World Music Open-earedness as a Possible Measure of Proteophilia and Connection to a Cultural Secure Base: A Commentary on Quan et al. (2022)

ALEX CHILVERS [1]
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney

ABSTRACT: In this commentary, I discuss the key findings of Quan et al. (2022) and consider how their World Music Open-earedness Scale might contribute to future research and practice. I offer an alternative assessment of the relationship between world music open-earedness and sociocultural adaptation, and suggest how this may be investigated further. I extend this into a reinterpretation of the result linking specific functions of music to adaptation, adding greater emphasis to the role of music as an explicit expression of culture. I propose that these findings can be used to support an increased focus on culture and art in educational contexts, including an increase in intercultural content and encounters.

OPEN-EAREDNESS is defined by Quan et al. (2022) as a willingness to engage with unfamiliar music. A major contribution of their article is the creation and validation of a scale for measuring world music open-earedness. As a composer of Western art music and an academic working within a Western music conservatory, I am embedded in a community of individuals whose lives are devoted to the cultivation of Western musical culture. However, it is evident that, when given the opportunity to actively engage with non-Western musical cultures, our students are open to these intercultural musical encounters (Ingram et al., 2020). The World Music Open-earedness Scale will enable us to explicitly measure this unique form of openness and to empirically explore trends within our community. In this commentary, I will consider what this explicit measure might implicitly tell us about an individual's sense of cultural identity.

Quan et al. identify a correlation between sociocultural adaptation and open-earedness among student sojourners. They go on to suggest that the omnivorous musical preferences of open-eared students are indicative of a cosmopolitan tendency to cross cultural boundaries. These students therefore adapt more eagerly and easily when faced with a new sociocultural setting. Noting that causal direction cannot be established based on the present data, the authors also offer the alternative possibility that successful sociocultural adaptation leads to open-earedness: through their interactions with diverse communities, students acquire cultural competencies. I agree with the authors' suggestion that the open-earedness measure provides insight into a subject's identity. However, rather than indicating cosmopolitanism, I propose that both high open-earedness and successful sociocultural adaptation may be direct indicators of a strong personal sense of cultural identity.

THE SOJOURNER'S SECURE BASE

That is why it is so important to have one's own, distinct identity, a sense of its strength, value and maturity. Only then can a man boldly confront another culture. Otherwise he will lurk in his hiding place, fearfully isolating himself from others.

(Kapuściński, 2009, pp. 87–88)

A sojourner by profession, the eminent foreign correspondent Ryszard Kapuściński understood from his own experiences the challenges of separating from one's culture: how identity insecurities can turn into isolation. In making the above point, he highlighted the experiences of pioneering anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, whose posthumously published fieldwork diary candidly documented his solitary descent into depression and thoughts of suicide as he lived among the Trobrianders conducting fieldwork (Malinowski, 1967).

While many factors undoubtedly contribute to cultural adaptation, empirical research directly relevant to our topic does support Kapuściński's basic assertion. A 2010 study of student sojourners based in France found that those who identified strongly with their home country had higher levels of successful sociocultural adaptation (Brisset et al., 2010). The implication here is that those who know where they belong are more confident participating in situations where they, perhaps, do not. Greischel et al. (2019, p. 608) observe a similar trend among German high school exchange students. Noting that those who arrived abroad with a strong commitment to their homeland had increasingly positive adaptation experiences over time, the authors posit that "the prospect of returning to a safe haven may also facilitate exploration and adjustment in unfamiliar surroundings".

Focusing on connection to cultural artefacts, rather than people or place, a study by Hong et al. (2013) provides insight into the value of an affiliation with one's native culture. Adapting an affective transfer task in which a maternal attachment icon (a picture of a mother holding a baby) was used to activate the secure base schema central to attachment theory (Mikulincer et al., 2001), Hong et al. found that positive affect transfer from native cultural icons (such as the Indomie noodle logo) predicted adjustment and resilience in Indonesian students living abroad. The authors present a "cultural attachment theory", suggesting that sojourners "expect that their native culture, in its abstract form, can provide them with a source of validation and existential meaning" (Hong et al., 2013, p. 1040).

OPEN-EAREDNESS AS PROTEOPHILIA

Rather than homelessness, the trick is to be at home in many homes, but to be in each inside and outside at the same time, to combine intimacy with the critical look of an outsider, involvement with detachment – a trick which sedentary people are unlikely to learn.

