



Comment

Music, empathy and cultural understanding: The need for
developmental research
Comment on “Music, empathy and cultural understanding”
by E. Clarke et al.

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Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski have carried out a formidable task of preparing a profound and encompassing review [3] that brings together two highly complex and multifaceted concepts, empathy and music, as well as a specific aspect of empathy that is highly relevant to society, cultural understanding. They have done an extraordinary service in synthesizing the growing, but still highly fragmented body of work in this area. At the heart of this review lies an intricate model that the authors develop, which accounts for a variety of mechanisms and cognitive processes underlying musical empathic engagement. In what follows I would like to first point out what I think is unique about this model. Then, I will briefly describe the need for including in any such model a developmental angle.

Despite empathy being “the most valuable resource in our world” [1], as Clarke et al. [3] cite in their review, not much research, theoretical or empirical has been done to unravel the potential of music in shaping empathic behavior. It is only in the last few years that practical interest in this intersection has sprung and new scientific, as well as ‘field’ evidence has started to surface leading to various accounts of the relationship between music and empathy [for example, see 7–9].

When integrating what we have learned so far into a comprehensive unifying model, it might be tempting to produce a universal, one-size-fits all model. Clarke et al. [3], however, imply that this is probably not the case with music and empathy. They argue that individual differences in cognitive styles (i.e. empathic disposition and susceptibility to contagion) can influence the ways in which people engage empathetically with music. The authors rely partly on a new study they performed [10] where music’s positive influence on subjects’ inter-cultural attitudes was mostly witnessed in people who rated themselves as having high dispositional empathy. This is consistent with previous findings that individual differences affect the ways in which we perceive music and specifically, emotions in music [for a review see 4]. Thus, it is important to take into account personality traits and individual differences when attempting to understand the impact of music on empathy. The prediction of Clarke et al.’s model is that the enhancing of empathy through music is at least in part selective to those individuals who are already ‘empathic’ to start with.

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Notably, these conclusions mainly refer to adults with relative fixed cognitive styles. It is now appreciated that a complete and general picture in any area in the social sciences should consist also of a developmental perspective [5]. This is especially true for the case of music and empathy.

I propose that in order to fully fathom the positive effects of music on empathy (and vice versa) and in order to eventually harness them to enhance empathy in society, it is important to examine how music influences empathy not only in adulthood but also during development. Most work to date, on preferences and dispositions in music has focused on adults. Thus, a huge gap remains about how and when such precious capacities as dispositional empathy and contagion develop, specifically with regards to music. How if at all do young children, toddlers and infants exhibit musical empathic engagement? Could music perhaps help mold children's susceptibility to contagion and empathic disposition? It certainly seems to be a likely possibility. Only a few studies have addressed how music influences empathy or related capacities in children [e.g. 2,6,8], but much more work is still needed. If Clarke et al.'s model is correct, then it is especially important to reveal whether cognitive styles, which are critical for moving from music to empathy, according to the model, might be amenable to change in young children, and even if they are not, whether they are important for enhancing empathy through music among children as they are suggested to be among adults.

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