

MUSIC MATTERS: MUSICAL IDENTITIES AS FUNDAMENTAL MARKERS OF PERSONAL IDENTITIES

Dorothy Miell

The Open University, UK

Raymond MacDonald

Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

Background

This presentation will show how current thinking in social and developmental psychology has influenced conceptions of what might constitute musical identity. It will outline various possible definitions of musical identities, building on our recent work in this area (MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell, 2002).

Aims

The study described here attempts to uncover the reasons underlying an apparently contradictory state of affairs. How can music, with such a powerful role in young people's lives outside school, be so dismissed when it is taught in the classroom? It is suggested that we need to understand more about the social forces underlying how young people use music, the identity work they do through their involvement with it, and the way it is used as a vehicle for resisting authority, if we are to be more successful in encouraging interest in the subject at school.

Method

Our studies reported here employed in-depth interviews and a longitudinal case study of all members of one rock group to investigate how young men and women (aged 13-16) reflect on their involvement with making music in different environments - both formal (i.e. at school) and informal (i.e. membership of bands). In particular, we were interested to examine the ways in which they saw their musical activities as bound up with the ongoing negotiations between themselves and their friends, other peers, teachers and other significant adults involved in developing their identities and establishing their place in their social worlds.

Results and Conclusions

Music emerged as an intensely personal aspect of young people's lives and also as a powerful vehicle for making social statements (such as to rebel against authority). Whilst the centrality of music to the lives of these young people was evident, the value of trying to bring such passion into the school needs to be balanced by the recognition of the difficulties of doing so.