

Social Development, Cohesion, and Healing in Music: Insights and Implications for Social Work Pedagogy

By:

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Abstract

Music affects human beings in myriad ways affecting cognitive, behavioral, and social dimensions of human conditions. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between music and social development, cohesion, and healing. Using a non-systematic literature review process, the study analyzes common themes that are explored from the different literature studies conducted especially those that resonate with social development, social cohesion, and social healing. Results indicate that music for social development, cohesion, and healing are co-constructed sensibilities that community people continually express as they deal with social realities. The role of Social Work as a functional discipline calls for a cohesive approach that addresses social problems using music as a tool to promote well-being, strengthen ties, and assert cultural identity. While music entertains, it ameliorates abject conditions and heals a community soul in the attainment of social solidarity as a conduit to human sustainability.

Keywords: Music for social development; social cohesion; social healing; Social Work

Introduction

Music profoundly influences emotional and social development, beginning in infancy and extending through adulthood (Annet, 2024). In many ways, music affects human emotions and influences behavior. The purpose of this paper was to explore the relationship between music and social development, cohesion, and healing. Using a non-systematic literature review procedure, the study analyzed common themes that were explored in the different literature studies conducted especially those that resonated with social development, social cohesion, and social healing.

Social development supersedes the idea that music has social meanings and interpretations that form social solidarity. For example, community music engagement promotes

spiritual experiences since it fosters relationships (Merwe & Morelli, 2022). Moreover, the Department of Arts and Culture (2012, p. 31 as cited in Merwe & Morelli, 2022) defines social cohesion as: “the degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and society at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression among individuals and communities.”

However, there was a lack of a robust non-systematic review of previous studies that dwell on intricate issues and patterns of social conventions associated with musical utterances. Indeed, music has the power to engage listeners both internally and externally of the many dimensions of healing, social solidarity, and community ideology that continually evolve with cultures. Hence, the study asked two critical questions: 1)How does music affect social development and social cohesion in a community setting? 2)What social healing aspects are identified in the course of applying music in their life?

The non-systematic approach instilled the idea of a more comprehensive, issue-oriented approach to literature analysis by way of thematic exploration and analysis, drawing upon statements of agreements, disagreements, and tensions between arguments to capture a more grounded perspective.

In effect, translating musical sonorities to the larger community will enrich social understanding that binds listeners and communities together. Ethnomusicologists will likewise benefit from the themed surveyed literature to benchmark on relevant issues, unravel intricate relationships between music and its social dimensions for human sustainability. Lastly, Social work education will embrace the role of music in social development for human sustainability.

Literature Studies

Music, as a universal language, profoundly impacts human emotional and social development throughout the lifespan (Annet, 2024). The idea that music affords opportunities for intercultural understanding and social cohesion has shaped policy and media discourse (Crooke et al, 2024). Meanwhile, the positive effects of music on physical and psychological wellbeing have been widely evidenced by scientific literature (Aguilleta, Crespo & Aguilleta, 2025). One study highlights that music has the ability to promote participants' cohesion, community creation, and transformative actions that align with the values and goals of Social Work (Aguilleta, Lopez & Aguilleta, 2025). People have different views on the essence of music, but what is clear is that it is embedded in social activities through its role in managing social relationships and developing social skills (Varadi, 2022). In effect, music not only partially reflects social changes, but rather contributes to causing them via participation, intertextuality, the recovery of repertoires and sound transformation by way of performance (Spencer-Espinosa, 2022).

On the aspect of social healing, music, a phenomenon that has been going on since the existence of humanity, is inherently empowering, cathartic, and healing (Mollaoğlu & Mollaoğlu, 2023). Throughout history and in all known human cultures, music has been used to promote health and well-being (Gouk, 2000; Horden, 2001 as cited in Thompson, 2014) In the Peruvian highland tropical forest, shamans known as vegetalistas use chanting as a primary tool through which healing takes place (Thompson, 2014).

Studies show that music functions as a universal language that bridges cultural differences and fosters mutual respect among diverse groups. According to the UNESCO (2005), cultural expressions such as music promote intercultural dialogue and contribute to peaceful coexistence among communities. This perspective positions music not merely as entertainment but as a social resource that enables communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, thereby strengthening intercultural understanding and social cohesion.

Supporting this view, Tia DeNora (2000) argues that music structures social interaction and shapes collective emotional experiences, making it a powerful medium for building social bonds. Similarly, Christopher Small (1998) conceptualizes “musicking” as a relational process in which meaning is created through participation, emphasizing that music is fundamentally a social activity rather than a passive product. From a sociological standpoint, Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) explains that shared rituals—such as collective musical performances—generate solidarity by reinforcing common values and a sense of belonging.

