

Breaking the Silence: Therapeutic Uses of Music and the Wellbeing of Adolescents

McFerran, K., Derrington, P., & Saarikallio, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbook of music, adolescents, and wellbeing*. Oxford University Press.

Abstract:

The author of this review paper critically discusses the *Handbook of Music, Adolescents, and Wellbeing*, edited by Katrina McFerran, Philippa Derrington, and Suvi Saarikallio (2019). The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the volume, which, drawing upon empirical, practical, theoretical, and personal perspectives from the fields of music therapy, music psychology, music cognition, and music sociology, explores the therapeutic role of music in the lives of adolescents. Moreover, an attempt is made to highlight the most valuable observations and learnings which a non-clinician might glean from the book in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author hopes that future collections on music, adolescence, and wellbeing will rebalance their research towards more cultural, socio-economic, and musical diversity to ensure that marginalised voices are heard.

Keywords:

adolescents, connectedness, identity, Katrina McFerran, mental health, music therapy, Philippa Derrington, Suvi Saarikallio, wellbeing

Przełamywanie ciszy. Terapeutyczne użycia muzyki i dobrostan psychiczny nastolatków

McFerran, K., Derrington, P., Saarikallio, S. (red.). (2019). *Handbook of music, adolescents, and wellbeing*. Oxford University Press.

Abstrakt:

W artykule recenzyjnym krytycznie omówiono *Handbook of Music, Adolescents, and Wellbeing* [Przewodnik po muzyce, nastolatkach i dobrostanie psychicznym]

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pod redakcją Katriny McFerran, Philippy Derrington i Suvi Saarikallio (2019). Celem tekstu jest ocena mocnych stron i ograniczeń tomu, który czerpiąc z empirycznych, praktycznych, teoretycznych i osobistych perspektyw z dziedziny muzykoterapii, psychologii muzyki, poznania muzycznego i socjologii muzyki, bada terapeutyczną rolę muzyki w życiu nastolatków. Ponadto podjęto próbę zwrócenia uwagi na najcenniejsze spostrzeżenia i wnioski, jakie w świetle pandemii COVID-19 może wyciągnąć z książki osoba niebędąca lekarzem. Wyrażona zostaje nadzieja, że przyszłe publikacje na temat muzyki, dorastania i dobrostanu młodzieży zrównoważą badania w kierunku większej różnorodności kulturowej, społeczno-ekonomicznej i muzycznej, aby zapewnić wysłuchanie głosów marginalizowanych.

Słowa kluczowe:

nastolatki, więzi grupowe, tożsamość, Katrina McFerran, zdrowie psychiczne, muzykoterapia, Philippa Derrington, Suvi Saarikallio, dobrostan psychiczny

Introduction

There has been a rapidly growing body of research examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents (Courtney, Watson, Battaglia, Mulsant, & Szatmari, 2020; Lee, 2020; Panchal, Salazar de Pablo, Franco, Moreno, Parellada, Arango, & Fusar-Poli, 2021). One of the most widely reported studies is UNICEF's *Life in Lockdown* research review covering more than 130,000 children and adolescents aged 10–19 years across 22 countries (Sharma et al., 2021).¹ According to the findings, the levels of child and adolescent depression, fear, anxiety, anger, irritability, negativity, alcohol and substance use, and sedentary behaviours have increased in the early stages of the pandemic compared with the pre-COVID-19 rates (pp. 4–5). The authors of the report argue that the COVID-19 pandemic may uncover only the tip of an iceberg, as the prevalence rates of common mental health conditions were already high before the pandemic (p. 14).

