

# Commentary on Verna Vazquez-Diaz de Leon “The Interactive Role of Music as a Facilitator for Mother–Infant Bonding in Early Motherhood”

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**ABSTRACT:** The following is a commentary on Vazquez’ two-part study of mothers’ everyday uses of music and their relationships to the quality of mother-child interaction and bonding. The commentary considers how Vazquez’ findings are linked to the experiences and meanings of motherhood in modern times, including the stressors and pressures that many women experience as they begin their journeys as new mothers. The commentary presents three main points: the necessity to listen to maternal voices, the need to diversify study samples, and the recognition that mothers are a diverse group.

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WHEN asked to think about babies and music, a first image that comes to the minds of many people is that of a mother rocking, singing or lulling her baby to sleep. From folk tales, personal anecdotes, contemporary theories of childrearing to marketing, this powerful image is integral to the Western imaginary. As Young (2019) suggested, the image of a mother singing to her baby is powerful and perceived as “close to nature.” Such perception has remained nearly untouched for quite some time until scholars began to do what they are trained to do, which is to research it. Scholars have designed ingenious studies to help us learn about the ways that mothers use music with their babies, the circumstances in which music is used, and the meanings associated with them. A solid body of knowledge now exists, particularly in the Global North, in the form of empirical and theoretical works (Cho & Ilari, 2021; Papousek, 1996; Trehub et al, 1998; Street, 2003). By helping us understand the many connections between music, motherhood/parenthood, and early human interactions, these studies have oriented practice in clinical, educational and care settings.

In this two-part study, Vazquez used both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data on mothers’ uses of music (study 1) and examine mother-child interactions and bonding through a two-week mixed-methods approach (study 2). Her design was unique in that mixed methods is not the approach of choice in most studies involving mothers, babies and music. There are reasons for this, including how laborious and complicated this type of design can be. But as Vazquez’s work suggests, a mixed-methods approach is perhaps more appropriate as it offers a more nuanced view of mother-infant musical interactions, allowing for new questions to emerge. In this commentary of Vazquez’s study, I entertain some questions that emerged as I read this work. They are presented here through three main points.

## LISTEN TO THEIR VOICES

Motherhood has a significant effect on a woman’s identity, and as such, is a time when many emotions come to the fore, including happiness, fulfillment, anxiety and sometimes distress (Brisola & Ilari, 2021). Mothers sometimes experience invisibility (see Mackinlay, 2009; Vedam et al, 2019), and mothering places many demands on new mothers, which may lead to feelings of loneliness. To complicate matters, in some cultures parenting is seen as an individual choice and not as a collective effort. Alloparenting (Herslosky & Crittenden, 2021), which is in line with the idea that “it takes a village to raise a child,” seems to have become less common in some Western societies. In my own research with Canadian and Brazilian mothers of infants (Ilari, 2005; 2011), I often heard statements like, “It is great to have someone to talk to” or “No one told me that I would feel alone as a mother.” Thus, many new mothers feel unheard (e.g., Vedam et al, 2019), so



much so that they question why researchers would be interested in their “mundane” existence. Street (2003) saw this first-hand in her work on uses of music with babies by British mothers: “I’m just a mum” uttered one of her participants. By making women’s musical mothering more visible through the interviews, Vazquez provides more context to systematic, mother-infant interaction data. This is important for several reasons. First, most studies conducted to date on the topic tend to do one or the other: they either interview mothers (e.g., Street, 2003) or collect empirical/observational data on mother-infant interaction. Second, any study on maternal uses of music or mother-child interaction is time-sensitive; unless one is carrying out a longitudinal study, studies of mothers and babies are a portrait of one moment in time, as motherhood and childrearing change as a function of children’s development and growth.

