

Border Crossing in the Sociology of Music Education: Are We There Yet?

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Abstract

This review essay raises problematic issues for the sociology of music education, and music education more generally, in light of the publication of *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education* (Wright et al. 2021). Debates are opened up about who and what music education is good for, as well as critiquing dominant “good news” discourses. In particular, I problematize the politics and performativity of citational practices that continue to reproduce White, heterosexual, male, and geographically limited scholarship. To conclude, a call is made to challenge and change the prevailing social inequalities within academic writing and assigned reading practices.

Keywords

Citation, social reproduction, music education, sociological discourse

Writing then is revelation. It calls up and stirs up. It illuminates.
bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 69

A few years ago, at a conference lunch, I struck up a conversation about academic handbooks with the person next to me. We had just listened to a presentation where such a book was given an overview slot in the programme. Even then, the music education field was flooded with handbooks. Routledge, Bloomsbury, Oxford, amongst others, all clamouring for space on library shelves and digital repositories. The lunch conversation posited on the question, “Is the academic handbook dead?” By the time coffee arrived, the answer appeared to be “yes.” *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education* (Wright et al. 2021) joins the ever-expanding pool of handbooks, written in the hope of calling up and stirring up the themes and issues of the day. If writing is, as bell hooks (2009) claims, “a revelation” (69), its space on the bookshelves is a good thing. What is revealed and not revealed amongst its pages poses some of the more interesting and perhaps problematic questions of this review essay.

A Place for Sociology of Music Education

Compiling and editing 36 chapters is a mammoth task. Focusing on Section 3 (*Crossing Borders—Problematizing Assumptions*) for this essay, readers are brought on a journey through wide-ranging contemporary topics such as creativity, genderfication, agency and music in early childhood, cultural omnivorousness, and online communities, to name a few. Authors weave in and out of theoretical frames and concepts with great agility, demonstrating aspects of music education that are now firmly placed within broader sociological discourses. This itself is an important aspect of the Handbook, given that music education has long been criticized for being theoretically light. In this sense, the Handbook has crossed an important border, to which the title of the section alludes. In particular, there are fresh insights into, and new lenses applied to, examining music education and community music programmes. Questioning such programmes is a progressive shift from the dominant discourses within both music education and community music that typically court certitude or victory narratives. How many conference presentations and talks present music programmes as “saving” children/the poor/the elderly/the incarcerated/the “other”? This is particularly the case with very large conferences or seminars/talks that wish to attract a mainly practitioner

audience (which of course also brings up questions around perceptions of what practitioners want). The lack of criticality given to the study of such programmes “is perhaps due to a perceived (or real) need to serve greater political agendas, satisfy multiple stakeholders, create employment opportunities, and attract increased funding” (Kenny and Christophersen 2018, 3). In other words, these “narratives of salvation” (Gould 2007) can reap many rewards beyond the “target groups.”

The Handbook makes numerous attempts to move on from good news stories and to continue this critical conversation. For instance, in Chapter 26, Yerichuk (2021) doubts the “glow we have cast around community music,” the “collective claims” and “normative statements” (366). Through an historical analysis of settlement music schools in Toronto, she finds “the trope of good music within the community music schools negated other kinds of music already circulating within Toronto’s poor and immigrant communities” (372). Similarly, Haak-Shulenburg and Laurence (2021) in Chapter 23 reveal the Barenboim-Said Center for Music in Palestine to be deeply flawed in its aims, Eurocentric approach, and claims to improve Palestinian lives. One cannot help but make immediate connections to the more contemporary work of Geoffrey Baker on *El Sistema* here, as well as others, who continue to point out uncomfortable truths about community and music education programmes that are often presented as unequivocally good (Baker 2014, 2019; see also Bradley 2009, Kertz-Welzel 2016, and Sæther 2020).