In this review paper, I will get back to the pre-pandemic world and examine the *Handbook of Music, Adolescents, and Wellbeing*, edited by Katrina McFerran, Philippa Derrington, and Suvi Saarikallio (2019b). The volume, as stated in its foreword, is meant as a way of “showing us how to understand and

¹ The authors of the report pointed to four areas for further research on COVID-19's psychosocial influence on children and adolescents: low- and middle-income countries; early (0–4 years) and middle childhood (5–9 years); vulnerable socio-economic groups of children and young people; longer-term effects of the pandemic.

use music to [break the silence]” on the unaddressed issues that young people face (Malekoff, 2019, p. vi). The publication is intended mostly for social workers, therapists, and other professionals whose jobs consist of helping youths deal with these very issues. Drawing upon empirical, practical, theoretical, and personal perspectives from the fields of music therapy, music psychology, music cognition, and music sociology, the volume explores the therapeutic role of music in the lives of adolescents with a special emphasis on emotion regulation, identity construction, and social connections. Each essay is complemented by an exhaustive bibliography of sources that can be used for further research in the related areas of studies.

Before going further into my thoughts and reflections regarding its contents, I would like to make it clear that I am not a social worker and, as such, will be speaking from a layperson’s perspective, at least as far as the social work sections of the book are concerned. However, as a graduate of cultural studies and an amateur musician with some formal education in the subject, I hope that my opinions will carry at least some weight when it comes to the subjects broached in the *Handbook*.

I would also like to make a note on the structure of this review. Since the *Handbook* is a collection of chapters² by different researchers, arranged by theme (emotions, identity, and connectedness), I feel that it would be appropriate to follow the same structure here.

Emotions

The “Emotions” part of the *Handbook* presents seven chapters on the complex relationship between music and emotion regulation. The incredibly broad subject is approached from a practical point of view: the authors whose essays make up this part are more concerned with how to use music in a considered, purposeful manner to help others than on high-level considerations of the interplay of music and mind.

In the initial chapter, “Crystallizing the Relationship Between Adolescents, Music, and Emotions,” Katrina McFerran (2019) offers a theoretical framework for the considerations presented later in the book. This is also perhaps the least practice-oriented chapter in the *Handbook*, dealing mostly with laying down terminological and conceptual groundwork for what is analysed by the other authors in more down-to-earth terms. McFerran introduces the notion of

² I would like to stress here that I discuss only selected chapters I find the most captivating.

“crystallization” which, despite the clarifications provided, remains somewhat opaque; in a passage on the term, she quotes Laurel Richardson (2000): “Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know” (p. 934).

In a later section, McFerran (2019) goes on to propose a “continuum of music use,” whose purpose is to “encourage more helpful uses of music” (pp. 4–7). The continuum goes from harmful, to unconscious, to hopeful, to helpful uses, indicating a clear, goal-oriented progression, where “harmful use of music” is the least desirable and “helpful use of music” is the ideal outcome (pp. 4–6). This is an interesting approach when compared to how music is colloquially thought about. Intuitively, one might make a connection between the emotional mood of music and its effect on one’s state of mind; for example, one might think that listening to loud, aggressive music would cause one’s mood to follow suit. McFerran’s idea of a continuum of use throws a different light on this approach. According to her, music should be evaluated not by face value (where a common-sense train of thought might lead one to believe that listening to hardcore music could lead to a build-up of negative energy), but by the effect it has on a listener, and in particular their mental health and actions (pp. 6–7). This seems like a humane, result-oriented approach: rather than, as may often happen, try to induce a calm, positive mood by making someone listen to classical or new-age music, it is more effective to encourage the subject of therapy to use the kind of music that may lead to a positive emotional outcome. This non-prescriptive, novel approach might indeed, as McFerran writes, have “potential to be used for personal and public health outcomes where emotional dimensions are implicated” (p. 12).