Contemporary scholarship further suggests that music not only reflects culture but also actively shapes identity and intercultural relations. Stuart Hall (1997) maintains that cultural identities are continuously constructed through representation, including musical expression. In multicultural societies, shared musical experiences can therefore become sites of negotiation where differences are acknowledged yet harmonized. However, scholars caution that intercultural engagement through music requires intentional and inclusive practices to prevent superficial appropriation or cultural dominance.

In psychological well-being, studies done over a span of five years and more, show a growing trend of positive responses of music interventions to psychological and physical health. Both experimental and meta-analytic studies show that music therapy promotes emotional control, mental flexibility, and increases one’s overall well-being in respondents of all demographics (Acta Psychologica, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). University students, for example, who took part in music therapy, had measurable increases in mental well-being, and significant decreases in anxiety, compared to control respondents (Acta Psychologica, 2025). Music engagement improved some people’s self-esteem, and increased their prosocial behaviors,

through a number of psychosocial phenomena such as social connectedness and meaningful participation (Tu & Fu, 2024; JMIR Formative Research, 2024).

According to (Sun et al., 2023), music operated as a stimulus that arouses people's emotions and induces the release of neurotransmitters and hormones in the brain such as serotonin and dopamine. Music has also been found to have an impact on people's mood, leading to research on music-based interventions for stress and anxiety, depression, etc. Listening to music has been strongly correlated to reducing stress by decreasing physiological arousal. This can be seen through reduced heart rate and arterial pressure and reduced cortisol levels (Burrai et al., 2016). As a result, music has often been used in clinical settings to reduce stress for patients. This type of music utilization is known as "music medicine" (Agres et al., 2020; Bradt et al., 2013; de Witte et al., 2020).

Music exposure has a proven physiologic impact in relaxing and stress relieving people by decreasing their blood pressure and heart rate, and lessening their overall autonomic arousal (Dalli et al., 2026). The lessening of the autonomic arousal response to stimuli by the music exposure in the people has shown to be the reason for their decreased stress and for the ease of relaxation that the people experience (Dalli et al., 2026). The risk of cognitive decline was lower, as a result of long-term music engagement. This suggests that music has neuroprotective effects (Washington Post report, 2025).

Comparing the different types of interventions, passive listening to music, and structured music therapy, it was found that music therapy produced more positive and consistent outcomes qualitatively in the psychological domain, while in the physiologic domain, both produced the same outcomes (Zhang et al., 2025; Dalli et al., 2026). In summary, music therapy, music passive listening, and music active engagement all show positive responses in the psychological and physiological aspects of health of the respondents, and more.

Several studies indicate that music has the power to promote well-being among individuals. Both experimental and meta-analytic studies show that music therapy promotes emotional control, mental flexibility, and increases one's overall well-being in respondents of all demographics (Acta Psychologica, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Indeed, the emotional power that music exudes can manifest in a person's strategic impulse to feel calm and relaxed when

listening or performing. In school, university students, for example, who took part in music therapy, had measurable increases in mental well-being, and significant decreases in anxiety, compared to control respondents (Acta Psychologica, 2025).

Based on the studies conducted, there was a noticeable lack of in-depth exploration and analysis on the relationship between music and social development, healing, and social cohesion. To achieve this, this paper addressed the gap using a non-systematic review process.

Theoretical Framework

The overarching theory that underpinned this paper is Structural Functionalist Theory. The theory studies social phenomena in terms of the consequences of a broader society, focusing on various systems (political kinship) that interrelate with one another (Stone, 2008). The main assumption of this theory is that parts of the system relate with one another in terms of the realization of functional roles to maintain stability in the society. In relation to this paper, structural functionalism is actively pursued in addressing the social development, social cohesion, and social healing aspects that musical sonorities bring about. These characteristics maintain holistic functional relationships among the members.

The second overarching theory that informed this research is the Psychodynamic Theory, developed by Sigmund Freud. The theory focuses on how inner energies interact with external forces to impact emotional development. This theory assumes that emotions play a key role in human behavior and is thus concerned with how these internal needs, drives, and emotions motivate human behavior. It assumes that both conscious and unconscious mental activity motivate human behavior, and that internalized experiences—such as childhood experiences—shape personality development and functioning. By patterning an individual's emotions, these early experiences are central to problems of living throughout an individual's lifespan (Practical Psychology, 2020).

