

Title: Music, middle childhood and agency: the value of an *interactional-relational* approach

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Introduction

One of the key achievements of the work emerging from ‘new social studies of childhood’ has been its account of children as competent social actors, capable of exercising agency independently of adults across a range of settings. Where an approach centred on the ‘socialisation of children’ had previously constructed the child as a ‘becoming’ in both developmental and biological terms, this new approach advocated seeing children as ‘beings’ who are ‘active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’ (James and Prout, 1990: 8). Following on from this work, numerous empirical studies have illuminated the ways in which children function as competent social actors who dispose of varying degrees of agency (Hutchby and Moran Ellis, 1998).

Nonetheless, key voices in the field have questioned the degree to which much empirical research on child agency actually ‘contributes either to the furtherance of our theoretical understanding of childhood or the development of childhood studies’ (James, 2010: 486).

Although children's agency has been attended to closely, numerous studies have neglected to question what such agency really means for different children, nor scrutinise the extent, impact and nature of it. Indeed, some commentators have noted how many of the studies focussed on children's agency have either 'emphasised how children have become marginalised or excluded by adults or adult structures...or they have tried to demonstrate how children have constructed their own spaces and practices as agents of their own destiny' (Mannion, 2007: 413). This has led to a somewhat polarised picture in which (adult-imposed) structure is often set against (child) agency and where control tends to be emphasised above autonomy, or vice versa. Indeed, such a situation may well relate to what Valentine (2011) portrays as childhood studies' common recourse to a 'liberal model' of agency (based on the exercise of rationality and intentionality, self-awareness and reflectivity, competence, strategy and efficacy). While the adoption of such a model may be valued by childhood sociologists for its capacity to buttress claims for children's entitlement to civic participation, one side-effect is that 'privileged children may appear to be more amenable to active participation, and to have more constructive agency, than disadvantaged children' (Valentine, 2011: 355).

Such criticisms of the treatment of agency within childhood studies notwithstanding, an important emphasis upon the relational nature of children's experiences can also be clearly discerned within the childhood literature. Emerging from Mayall's (2000) research, for example, is the way that children's accounts of their daily lives tend to stress interdependence and reciprocity rather than autonomy: 'Children regard childhood as relational. That is, they see that the character and quality of their childhoods is structured through their inter-generational relationships' (2000: 256). As this quotation suggests, in

many respects, the growth in attention to the relational dimensions of children's agency can be linked to what has been termed the 'generational perspective'. This argues for seeing childhood as part of a generational order and foregrounds the ways generational processes fundamentally shape the nature of child-adult relations (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2002). According to this perspective, it is in their interactions that children and adults, as members of existing generational categories, both produce and reproduce the generational order. It is, however, worth pausing to attend to the implications of bringing the generational perspective into dialogue with a notion of relational agency, especially in terms of how this move subsequently inflects the meaning of 'the relational'.

Which 'relational'?

One important implication of attending closely to the generational order within approaches to child agency is that the salience of the social categories of 'child' and 'adult' is foregrounded. Madeleine Leonard's (2016) recent intervention into debates about child agency is usefully illustrative in this regard, since it sees her bring together 'the mutually reinforcing and interdependent relationship between generation and agency' (2016: 9) to advance the concept of 'generagency'. Leonard explains her emphasis on generation within this conceptualisation of child agency by noting that, although the boundaries between the categories of adult and child are fluid and constantly shifting, it remains the case that 'a host of formal and informal institutions and practices are premised on making relational distinctions between adults and children' (Leonard, 2016: 133). While an expressly relational approach to child (and adult) agency is taken up by Leonard then¹, it is one that nevertheless 'necessitates illuminating the binaries from within which agency is practised' (Leonard, 2016: 132). In affirming the need for attention to 'binaries' and 'relational

distinctions' in this way however, Leonard appears to thereby relegate explicitly relational concerns to something of a secondary position, with attention to the 'generational order' (and the salience of the social categories of 'child' and 'adult') retaining primacy. The picture of agency which subsequently emerges could therefore be said to take the form – in certain regards – of something like a zero-sum game, with the agentic practices of children needing to be seen, in any final account, as necessarily qualified by those of adults. As Leonard's formulation of 'generagency' suggests then, when informed by the generational perspective, attention to 'the relational' tends to be understood in terms of the (effects of the) relationship between the socially constructed *categories* of child and adult.