Another chapter from the “Emotions” part, “Music and Violence: Working with Youth to Prevent Violence” by Andreas Wöfl (2019), presents a more intuitively understandable approach to modifying a person’s emotional state with music. In line with conventional thinking, he points out that “stimulating music can intensify aggressive feelings and increase preparedness for violent behaviour” (p. 75). Furthermore, he goes on to state that in already violent contexts, the music played may place more emphasis “on rhythm and intensity, in order to build a sense of unity and energy” (p. 77). Wöfl’s view on music coincides with the common-sense approach to how music may influence one’s disposition and behaviour: aggressive music amplifies aggression; peaceful music promotes peace. However, his proposed approach to reducing youth violence is not one of encouraging or inducing young people to listen to calming tunes in order to decrease their likelihood

of committing a violent act. Instead, Wölfl suggests music therapy in which participants actively make music, giving them a sense of agency and an outlet for the negative or destructive emotions they may be harbouring (pp. 76–82). In a case study quoted in Wölfl’s chapter, an example of such therapy is described. A student who has exhibited aggressive behaviour “learned to develop a language for his feeling by rapping improvised lyrics” through which his aggression was channelled (p. 82). Without disparaging the effectiveness of this approach, one cannot help but consider the paradox: while making aggressive music might be a healthy outlet for violent thoughts, listening to the same music might lead to negative emotional outcomes, at least in a therapeutic setting.

These contrasting and sometimes paradoxical considerations show both the complexity of humans’ relationship with music as well as its incredible potential for doing good, even in clinical settings. It may even be beneficial to adopt some of these practices in one’s private life; this author’s sincerely held belief is that there are few activities as exhilarating and advantageous to one’s disposition as individual or group musical improvisation.

Identity

The second part of the *Handbook* deals with the complex universe of young people’s musical preferences and the ways in which these preferences affect and make up their identities.

One particularly interesting chapter is Dave Miranda’s (2019) “Personality Traits and Music in Adolescence,” which further investigates the elusive relationship between the mood of music and the mood of the listener. This is done in a very structured manner; Miranda enumerates four lines of research according to which the influence of music on personality can be investigated: personality as correlate of listening behaviours, personality as antecedent of listening behaviours, listening behaviours as markers of personality traits, and personality traits as outcomes of listening behaviours (p. 99). Restated in plainer terms, the author poses several questions: can we evaluate a person’s personality by the music they listen to? Does one’s personality affect one’s choice in music? Can one’s personality be changed by the music they listen to?

The answers are, of course, not cut-and-dried – musical preferences are not foolproof indicators of personality traits, and it is not possible to overhaul a person’s disposition by exposing them to the right types of music. However, some interesting observations emerge. Miranda (2019) points to a series of studies

done by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and his collaborators (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Chamorro-Premuzic, Gomà-i-Freixanet, Furnham, & Muro, 2009; Chamorro-Premuzic, Swami, Furnham, & Maakip, 2009), who analysed three types of music motivations in late adolescence: emotional, cognitive, and background. According to the findings, the motives one has for listening to music are in fact strong indicators of some personality traits. As Miranda (2019) concludes, “research seems to suggest that not only openness – but also neuroticism – can have the largest effect size” (p. 100). The results of another study done by Jeffrey Arnett (1992) indicated that in middle adolescents there is a correlation between sensation seeking and preferences for hard rock and heavy metal music, which Miranda (2019) surprisingly refers to as “defiant and rebellious” (p. 101). At this point it is interesting to consider how these descriptors are constructed in the discourse of music. How does one arrive at a useful definition of “defiant and rebellious music”? For a tongue-in-cheek example, let’s use Igor Stravinsky’s 1913 *The Rite of Spring*, which was clearly a defiant, rebellious, and deeply controversial work at the time of its initial release. Would a modern-day music psychology researcher conclude that a teenager who listens to Stravinsky is ‘sensation seeking’? Would it be considered ‘sophisticated music,’ indicating the personality trait of openness, or ‘intense music,’ which correlates with conscientiousness? This criticism, of course, is only half-serious: it is easy to equivocate in matters on theory, but the purpose of the *Handbook* is to look at these matters in a more practical (or even clinical) manner. Perhaps it would be more useful to apply McFerran’s (2019) concept of “crystallization,” which departs from the binary categories of healthy and unhealthy and examines adolescent uses of music in a variety of contexts.