In this paper, Psychodynamic Theory was applied in the social healing aspect of the relationship between music and social healing. Social healing is grounded on personal healing, a quality of emotional attachment that music addresses. As a result of musical exposure, an individual endures healing as a response to the sensation brought on by the musical sound. The

process instills inner balance, peace, and harmony so that an individual experiences a soothing, calming, and enduring state of emotional well-being.

Conceptual Framework

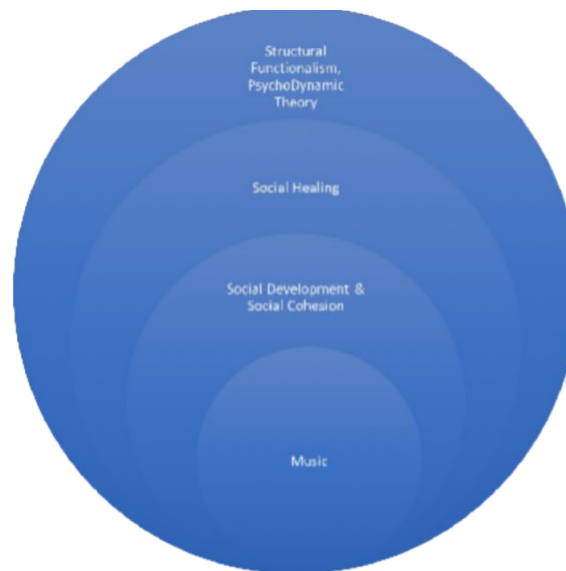


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of a Non-Systematic Literature Review

The figure illustrates the relationship between music, social development, social cohesion, and social healing, underpinned by Structural Functionalism and Psycho-Dynamic Theory as an iterative process that results in societal stability due to the interaction of the different elements. Combined together and analyzed as distinct and related concepts, the analysis foregrounds the functional role of music as a social process.

Methodology

This literature review utilized a nonsystematic analytical process. Non-systematic literature reviews (nSLRs) encompass a range of review types that implement varying approaches to searching, screening, and data extraction (Brow, et al, n.d.). There was no strict methodological structure in conducting a non-stystematic review and the researchers had flexibility in exploring themes that foregrounded the analysis. Data came from secondary sources representing previous studies that have already been published. Analysis was drawn from the different concepts, theoretical, and thematic lenses woven together to identify commonalities and differences formed as thematic clusters. Finally, Artificial Intelligence was utilized for consultation and organization of ideas as a tool.

Data Triangulation

Data was triangulated through the different literature reviews and theoretical/conceptual underpinnings in the different studies. The process instilled rigor and credibility and eliminated potential bias in argumentation.

Ethical Considerations

This paper was submitted for ethics review at Leyte Normal University Ethics Committee and has been evaluated and cleared for publication.

Results and Discussion

The foregoing literature analysis elucidated various social dimensions of interpreting music. For one, music enables societies to co-construct meanings based on collective understanding of the lived experiences of the people within specific cultures. However, there is a question that can be raised: Are meanings associated with music inherently determined? Do people value musical expressions because of the nuances of music structures as pre-determined entities? In effect, does music create meanings such as emotions or are emotions considered as part of human interpretation that has nothing to do with a musical utterance? The following themes are extracted from the literature studies that resonate with the overarching theme of music for social development, cohesion, and social healing as addressed in the research questions.

Music as a social healing activity

This theme accentuates music as a social activity in its collective pursuit to achieve social cohesion or solidarity. Meanwhile, healing engenders a personal benefit accrued as music's emotional value is experienced by an individual or a group listening or performing. Then, personal healing transcends to society when it is magnified, therefore, socialized in many ways. One theory that explains such connection is the Social Bonding Theory which emphasizes the therapeutic power of music in fostering social connections. (Hirschi, 1969). The theory implies that music has the power to create social bonds where performers and listeners can share each other's sentiments providing a sense of relief and belonging. In other words, music becomes a social activity with a purpose of alleviating emotional struggles, among other intentions. Among

social workers, for instance, who immerse in communities and listen to elders' various issues such as social isolation that can lead to depression, music becomes a potent tool for social healing. In a musical setting, Creech et al. (2013) highlights that participating in choir programs significantly aids older adults form meaningful social bonds. This is particularly significant in situations where choir members interact casually with fellow singers. In this situation, learning how to sing becomes a social event solidifying relationships, and in some cases, musical talent becomes secondary.