Given its attention to positions and categories, I want to suggest that this figuring of relationality might be best understood, for heuristic purposes, in terms of the *categorical-relational*. As the foregoing discussion suggests, the main drawback involved in adopting such an approach is that it risks centring analysis upon the effects of the quasi-objective categories of child and adult, thereby tending to reify these as aspects of a social structure and invoking a substantialist view of agency (characterised by external and enabling or constraining forces). Inevitably, such a stance occludes a deeper engagement with questions about the interactional nature of child-adult relations.

The adoption of such a 'categorical' approach is not the only way of incorporating a concern with relationality into questions about child agency however. In recent years one such model has emerged through the growth in attention, on the part of both sociologists and social psychologists, to the interactional and intersubjective nature of all agentic practice, where a concern with relationality centres less on the purported effects of social *categories*

or *categorization* and more upon the deeply interactional nature of all action (see, e.g., Burkitt, 2016; Crossley, 2011; Dépelteau 2013). I will hereafter refer to this second way of approaching relationality, again for heuristic purposes, in terms of the *interactional-relational*.

To help unpack the notion of the *interactional-relational*, we might contrast the *categorical-relational* approach's residual vision of individuals as singular agents or actors with that of the former, where these are figured as 'interactants' (Burkitt, 2016) or, in Dépelteau's (2013) formulation of 'deep' relational sociology², 'trans-actors'. A key premise within *interactional-relational* thinking is that, as Kenneth Gergen has put it: 'we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship' (2009: xv).

Correspondingly, within *interactional-relational* theorisation, agency comes to be understood not in 'the narrow sense of reflexive choice in situations where people could have acted otherwise' but 'in the wider sense of action that produces an effect on the world and on others' (Burkitt, 2016:332). In fact, advocates of 'deep' relational sociology, such as Dépelteau (2013), see no value in the term 'agency', since it presupposes a distinction from 'structure', when this very binary is – by way of a properly conceived relational ontology – deemed quite useless. Accordingly, 'deep' relational theorisation denies the possibility of attributing causal force to either structures or individuals since the outcomes of action result from 'transactions in a specific and more or less complex field of transaction'³ (Dépelteau 2013: 180). Although people tend to conceive of certain fields of transaction (such as couples or families), it is individuals' specific *perceptions* of these that help explain actions, rather than any assumed structural features of couples or families *per se*. In order to help illustrate the benefits of what I am terming an *interactional-relational* perspective

for approaching questions of agency (as opposed to adopting a substantialist approach to it), these ideas will be taken up in the analysis to follow.

Before moving on however, it is worth noting that the role of interactional processes in relation to questions of agency has not been lost on some childhood scholars. Mannion (2007), for example, has written of the relational nature of all ‘consciousness, agency, and performance’ (2007: 415), while Valentine – reaffirming a number of Mannion’s concerns – recommends that childhood studies take up a ‘social model of agency’, attentive to ‘the particularity of children and the social embeddedness of the agency of both children and adults’ (2011: 353). Similar arguments have been advocated by Oswell (2013) and Kraftl (2013), not to mention several contributors to a recent edited collection on agency and childhood (Esser et al, 2016).

In line with this growing focus upon relationality, this article takes up the task of exploring some of the complexities and interconnections of childhoods through a focus upon children’s accounts of their musical practices approached from an *interactional-relational* standpoint. More specifically, in line with the assertion that attending to an *interactional* understanding of relational agency involves ‘locating, comparing and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particularly structuring contexts of action’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 1005), the research findings presented below largely centre upon one such context of action, the home, in relation to children’s (and others’) engagements with music within it. My intention is to illustrate the relevance and value of an *interactional-relational* perspective as a means of grappling with the

complexities of children's music-related practice. Before addressing this however, I briefly turn to consider the existing research on agency in relation to musical activity.