The only attempt to explore music therapy in a multicultural context was made by Viggo Krüger (2019) in his chapter “Music as a Structuring Resource in Identity Formation Processes by Adolescents Engaging in Music Therapy – A Case Study From a Norwegian Child Welfare Setting.” The case study deals with the story of an 18-year-old refugee³ who was “was introduced to rock bands such as Metallica and Sepultura by adult social workers at one institution, which he came to like” (p. 130). Later on, he was even introduced to “Norwegian black metal music” (p. 131). With time, Javid’s enthusiasm for “defiant and rebellious music” became a conduit for him to learn to play drums, which in turn fostered his sense of agency and enabled him to make significant progress in his therapy. Clearly, McFerran’s (2019) “uses of music” rather than

³ As Krüger (2019, p. 137) highlights, this case study is created from several cases to preserve anonymity.

the colloquial “moods of music” seem like a more accurate description of both empirical and clinical reality.

The empowering potential of music therapy found its full expression in two closing chapters, Daphne Rickson’s “Working in Music With Adolescents Who Experience Disability” and Elly Scrine’s “Reframing Intervention and Inclusion: The Importance of Exploring Gender and Sexuality in Music Therapy With All Young People.” Drawing on two case vignettes from music therapy practice with adolescents who have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and those who have intellectual disability, Rickson (2019) demonstrates how collective music making allows them to develop the resources they may use to support their individual growth, emancipation, and wellbeing. The essay’s focus on empowerment and participation enters into an interesting dialogue with disability studies that call for the shift towards the affirmative model of disability that celebrates human differences (Cameron, 2008), anti-oppressive music therapy that subverts oppressive barriers (Baines, 2013), as well as participatory and community approaches that involve active engagement and collaboration (Stige, 2004, 2005).

Scrine (2019) takes the strategy of empowerment a step further towards an interventionist music therapy that addresses systems of oppression, questions dominant heteronormative narratives, and provides safe spaces without approaching clients as vulnerable victims. The essay constitutes a valuable contribution to an evolving body of research on LGBTQIA+ issues in music therapy practice (Bain, Grzanka, & Crowe, 2016; Besse 2021; Robinson & Oswanski, 2020; Whitehead-Pleaux, Donnenwerth, Robinson, Hardy, Oswanski, Horinash, Hearn, Anderson, & Tan, 2013; Whitehead-Pleaux, Donnenwerth, Robinson, Hardy, Oswanski, Horinash, Hearn, Anderson, & York, 2012).

Connectedness

The third and final part of the *Handbook* deals with connectedness – both interpersonal and technological. A major subject of analysis is, of course, the internet – social media in particular – and how young people use it to both stay connected with each other and build their identities, for example, by sharing their musical preferences and following their preferred artists.

An interesting chapter is Michal Viega’s (2019) “Globalizing Adolescence: Digital Music Cultures and Music Therapy.” The chapter contains a personal account of the evolving landscape of digital technology, “beginning with the rise of Napster and MP3 file sharing in 2000, to the current accessibility of streaming

and mobile technology” (p. 217). His observations resonate with what many of us have experienced on their own: while technology has facilitated access to music, it has also caused “digital stress,” which is “increased anxiety and depression after using social media” (p. 223). This term is akin to the more recently coined “Zoom fatigue,” which is associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailenson, 2021; Fauville, Luo, Queiroz, Bailenson, & Hancock, 2021).

The author’s personal experience with music-sharing sites and communities echoes the observations made by him in a clinical setting. While these communities have the potential to be safe, nurturing spaces that create a positive sense of belonging and provide room for shared enjoyment of music and the process of discovering it, they also come with the downside shared by many interest-based communities: appropriating music cultures in therapy or cyberbullying (Viega, 2019, pp. 222–223). This leads Viega to advise caution when using technology in therapeutic settings, but the same may also be applied to non-clinical participation in online communities (p. 223).