(Bauman, 2012, p. 207)

Whether we possess a sense of safety and security through cultural attachment might broadly dictate how we respond to encounters with an unfamiliar other. According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2012), we live in an age of increasingly unstable social bonds – a time in which political, religious, and cultural institutions no longer provide us with security and a sense of collective purpose. Labelling this era "liquid modernity", he highlights the "agony of indecision linked to a state of uncertainty about the intentions and moves of others around" (Bauman, 2012, p. 20). Such uncertainty is an inevitable consequence of temporarily placing oneself in a foreign country, whether as an East Asian student in Sydney or a Central European anthropologist in New Guinea.

There are then two common responses to this anomie, according to Bauman. If we lack that sense of safety and security, we seek the stability of our own cultural niche at the exclusion of the unpredictable, and potentially hostile, environment around us (Bauman, 2012, p. 172). Here, the sojourner's sociocultural adaptation is consequently minimal. The correlation identified by Quan et al. (2022) suggests that so too is their openness to unfamiliar music. We see further evidence of this type of response in another recent study of student sojourners conducted by Fanari et al. (2023). The authors here found that selectively listening to music from one's home culture can lead to an increase in isolation and the insulation of negative feelings.

Contrary to withdrawing, an alternative response to this anomie is "to learn the difficult art of living with difference" (Bauman, 2012, p. 178). To live with difference is to engage in dialogue and to maintain a strong sense of self while seeking to understand others. Interestingly, another significant finding in the data presented by Quan et al. is that student sojourners who listen to music for arousal and activation demonstrate higher levels of both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. In light of the above, this correlation might be worth interrogating further but with greater focus on music as cultural artefact, rather than mere stimulus. Listening to music can motivate us to seek out connection with others, and De Leeuw et al. (2022) specifically demonstrate that meaningful music can induce moral motivations and feelings of connectedness. It may therefore be that, for some students, listening to music from their cultural secure base provides motivation to

proactively engage with the world around them. Whether music provides insulation or motivation to connect may come down to the individual's sense of cultural identity.

The proactive nature of living with difference is what necessitates the self-security identified by Kapuściński. If cultural attachment theory holds true, such security is provided by a strong affiliation with the culture of one's home. Bauman (2011, p. 68) elaborates: "A feeling of safety on both sides of the barricade is an essential condition for a dialogue between cultures". In their article, Quan et al. argue that open-earedness plays a role in cultural adaptation. I propose the alternative interpretation that a measure of open-earedness equates to a measure of openness to intercultural dialogue.

High open-earedness is one manifestation of proteophilia: a desire for difference that, according to Bauman who coined this term, is only possible when the subject feels secure in the social space. When we encounter difference in a sociocultural environment in which we feel safe and secure, we can appreciate novelty in the strange other (Bauman, 1993, p. 168). Haynes (2012) has used this theory to analyze the ways in which world music festivals provide a safe environment for engaging with unfamiliar cultures. In the Western world, these events maintain clear boundaries and prevent non-Western cultures from pervading the cultural mainstream. This allows audiences to enjoy their novel offerings without the threat of meaningful change to the social order.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Open-earedness may provide a snapshot of how secure one is in their own cultural identity: a litmus test for their readiness to confront another culture. The suggestion by Quan et al. that a measure of open-earedness could help identify international students who are at risk of failing to adapt seems a highly plausible application of their newly devised scale. By extension, cultivating open-earedness in individuals prior to their sojourns may indeed improve their chances of successful sociocultural adaptation. However, if, as I have argued, open-earedness develops in the context of a strong cultural identity, which allows individuals to withstand unfamiliar cultural encounters, we should perhaps focus on that aspect of personal development and the direct effect it will have on adaptation.

This, and future, research may be used to argue in favor of educational initiatives that prioritize connection to culture and the arts. Such initiatives should be designed alongside the creation of increased opportunities for intercultural engagement. There is growing evidence that, in a time of increased mobility and migration, future generations will be better equipped to deal positively with unfamiliar cultural contexts if they feel an affiliation with, and an understanding of, their home culture – whatever that may be.

In my own professional setting, there is no shortage of culture. I believe that we, as experts in our cultural field, possessing the most secure base of all, are in the best position to engage with other cultures and to lead the dialogue. As a composer, I am prioritizing collaborative projects with musicians whose expertise and training sit outside the Western musical context. Perspectives gained from such encounters have the potential to transform creative practice, forcing us to turn the critical gaze of the outsider onto our own cultural niche.

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NOTES

[1] Correspondence can be addressed to: Dr Alex Chilvers, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. Telephone: +61 2 9351 1406, E-mail: alex.chilvers@sydney.edu.au

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