Music, agency and childhood

For some relational theorists, an important element within their thinking concerns not just interactions between humans, but also the significant mediating, moderating and connecting role of material objects and environments. Raithelhuber (2016) for instance, drawing on Latour (2005) and Gell (1998), highlights the need to attend to relationality not just in terms of human interactions but also that occurring 'between human beings and 'things'' (2016: 89). Such a perspective, he argues, allows agency to 'be envisioned and investigated as an essential element of an overall milieu' rather than 'purely an element of the human psyche' (2016: 97).

Interest in music as one such 'thing' has grown in recent times. Sociologist Tia DeNora (2000), for instance, has argued that through its dynamic relation with social life music helps 'to invoke, stabilize, and change parameters of agency, collective and individual' (2000: 20). Judith Becker (2001) has similarly drawn attention to the social components of musical agency, describing musical events as inevitably setting up 'an aural domain of coordination that envelops all those present' (2001: 151). At one level, this occurs by virtue of the fact that, as Murray Schafer has put it, 'there are no earlids' (1994: 11). At another level however, as Karlsen (2011) has argued, the collective dimensions of musical agency may well be more significant than the 'creation of meaningfulness and for negotiating a position-in-the-world on the individual level' (2011: 114). Taken together, the work of DeNora, Becker and Karlsen might alert us to the way that musical activity intersects meaningfully

with questions of agency and it very often does so in ways which go beyond individual listeners. The particular nature of music and music-related activity – in terms of both its sonic properties and the auditory capacities of listeners, as well as the communal and social implications of these for music's place within social action – therefore appear to merit particular attention when approaching questions of relationality.

Turning to scholarship concerned with the relationship between music and childhoods, it might be noted that the focus here has tended to remain centred upon children's production of music and songs, presenting this as evidence of children's musical agency (Karlsen 2011). Indeed, even when ethnomusicological approaches have been employed to uncover the conditions of children's musical lives in non-curricular contexts or amongst peer groups (e.g., Barrett, 2006; Campbell, 1998; Marsh, 2008), the focus tends to remain on children's musical skills, creative play and their implications for music pedagogies. A side-effect of this common conflation of musical agency with music making is that children unable to produce original musical outpourings are either portrayed as simply lacking in agency compared to their more musically productive peers or not considered at all. But what, we might ask, of the music-related practice of less musically productive children? Indeed, what of the (many) mundane and everyday forms of musical activity undertaken by children in less explicitly 'musical' settings (such as school music lessons, etc.)? To date, only a handful of studies have sought to explore the role of home and family life for musical and music-related activities and when they have done so, the focus has predominantly been on early childhoods (Lamont, 2008; Tafuri, 2009; Young, 2008). Nevertheless, some research is beginning to attend to out-of-school musical experiences during middle childhood (the focus of this article's empirical discussion) and suggestive findings are emerging. Thus in her

recent 'first-stage mapping' of this terrain, Susan Young argues that the home setting provides 'a particular kind of musical "ecology"' capable of engendering 'forms of musical participation not found beyond the home' (2012: 3). It is to a consideration of such forms of participation – through an exploration of relevant empirical evidence – that this article now turns.

About the Study

The findings presented below emerged in the course of a study⁴ which set out to explore how the participating children attributed value to cultural activities. As such, questions of relational agency were not key concerns at the project's outset. Rather, they emerged through the analysis of children's accounts and subsequent theorisation regarding children's perceptions of value in relation to cultural activity. To access these accounts, the project employed semi-structured interviews (n=111), undertaken with primary-aged pupils in schools located in areas of noted deprivation⁵ within three parts of England: Newcastle (n = 43), Telford (n = 42) and Norwich (n = 26)⁶. The sample of participating children was stratified within schools to accommodate, in approximately equal proportions, boys and girls from six to eleven years of age. Participants were selected at random, either by research team⁷ members or teachers, with interviews typically lasting between 25 and 45 minutes. In light of the low parental response rates at each of the participating schools, head teachers encouraged an 'opt-out' consent procedure. Nevertheless, information sheets were produced for teachers, parents and children describing the research in age-appropriate language and participating children were informed that they could quit their involvement in the research at any stage (although none chose to).

