Minichiello (2005) reported that older adults articulated how music represented their inner selves; however, exploration of how particular music affects the actual processes of identity construction in senior adults remains scarce and remains open for future research.

The Role of the Social World

Although music education as a discipline largely lacks studies in the area of older adults' identity formation, the few known findings strongly suggest that others' perceptions of an individual's music activities, and the social conventions of the activities themselves, play a crucial role in identity. Membership in a group is a key to social identity. In the context of the New Horizons Band, the rituals and conventions of traditional ensemble performance reinforced participants' identities (Dabback 2007). Structured rehearsals, seating

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arrangements, the hierarchical leadership of the band, and the ensemble's repertory reinforced members' self-concepts of themselves as musicians.

Distant (not closely related) and significant (close friends, family, and influences) others helped to reinforce these identities. Distant others attended performances and invited band members to perform in other venues; their actions confirmed band members as "musicians." Community performances in assisted-living or long-term care facilities especially aided members in confirming their self-perceptions as healthy older adults. Although band members offered concerts primarily to share the pleasure of music, contact with individuals of diminished physical or intellectual capacity inevitably prompted reflection. The older adult musicians delimited their identities against the interrelated others of approximately the same age, but whose physical autonomy or intellectual abilities were diminished and who may have lacked a sense of purpose or belonging to a dynamic community.

Relationships with those people closest to a person perhaps affect identity most strongly. Spouses and children who support music activities, whether they themselves participate or not, reinforce identity perceptions by their words of encouragement and actions in concert attendance (Dabback 2008). Some older adults cite private music teachers and directors as significant others who interact with them in rehearsal as musicians, thereby strengthening their self-images. With respect to the New Horizons Band, members drew inspiration for music making from the oldest members of the ensembles, who continued to learn music well into their eighth and ninth decades of life.

In ensemble settings, older adults compare themselves to their peers to gauge their success and role identities. One individual, "Samantha," referenced a peer role model, who mentored her until his death and gave her the confidence and motivation to succeed (Dabback 2009). The mentor's actions helped Samantha shape her thoughts and behavior vis-à-vis the group. In the same study, "Jordan" expressed a feeling that she needed to prove herself as a female trumpet player due to her internalized stereotype of trumpet as a "male" instrument. Although she admitted that her companions in the section might not have shared her feelings, her resultant actions reflected her personal views. In this way, her construal of herself as a trumpet player led to interactions that served to reinforce and further construct her musical identity. Further, Jordan spoke of her occasional discomfort regarding the time she diverted away from her roles as a wife, a mother, and a grandmother toward her musical pursuits:

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> Well, I think that I felt uncomfortable. Now how does that happen? . . . Why should someone have to justify their time for wanting to practice the trumpet? . . . Now my family's all trained. I'm going to take the trumpet with me and take a certain amount of time to practice. They knew when we went on vacation that I was going to spend two hours a day playing my trumpet, which I did. And I shouldn't feel I have to justify that. In the beginning, I did. Now I say, "The heck with you all" (Dabback 2009, 14).

Jordan's words demonstrate her construction of an identity based on her perceptions. Her case reflects the basic premise of symbolic interaction. "People attach symbolic meanings to objects, behaviors, themselves and other people, and they develop and transmit these meanings through interaction" (Howard 2000, 371). As Jordan's case suggests, individuals behave towards objects, based on the meanings the objects hold for them rather than on objects' concrete properties.

Implications for Music Education

For many individuals, engagement with the arts and music in later life plays a significant role in identity formation. The lenses of psychology, sociology, and social psychology provide many potential frameworks for identity research and the processes involved. Much of the existing research explores the musical preferences of adults and older adults (VanWeelden 2009, 2007; Flowers 2001; LeBlanc 1996). Such studies offer potentially useful information regarding media and performance programming, musical content for educational programs, as well as music as a commodity. Despite the existence of this research, Bailey (2002) states that, while the listening habits and consumer choices indicate the importance of music to young people, its significance to senior adult populations remains unclear. This research does not provide insights regarding the actual interactions and mechanisms that influence individuals' self-perceptions and, therefore, the actual ways in which they use music. In addition, other than potential material, it offers little in the way of how to approach teaching and learning interactions in music education programs for older populations.

Music educators can take the lead in this area as the population ages and more people live to see their eighth and ninth decades. A substantial body of research pertaining to older adults' music learning and the impact of music participation itself on successful aging and identity formation would enhance the relevance of music education to society as a whole, as would the creation of programs to serve populations beyond the PK–12 paradigm. School music instruction will always represent an important aspect of the profession; however,

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limiting music education to that familiar horizon risks stagnation and marginalization in an ever-changing society.

A music education profession that embraces music learning across the lifespan moves beyond rhetoric and into the realm of actions to offer access to opportunities at various points throughout life at all skill levels. Examples of entry points for adult novice musicians are not ubiquitous. Increasing numbers of communities offer such programs as the Late-Starters Orchestra in London and New Horizons band, choirs, and orchestras in the United States and Canada, which do feature instruction for beginners. But evidence suggests that most members of these programs participated in such programs earlier in life; very few begin music participation for the first time. The total number of participants in all programs represents a very small percentage of the total population. Does this imply that the rest of the population has no interest in music study or rather, perhaps, that the profession to date has not yet developed programs that reach and interest the majority of society? Replication of existing school music paradigms in adult populations does not ultimately meet the requirements of society.

Research indicates that music engagement facilitates successful aging. While participants may or may not establish identities as musicians, musical activities provide interactions and opportunities that facilitate their self-images as healthy older adults. Further examination will clarify the psychosocial means by which people form identities through music and identities as musicians as well as the actual influence that music has on those processes. As we come to understand how seniors use music in identity creation, we will begin to understand how we can design and implement programs for them. The root of the question lies in the purposes of music education. As Elliott (2003) writes, "Goals relate to *what* and *how* we teach. Critical and musical thinking is *what* we teach; enjoyment, self growth, and other aims [including self identity] are *why* we teach" (32).

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William M. Dabback holds the position of assistant professor of music education at James Madison University in Virginia. His research interests include the relationships between sociological interactions, learning, and identity; issues in community music; music teacher preparation; and music pedagogy. His work pertaining to older adults and music participation also appears in The Oxford Handbook of Music Education and the International Journal of Community Music.