

# Embracing Plurality: A Response to ACT Reviews

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**W**e would like to thank the editors of *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* for commissioning this set of review essays of *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education*. It is an honour to see an entire issue dedicated to thought about our publication, and we express here our gratitude for such recognition and for the rigorous and challenging consideration brought to the project by the reviewing authors.

It was particularly fascinating to see the connections the review authors drew between their own specialist areas of research and sections of the *Handbook*. The essays contained in this issue of ACT represent incisive intellectual engagement with the content of the *Handbook* and exemplify the type of scholarly discourse required if the field of sociology of music education is to move forward and engage effectively with the ever-increasing complexities of contemporary society.

One of the problems, possibly, in reviewers addressing the reviews from their own areas of specialism is that it may, at times, tend to skew their readings. Sometimes this may result in a reading that attributes to the authors intentions, theoretical positions, or even social origins quite other than those intended. We are

particularly grateful, therefore, for the efforts made by the reviewers to provide balance and objectivity (if such a thing is possible) within their reviews. Their contributions, whether one agrees with them or not, are much needed to the project of diversifying dialogue—and music education is indeed in much need of dialogue!

As for our part, we entered this project with a specific aim: to address the interfaces between music education and sociological theory as different from merely attending to the relationship between music education and society. We attempted to contribute to the introduction of more robust theoretical content to what has often been referred as an under-theorized field of music education (Westerlund and Väkevä 2011; Karlsen 2021). Therefore, some of our decisions about the content of the *Handbook* were guided by an effort to gather chapters that provided a variety of relevant theoretical perspectives—or, as Bernstein (2000) would say, languages of description—from within the social sciences. This, in turn, in combination with questions of space, resulted in many desirable perspectives being left out, together with the omission of potential contributing scholars. This critique is absolutely relevant, since no publication, even in the format of a handbook, can give a complete overview of a field. More certainly needs to be done. We can only assert that our intention as editors was not to exclude any particular group or reflect particular imbalances but was necessitated by pragmatic constraints of various kinds.

The authors of some of the essays in this ACT collection, particularly those situated in North American contexts, comment regretfully about the under-representation of certain demographic groups or the over-representation of others. Similar comments are made with respect to theoretical perspectives. First, we would like to stress that this publication was intended to be an international handbook and not a resource relating to North American music education alone. We thus tried to maintain a balance so that enough space was given to other national perspectives on education systems very different in their approach to music education than those in North America. It is, however, true that some of the imbalances resulted from our being unable to secure contributions from scholars representing desired demographic groups. Others occurred as the result of authors initially engaging to contribute chapters and then having to withdraw, for various reasons, leaving us without time to invite other contributors who could remedy unintended imbalances or missing perspectives.

As far as inadequate representation of certain theoretical perspectives is concerned, in almost all the cases where this issue was pointed out by scholars who were assigned specific sections of the *Handbook* to review, the missing perspectives were present in other sections. Nonetheless, it is of great value to have these matters brought to the fore and indeed to the attention of any others who might engage in such future projects. It would be highly desirable to address these points in future volumes, and we hope the *Handbook* will inspire such additional scholarship as one of its effects. Indeed, efforts are already being made in many respects, as illustrated by the recent publication, *Sociological Thinking in Music Education: International Intersections* (Frierson-Campbell, Hall, Powell and Rosabal-Coto 2022) to which some of the reviewing authors contributed chapters. This publication can be seen as a concrete response to the need for more diverse perspectives.

In connection with the theoretical representation point, we also maintain that while seminal theorists such as Marx may not have been referenced explicitly or at length in the *Handbook*, the origins of much of the theory with which our authors engaged lie in his thought. See, for example, the vivid discussion around the Marxian underpinnings of the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein (Apple 1992; Desan 2013), two sociologists whose ideas figure prominently in the *Handbook*. Having said that, we certainly acknowledge that there is a need for more work based on the Marxist tradition. As to the underrepresentation of female theorists in the *Handbook*, we suggest that this reflects a lamentable lack of representation of women in the field, an issue worthy of particular attention itself. A short glance at the contents pages of the *Handbook* shows that many highly original and influential female authors are included; they were not invited to contribute to secure female representation but because they represent cutting-edge thought. We look at the inclusion of their contributions itself as a statement, and we are proud of it.

Other reviewers have commented on the prevalence of the work of Pierre Bourdieu in the chapters. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the particular relevance of Bourdieu's thought to a field so closely connected with culture—moreover one dominated by elite highbrow culture. Bourdieu's thought has received critique from several quarters, some concerning the relationships Bourdieu drew between class and cultural capital and the determinist character of his interpretations (Threadgold 2018). Given this prevalence, we see the inclusion of perspectives that revisit and further develop our knowledge of music education on these bases as

valuable for the further development of our field. It is interesting to note, however, that large sociological surveys such as the Great British Class Survey Experiment (Savage et al. 2013) found that, despite increased complexity in the types and consumption of culture, highbrow cultural capital was still predominantly possessed by the upper echelons of British society: “In February, the Warwick Commission found that the wealthiest, best educated, and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population made up 28% of theatre audiences” (Arts Professional, no date, n.p.). Moreover, representation of those of lower socio-economic standing in the arts as a profession also indicated a problem in the social distribution of cultural capital: “Recent analysis of the Great British Class Survey discovered that only 10% of actors came from a working-class background” (Arts Professional, no date, n.p.). While these examples pertain to the UK, they indicate that, at least in this geographical context, Bourdieu’s analysis of the relations between elite culture and class remains valid.

To conclude our brief and inevitably incomplete and selective response: our work as editors of *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education* has been guided by the intention to produce a volume that challenges complacent thinking as well as formulaic approaches that obliterate complexities. In this process, we have been committed to make space for and/or produce theoretical argumentation from a sociology of music education perspective that offers ways of thinking that might create openings for music education practices that manifest care, love, justice, criticality, and solidarity. We thus argue for a sociologically informed music education scholarship that “bear[s] witness to negativity” while at the same time produces critical analyses that “point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action” (Apple 2013, 270).

In this spirit, we regard the essays in this volume of *Action, Criticism, And Theory for Music Education* as significant and much needed contributions to a debate that is necessary for maintaining the momentum of the development of our field. In addition, they contribute valuable illumination of the relationship between sociology and music education itself. We thank our contributing authors again for their scholarly work and look forward to future developments, dialogue, and debate in the sociology of music education.

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