In their questioning, then, the Handbook authors play an important role in opening and sometimes reopening debates about who and what music education is good for. In the introductory pages, Kanellopoulos (2021) is quite explicit in outlining the complexity that such debates entail, stating, “sociologically framed critical thinking questions certainties, it is not easy to digest, and might at times sound a bit melancholic” (327). This is clearly no place for solely good news. In attempting to “cross borders” (often guarded heavily by vested interests) and “problematize assumptions” within this section, readers are confronted with “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998). Grappling with such knowledge, then, involves, “a courage to explore the multi-dimensions of our desires and confront truths about ourselves and our world that can be very difficult to admit” (xxxviii). Taking Britzman’s ideas forward, what is most interesting in the reading of this section is that the authors often speak of issues of marginalisation within the work they do. For instance, in Chapter 28, Young (2021) speaks not only to the existing age hierarchies within music education research but also to the lower status afforded the

(mainly) women who work with young children. For Young, early childhood music education is “beyond the sightlines, knowledge, and awareness of most music educationalists” (397). Thus, one wonders (again), when babies and young children will be offered an equal place at the sociology of music education table—or indeed, any music education table at all. Similarly, in Chapter 24, Nielsen and Dyndahl (2021) tackle gender issues in higher music education, not just in relation to academic titles and positions but also in relation to how gender dominates topics studied (for instance, the proliferation of male academics who study popular music). In presenting topics and cohorts that are marginalised within music education such as these, the Handbook serves an important function. Readers are given clear directions to areas of neglect in our field—scholars both young and old would do well to take heed and embark on such less trodden research paths.

In and Out

There were many moments as I read this Handbook section where I could not help but ask, what borders have really been crossed? Are music education sociologists even at the borders yet? Such questions began for me within the opening pages. As a first port of call, as with any book, I peruse the table of contents. Who is in? Who is out? What topics are afforded space? What topics are not? Through this all-important list, some insight is gained into the political machinations of academia such as hierarchies, alliances and patronage, as well as current research perspectives and foci. At a glance, there is a clear dearth of writing from scholars of color and/or from minority communities despite the great efforts evident in the geographical spread of authors, not to mention the noteworthy mix of early career and established scholars. However, in a handbook that claims to be “comprehensive” and “authoritative” (2021, i), what does this mean for the voices we are not hearing? What does it say to the students and scholars who open its pages and do not see themselves mirrored within it? Such questions are not intended as a finger-pointing exercise. As a White, heterosexual scholar, I recognise my positionality and the part I, too, play in this.

The issue of representation continued to disturb me throughout the reading in other ways. The reproduction of social inequalities within academia is not a new phenomenon (Bourdieu 1984). Taking the politics of citation practices as one element where such inequalities manifest (despite advances in recent decades), the

reproduction of White, heterosexual, male and geographically limited scholarship continues (Ahmed 2012, 2017; Bacevic 2021; Borsuk et al. 2009). Repeatedly, references to the work of male academics takes centre stage in this Handbook (despite the majority of female authors). I hear Roberta Lamb's words from the 8th Conference of the International Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education ringing in my ears: "WHERE ARE THE WOMEN"? (see also Lamb 2014, and Lamb and Dhoki 2015). Pages and pages are given over to Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, and at a more music education specific level, Christopher Small. Of course, this bias is largely expected and arguably needed within a handbook—academic writers must build on the canon, not ignore it. It does bring up important questions, though, about how much we strive as scholars to address this bias in our writing? How often do we use these male, Western-centric discourses as points of departure and look beyond the readily available? The typically cited? There appears to be a lack of breadth to our reading if we continually cite the same (White) men from the Global North. Lamb and Dhoki (2015) point to the prevailing grand narrative within music education as part of this problem:

This grand narrative, historically written by white, Anglophone heterosexual men, systematically ignored individuals who wrote a different narrative. This systematic erasure becomes obvious in the texts historically assigned to students, the lack of citation of scholars who are feminists, anti-racists, and those not from the Northern and Western Hemisphere. (124)

Performing and Recognising

Performativity theory is also relevant to reflect upon when debating the over-citation of foundational literature at the expense of contemporary and/or "other" authors. Judith Butler (1999) argues that reality is constructed discursively and performed, not just through language, body norms, and physical acts, but also through power relations, historical events, and environments:

Performativity is thus not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. (241)

As such, norms are made and remade through repetition of these discourses, which often support or uphold existing power structures. The sociological nature of knowledge production, then, depends not only on performing through certain actions (such as academic citation), but also on those actions being repeated and

recognised. According to Butler (2004), such recognition functions as a site of power; therefore, “if the schemes that are available to us are those that ‘undo’ the person by conferring recognition, or ‘undo’ the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differently produced” (2).