There has been a good deal of debate about which research methods may be best suited for use with children and young people (e.g., Greene and Hill, 2005). In employing semi-structured interviews within this study it was decided that the research would be introduced to children by telling them that, as adults, the research team members did not consider themselves experts in what mattered to children. The interviews thus sought, as far as possible, to employ a child-centred approach, treating children as fully competent informants and attempting to understand the world from their perspective. Interviews set out to cover three broad areas, only one of which is considered in depth within the discussion to follow: first, leisure and free-time activities; secondly, musical and music-related activities (the focus of this article) and finally, participation in the *In Harmony*⁸ initiative. In order to encourage the flow of discussion, children were presented, within interviews, with photo cards depicting an array of musical forms and related activities⁹ from which they were asked to select a few favourites before ranking these in order of preference. Children were also invited to suggest any other activities not depicted on the cards. This 'ranking game' served as the basis for discussion, as children were asked to elaborate upon their choices and offer reasons for them. The interviews therefore adopted an exploratory mode, aiming to draw out some of the implicit meanings and associations between those activities detailed by children, their valued qualities or attributes and those contexts and relationships relevant to them. Interviews were subsequently analysed with particular regard for consistencies, patterns or other regularities in terms of how children saw value in cultural activities and the way(s) in which this was framed by them.

Research Findings

In order to explore how the experiences and practices described by children shed light on questions of relational agency, the following discussion is structured around three sets of themes. Firstly, I consider the co-participatory nature and interpersonal dependencies characteristic of the domestic musical practices described by children. Next I address the enfolding of domestic audio (and visual) technologies within *interactional-relational* music-related practices. Following this, the discussion explores the variety of ways in which music-related interactions are enfolded into children's thoughts about music and its meanings. On the basis of the empirical evidence presented, I go on to summarise the value of an *interactional-relational* approach for understanding children's music-related practices.

Confluent musical interactions

Although children's accounts of their out-of-school music-related activities were complex, uneven and often idiosyncratic, the role of other persons (especially parents and other family members) nevertheless emerged with some prominence across many. Thus although many children revealed that they engaged in solitary listening practices (typically through mobile phones, MP3 players or bedroom stereos), many of the musical listening practices that children detailed suggested that it was principally through interactions with (significant) others that music took on import for them:

C¹⁰ Erm, me and my mum and me, when everybody's at school I come home sometimes early, so me and Mum can listen to *One Direction*.

(Boy, age 7)

C I'm a big *Michael Jackson* fan cos when I came off my holidays from Turkey last year my uncle had a new song on his phone, *Michael Jackson*, 'Black or White', then we listened to it then I liked *Michael Jackson*.

(Boy, age 8)

In cases like these, children revealed how shared experiences of attending to musical sounds, often in contexts of familiarity, played a central part in the ways that they understood their relationship with music. Indeed, the varied ways in which children engaged in music-related experiences revealed the quite fundamental role of complex webs of interaction in engendering and sustaining such engagements. The following exchange offers just one suggestive example:

C I normally listen to like *Nikki Minaj* and things.

I What do you like about her?

C I went to see her last year in Birmingham.

I Who did you go with?

C It was me, my mum, my mum's friend, one of my best friends and another one of my mum's friends.

(Girl, age 9)

In this excerpt, what initially appears to be a straightforward expression of this girl's preference for a particular artist can be seen, as the exchange develops, to be a matter bound up with a particular interactional experience (the concert) which drew further interactional processes and dependencies (at a minimal level, relations between mother and daughter, daughter and friend, mother and friends) into its ambit. Thus not only was it the

case, in many instances, that children littered their accounts of music's place in their lives with references to other persons but, perhaps more significantly, these relations emerged as quite integral to their relationships with music.

Another form of relational activity to emerge especially prominently within children's accounts involved singing and/or dancing along to music:

C When I'm playing I can hear my mum putting on music and then I dance to it

(Boy, age 6)

I So who's got the better voice?

C Mum has best.

I Do you sing together?

C Yeah and sometimes she sings and I dance.