This idea of building virtual music communities is further developed and put into practice by Carmen Cheong-Clinch (2019) in a chapter titled “My iPod, YouTube, and Our Playlists: Connections Made in and Beyond Therapy.” The author describes an application called Tune Your Mood (TYM) which “invites young people to submit and upload their playlist and a short description of the positive impact and/or significance of the playlist” (pp. 229–230). Without getting into the practical considerations of if and how such a solution might be rolled out on the same scale as Spotify and similar global services, scaling this approach from the relatively controlled environment of musical therapy to the general populations would pose a number of difficulties, content moderation being perhaps the most significant one. As Cheong-Clinch herself notes, introducing such features to music-sharing applications could have the potential to “build youth mental health literacy and wellbeing, and improve help-seeking behaviour” (p. 233). Surely, the same conclusions could be applied to both a much wider audience and a much broader context than just the therapeutic setting.

Conclusions

In this review, I have tried to highlight the most valuable observations and learnings which a non-clinician might glean from the *Handbook of Music, Adolescents, and Wellbeing*. Between the foreword and the “Emotions” part, the *Handbook* contains a short preamble entitled “Acknowledgments, Hopes, and Dreams” (McFerran, Derrington, & Saarikallio, 2019a). In it, the editors of the

volume express their aspiration to “produce a text that brings together a range of ideas so they can be used and applied by people in education, health and community care, and welfare, and in families around the globe” (p. ix). In my opinion, this objective was accomplished with limited success.

On the one hand, the *Handbook* represents a genuinely useful resource not just for professional therapists and clinicians, but also adolescents and their families facing the psychosocial effects of the pandemic, which surely includes a large segment of the potential readership. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the issues faced by clinicians engaged in helping young people improve their mental health are not that much different from the ones faced by many of us. The toxicity often present in online communities, the difficulty in engaging with music in a meaningful and beneficial manner, or even with listening to it consciously – all of these questions are as relevant in the clinical space as they are in everyday life. At this point it should also be noted that the *Handbook* successfully combines solid theoretical underpinnings, which help one conceptualise the issues that lay at the intersection of music and wellbeing, with observations from clinical settings, case studies, and practical insights. What is more, the authors offer directions for future research on gender, sexuality, power relations, and disability, which still deserve greater attention in the music therapy academic discourse.

On the other hand, although the editors made an attempt to invite authors from a range of backgrounds and countries, they recognised the limits of their efforts to include “non-white cultures and less privileged social states and countries” (McFerran, Derrington, & Saarikallio, 2019, p. ix). Indeed, except for the story of an adolescent refugee, the questions of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs in music therapy remain practically under-examined, not only in the *Handbook*, but also in most of music therapy literature with only several studies offering in-depth insights into the topics of race (Hadley, 2013), ethnicity (Kim, 2013), and religions (Elwafi, 2011). Going further, the *Handbook* concentrates almost exclusively on Western musical styles and grossly underestimates the therapeutic value of multicultural music. One of the first attempts to discuss ethnocentric uses of music in therapy was made by Joseph Moreno (1988), who undermined the myth of music as a universal language and encouraged music therapists to become familiar with music of representative world music genres, including Indian classical music, Indonesian gamelan music, and African drumming. The *Handbook*’s surprising focus on Western music somehow glosses over the early 2000s shift towards the therapeutic uses of multicultural music that is reflected in the works by such scholars as Stige (2002), Brown (2002), Chase (2003), Whitehead-Pleaux and Clarke (2009), Hadley and Norris (2016).

Concluding this review, since the COVID-19 pandemic has shed a spotlight on young people's mental health and wellbeing, I hope future collections on music, adolescence, and wellbeing will rebalance their research towards more cultural, socio-economic, and musical diversity to ensure that marginalised voices are heard.

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