Vazquez’ study also adds to the body of knowledge that informs educational and clinical work, with implications for wellbeing and mental health. It is common knowledge that some mothers are at risk for postpartum depression with its deleterious effects on their wellbeing and that of their children and families (Brisola & Ilari, 2021). Across the world, educators, community musicians, psychologists, and other health providers have developed music programs aimed at mothers experiencing postpartum depression and their babies (e.g., Mackinlay & Baker, 2005; Rodrigues et al, 2010). Singing is often the main medium of such programs, and is used to improve communication and deepen mother-child bonds, to express emotions, and as a tool to help mothers reduce stress levels and engage positively with childcare (Brisola & Ilari, 2021). I suspect that many studies on mothers’ uses of music and mother-infant musical interactions (including my own) were conducted with mothers who were in positive states and therefore willing to participate in research. Inquiring about mothers’ mental health and wellbeing may inform what we currently know about early music interactions of mothers and infants. This ties into my second point: the importance of acknowledging that mothers are a diverse group, not a monolith.

### **DIVERSE MOTHERS, DIVERSE MUSICS, DIVERSE SAMPLES**

Scholars are pattern seekers. Each piece of data is contrasted with the next—through rigorous statistical or qualitative approaches—in an attempt to make models of human behavior. Yet a challenge remains in terms of research sampling, particularly in research involving parents and babies. Recruiting mothers to take part in research studies is very challenging. Therefore, it is not uncommon for study samples to include more educated and affluent women (e.g., Cho & Ilari, 2021; Ilari et al, 2011), as in Vazquez’s study. We still know less about uses of music and mother-child interactions in families from disadvantaged backgrounds, who tend to participate less in research studies than their more affluent counterparts. Maternal experience is another factor that needs to be factored in future studies. First-time mothers and mothers with multiple children are known to have different expectations of child rearing and support (de Sousa Machado et al, 2020). Caring for multiple children places much demand on women and may contribute to differentiated uses of music with their children. Likewise, in families with multiple children, siblings also play a role in singing and listening behaviors (Koops & Kuebel, 2019). And last but certainly not least, it is essential to recognize that mothers are musical agents with diverse musical experiences, tastes and beliefs about music. This appears to be true regardless of the pressure that many new mothers feel concerning appropriate repertoire and musical behaviors with their infants (Ilari, 2005). This brings me to my third and last point: the centrality of understanding maternal culture and context, to help us better understand and represent mother-child interactions.

### **MOTHERS ARE CULTURAL BEINGS**

Some years ago when I was a doctoral student in Montreal, I had the opportunity to visit more than one hundred families with 6- to 9-month-olds in their homes. I visited families in all neighborhoods—distant and near, rich and poor, urban and suburban, and predominantly English-speaking, French-speaking, or linguistically-diverse. About half of the infants were first-generation Canadian-born, with immigrant mothers. Most mothers reported liking music and singing for or listening with their babies, yet these behaviors manifested in different ways. Home visits allowed for information to emerge beyond the semi-structured interviews and lab visits (Ilari, 2005). By examining the spaces where babies were being raised, I witnessed the diversity of childrearing practices, including musical behavior. Some mothers voluntarily demonstrated their musical interactions in situ (something that, to this date, I regret not being able to document). A mother from Ghana had her baby tied to her back and sang a rhythmic song in her native Twi language. A French-Canadian mom twirled her baby to Abba’s “Dancing Queen” and laughter and joy filled

up the air. I also remember a Pakistani family living in a communal home singing in Esperanto; dad led the singing with three other mothers, two babies lying on the floor, and three or four slightly older children playing, singing, and moving around the adults. Memories, of course, can trick us. But of the 100+ families that I visited over 20 years ago, these ones stood out because it was obvious that communication, engagement and joy were taking place through musical interaction.

I share this story to reinforce the idea that mothers are as diverse as they get, and so are their musical backgrounds and preferences (Lewis, 2019; Bolduc, 2012). While mother-child musical interactions may be intuitive (Papousek, 1996), they also are constructed along with the child and within family life. As such, mothers' approaches to using music with their infants are equally diverse, although this is difficult to capture with surveys, systematic observations, and interviews alone. A mixed-methods approach, as the one adopted by Vazquez, offers interesting possibilities and should be replicated.

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### NOTES

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