Citation is now recognised as both political and performative. As Sara Ahmed (2012) often argues, citation is the practice of how we choose to reproduce our discipline. How are we choosing to reproduce a sociology of music education? Handbooks in particular are typically used as a “textbook” site for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In continuing to predominantly cite and therefore *recognise* the most established White males in the field (and within other fields), other voices are deprivileged and dismissed. This in turn makes it less likely that their ideas will be reproduced or credited in future texts. The consequences of this citational practice are not insignificant in a growingly competitive academic world, with limited promotional opportunity and increasing academic job insecurity. Bacevic (2021) goes so far as to label such dismissals as “epistemic erasure,” where “even when women, ethnic minorities and other differently constructed ‘Others’ are credited as knowers, their contributions often appear in footnotes, acknowledgments or, as it were, brackets” (11). Feminist poet and scholar Adrienne Rich (1979) argued decades ago that “in a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence” (204).

It is not that women are missing from the chapters, but rather, they so rarely are a focus. To the scholars in this section who chose to centre their writing on the theories of women and women of color, I applaud you. Reading the work of Audre Lorde (Chapter 25), Noortje Marres (Chapter 33) and Sidsel Karlsen (Chapter 36) was refreshing. Not only this, such re-centering moves the field forward in new directions—perhaps even crossing some borders along the way. Elizabeth Gould’s chapter in particular (Chapter 25) calls out the many issues with a universalised White patriarchy and goes further to deconstruct and interrogate her own past research practices that she feels upheld such norms. She poses in her reflective questions at the end of the chapter, “How do racial/class/gender/sexuality exclusions impact music education in your experience”? (Gould 2021, 363). One could extend this provocative and urgent question to the Handbook itself.

Citation is a feminist practice. Citation is also an anti-racist practice. Victor Ray (2018), when explaining specifically the effects of racism in scholarly citation, states:

Data showing that scholars of color are underrepresented in publications, citation rates, or other venues can be explained away as the personal failings of unproductive researchers rather than the result of systematic exclusion. That allows whites to maintain a type of studied ignorance that furthers racial dominance and forecloses potentially valuable avenues of intellectual inquiry.

This is not a new problem and several scholars, platforms, and organisations have been tackling it for years (see for example citeblackwomencollective.org and feministkilljoys.com). Within music education, we have also seen increasing critical discourse on these issues (see for example, Bradley 2015; Hess 2015, 2018; Niknafs 2020) and an “invitation to ongoing reflective inquiry; to deliberate the politics of diversity in a fast-changing and pluralist world; and together work towards more informed and ethically sound understandings” (Kallio et al. 2021, 9). Yet, here we are. We still have borders to cross in this regard.

Conclusion: Getting There

The chapters in this Handbook section allow for interesting and varied insights based on sound theoretical understandings and robust empirical data. There is much to be gained from its reading. Just as the authors often question the taken-for-granted or “good news stories” in their chapters, in turn, the Handbook itself creates further questions. In this regard, the chapters function as important contributions to the music education field by piquing readers’ interest, forming new research questions, and taking us into lesser known terrain. It also forces a rethink and reevaluation of where sociology of music education is right here, right now, at this moment in time. Then, music educators can imagine, what next?

As a move towards and perhaps beyond the borders referred to in this Handbook, one must first acknowledge the politics and performativity of citation. Mott and Cockayne (2017) remind us, “Careful and conscientious citation is important because the choices we make about whom to cite—and who is then left out of the conversation—directly impact the cultivation of a rich and diverse discipline, and the reproduction of geographical knowledge itself” (955). To ignore the existing politics of citation risks continued silencing and an upholding of White heteronor-

mative and geographically limited knowledge production. Thus, there are conscientious choices to be made at both conceptual and pragmatic levels. We have power and tools to resist reproduction. It requires active interventions such as careful and mindful citation, actively counting and checking reference lists, increasing one's co-authoring practices, and rethinking the choices we make about assigned readings in courses and programmes we teach in.

Sara Ahmed (2017) claims, "Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings" (16). What do the future sociology of music education dwellings look like? What could and should these bricks be made of? If, as Lucy Green (2021) suggests in the foreword of this Handbook, "Music educators ... ultimately seek to cause change" (xxv), let us open up to change in citation practices. Let us open up to change in our reading and assigned reading practices. Otherwise, we are all simply missing too much.

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