(Girl, age 7)

From the perspective of relational analysis, we simply cannot understand what *A* is doing in such instances without taking into account what *B* is doing, and vice versa. Dépelteau's suggestion that, 'if the child acts in this way, it is only and partly because the father is also there and he is doing what he is doing' (2015: 55), is quite apposite here. Given the impossibility of attributing causality or agentive power to any singular, 'bounded' being within the context of such interdependent action, relational theorist Gergen employs the term 'co-active *confluence*' (2009: 49; emphasis in original) to describe the nature of the action involved. Such instances of confluent musical activity, which take the form they do

only by virtue of the relational interaction involved, provide good examples of the principles of an *interactional-relational* approach at work. These children did what they did in their relations with 'mum' only because of what 'mum' does and what both do in relation 'the music'.

In light of children's accounts of confluent singing and dancing, we might also note music's capacity to generate 'entrainment', the 'spatiotemporal coordination resulting from rhythmic responsiveness to a perceived rhythmic signal process' (Phillips-Silver et al. 2010: 5). While Gergen employs the term 'synchronic sensitivity' to describe instances of co-action involving 'carefully tuned responsiveness to each other's actions' (2009: 165), to this *interpersonal* dynamic must also be added an appreciation of music's specificity as a 'thing' of a certain kind (form of communication, sonic artefact) and how this might become intertwined within interactions of the kind alluded to above. Indeed, as ethnomusicologist Phillip Tagg has suggested, whereas it is rare for people to talk, write or paint *in time* with each other, music very often involves 'a concerted simultaneity of nonverbal sound events or movements', which render it 'particularly suited to expressing collective messages of affective and corporeal identity' (Tagg, 1999: 20). It is for these reasons that attending to the phenomenality of music is important when confronting questions about how it becomes bound up in people's interactional practices. Indeed, approaching music in this way also reminds us of the need, within *interactional-relational* theorisation, to look beyond persons to also take account of the broader array of material arrangements relevant to all interaction. It is to a closer consideration of such arrangements, especially in terms of the role of mediating technologies, that the discussion now turns.

Technology in interactional-relational processes

Centrally implicated in many of the music-related activities detailed by children were a range of resources which – by dint of being embedded in domestic contexts and typically shared between family members – figured prominently in the accounts gathered. Media technologies emerged especially prominently in this regard. From laptops computers and tablet devices to television sets, interactive video games and MP3 players, surfacing clearly in the interview data was the capacity of technological devices ‘to bring about subtle and unpredictable change in children's opportunities for action through quite mundane processes’ (Lee 2001: 167). Rather than necessarily seeing the presence or use of technological devices as capable of endowing children with greater degrees of ‘agency’ (as Lee implies) however, it seems more appropriate to interpret the data uncovered in this research as revealing of how children’s relationships to such technologies were themselves also significantly mediated by interpersonal relations. The following interview excerpt is usefully illustrative:

I So you said you play music from the internet. Why do you like doing that?

C Cos, when I always get on the laptop I say “Mum, can I please go on your laptop?” and she says “Yeah” and then I run on her laptop and put ‘Gangnam Style’ on and then I dance to it and get my mum involved dancing to it.

I Okay. So when you and your mum are dancing around to the music, does she choose what it [the music] is, or do you choose what it is?

I I choose what it is. It’s ‘The Cup Song’ and then ‘Gangnam style’. We both pick two songs each, then we take turns. (Girl, age 7)

In such instances, children revealed complex arrangements involving not just persons but also 'things', none of whose imbrication in the unfurling action could be overlooked in the search for an adequate grasp of the latter's nature. As is also suggested by the above exchange, the specific affordances of different technologies (and associated texts) could help facilitate different forms of confluent musical activity (e.g., 'We sing [along with] *X-Factor*¹¹. I watched it last night' – Boy, age 6). Equally illustrative of the deeply *interactional-relational* nature of domestic music-related activities, however, were accounts in which children disclosed some of their non-confluent musical practices. The following interview excerpt, for example, illuminates how music-related action might incorporate *interactional-relational* dynamics however shared – or not – particular listening experiences may be:

C Normally when I go on my dad's laptop and sometimes when I'm on a game I turn the game music off but I'm still playing and I put YouTube up and put my favourite songs on and just listen to that and sometimes my dad likes to hear it but when he's watching *Bake Off* [TV show] he asks me to put headphones on. (Girl, age 10)

Indeed, children accounts revealed numerous ways in which they made use of listening technologies such as MP3 players and mobile phones in their solitary listening. Far from obscuring the ongoing influence of interpersonal relations within such child-'thing' interactions however, these accounts often served only to further illustrate how these practices were, in and of themselves, bound up with broader arrangements of *other* persons and 'things'.