Furthermore, O'Callaghan & Coleman (2017) examines the role of music in fostering supportive communities, particularly for individuals grappling with personal or social difficulties. In this light, the role of social support can be manifested through social workers' collective intent to bring people together, letting them know that music is a perfect avenue for self-expression within a creative and safe environment. Here, everyone else matters. As a social healing activity, the value of music deepens and interpretation extends beyond the self. It will also be noted that the creative process of musicmaking as a collective activity is not enforced but rather comes as a natural flow. And, it becomes a matter of understanding that social healing is an offshoot to personal well-being that characterizes well-beingness as implied in the Psychodynamic Theory.

In this regard, the foregoing analysis aligns the social healing power of music with the Structural Functional Theory introduced earlier because social healing promotes stability in communities that experience well-being and resilience. In other words, the function of music as a social healing activity creates societal equilibrium and balance. In effect, healed individuals turn out to become functional entities as they integrate within holistic bounds of the society.

Intercultural understanding and social cohesion

Owing to the archipelagic nature of the Philippines, intercultural understanding is a mantra of co-existence. Related to the Sikolohiyang Pilipino as a dictum of *loob* (inside), shared commonalities manifest while cultural differences solidify strong ties among regional groups. Indeed, both tradition and contemporary Filipino music facilitate regional differences that foster

respect among diverse groups, claiming that engagement with music strengthens intercultural understanding and appreciation De Nora, 2000; Small (1998) & UNESCO 92005)

On notes that cultural differences account for identity formation. Within the Visayan region, for instance, Waray-Waray people assert certain cultural expressions that can be uniquely attributed to the people within the geographical territory, and language plays a crucial role in spreading Waray-Waray consciousness as it traverses through different sensibilities. Meanwhile, Cebuano people who speak Cebuano language possess certain qualities of cultural identity that can be understood to be their own unique expression. In this regard. Intercultural understanding asserts that people communicate interculturally while diffusing cultural sensibilities whether consciously or sub-consciously. Now, how does it relate to musical understanding? As music affects people in so many ways through association and emotional attachment, the role of language can be secondary in its intricate and nuanced way. Thus, cohesion and social understanding can feed into people's sensibilities without even verbally articulating that sense of unity being fostered.

Beyond just appreciation, music shows to serve as a platform for dialogue and common ground. Participation in school and cultural activities, religious celebrations, and community events introduced and exposed individuals to musical traditions that may not be known to them. Such exposure appeared to reduce stereotypes and misunderstandings, as participants could experience emotion, history, and identity through music in ways that words alone could not convey (Small, 1998; DeNora, 2000). Active listening and participation enabled individuals to gain insights into the values, struggles, and aspirations of other cultural groups, thereby promoting intercultural dialogue and reinforcing social cohesion (UNESCO, 2005). These results underscore how empirical the role of music to every society. It is not only considered as a form of cultural expression and identity but also as a way or tool for fostering mutual understanding and unity in a multicultural society.

In effect, it will be noticed that cultural differences are fluid assertions, constituted within daily practice, that may not need reminding. In fact, social cohesion is strengthened when communities recognize and respect diversity while embracing common cultural narratives (Turino (2008); Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

Implications

The foregoing analysis foregrounds a comprehensive narrative on functional music - its power transcending to society apart from personal gratification that it affects. Indeed, music encapsulates deep layers of emotions affecting individuals that manifest in various behavioral responses. As a result of the data triangulation process, the web of culture narrative cannot be undermined simply because musical utterances are surrounded by significant interpretations leading to social action that result in development and group cohesion. In this way, music becomes constituted in daily practices of community people. Next, the power of music to forge developmental alliances equates with how people apply rich musical heritage in uplifting social conditions. For instance, non-Western countries in the periphery utilize community music in various economic endeavours such as farming, fishing and many other means of livelihood. Individuals perform thru singing or playing instruments as a form of entertainment, usually done at night after a hard day's labor. In this social activity, spontaneity is expressed in casual strumming of the guitar accompanying a vocal tune that everybody is familiar with. Thus, singing becomes a social event where entertainment is fluid, casual, and sustainable. All these, and many other instances, forge a social bond that depicts a sense of belongingness with every note sung, and with every dance movement performed. Lastly, the structural functional theory espoused earlier in the analysis proves that music is responsible for creating social solidarity and unity because of its power to bring people together.

Conclusion

Music for social development, cohesion, and healing are co-constructed sensibilities that community people continually express as they deal with various social realities. In effect, the role of Social Work as a discipline calls for a cohesive approach to addressing social problems using music as a tool to promote well-being, strengthen ties, and form cultural identity. While music entertains, it ameliorates abject conditions, heals a community soul in the attainment of human sustainability.

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