C I use my mum's MP3 player...she has *N-Dubz*. (Girl, age 8)

I So who puts the music on your MP3 player?

C It's either my mum, dad or grandad...I ask them what to put on it.

(Boy age 10)

To fully grasp the quite encompassing states of interdependency revealed through such glimpses into children's music listening practices, the analysis must attend not only to the child's relation to those 'things' implicated (technological devices and songs in this case) but also both the relation of other persons to these 'things', those persons' relation to the child as well, indeed, as the child's relation to (or understanding of) other persons' relations to those 'things'. So, to take the first of the above interview excerpts as example, there is no sense in which the child's relating to both the MP3 player and *N-Dubz's* music ('things') might not be inflected by both the mother's relation to them and the child's understanding of this. Indeed, within numerous children's accounts, such understanding appeared to function as important aspects of their relationship with *this* or *that* music, *these* or *those* practices. The ways in which others' relations to 'things' served to inflect children's own ways of relating to them is further explored below.

Interactional-relationality in musical thoughts and meanings

While the value of an *interactional-relational* approach to questions about (child) agency can be illuminated through attention to activities involving the co-presence of persons and things (as above), children's accounts also revealed that the ways they thought about and saw meaning in music also incorporated relational interdependencies. As advocates of

'deep' relational approaches, such as Dépelteau, have noted: 'people are driven by their "personal" but interdependent (or "trans-acting") knowledge, understanding, memory, etc...even our most "personal" thoughts and habits are linked to trans-actions in one way or another' (2008: 62). One of the ways in which children revealed some of the interdependencies implicated in their relationships with music (in terms of knowledge, understanding and memory) was through talk of their musical preferences:

I So what music do you like?

C I don't know their names [i.e., artists, genres, songs] but like they're really good ones, my mum likes them and my sisters like them.

(Boy, age 8)

I So what music do you like listening to?

C Erm, *Rhianna*

I What do you like about her?

C I like, me and, my mum loves her, she loves her hair styles and everything.

(Girl, age 9)

I Do you have a favourite artist or song?

C Yeah I have a favourite song. 'Counting Stars' [by] *OneRepublic*.

I And why do you like that song?

C Cos my mum and dad are having a wedding and I really like that cos it's about stars and she's having a black and silver starry wedding and it's about stars, so I like that one.

(Boy, age 8)

As these excerpts suggest, children often had less to say about the perceived qualities of preferred musical texts or artists than they did about the relations with which these were bound up. Indeed, when probed to sketch out the factors which motivated or sustained their preference for particular musical activities, children often drew upon understandings and values forged in the contexts of *interactional-relational* processes within their explanations. For example:

C If there's songs I don't know and my mum's been singing [them] I put that on
 to listen to and learn the words. (Girl, age 8)

As this excerpt suggests, previous interactions between others ('mum') and particular songs can be seen to have fed into (although by no means determined) subsequent interactions between this girl and those songs. Once more then, attending to previous empirical chains of interaction proves indispensable in the attempt to more fully grasp how interdependent knowledge and understanding might inform the nature of subsequent interactions.

While interdependent relational knowledge and understanding appeared enduringly significant within all children's accounts of their relationships with music, for some children this knowledge and understanding was informed by chains of interaction bearing quite different characteristics to those discussed above. For instance, when prompted to outline their musical tastes and practices, some children spoke largely of the musical instrument learning activity which they undertook in school. Indeed, for these children talk of 'music' typically prompted different kinds of reflections. Rather than providing accounts attending

to popular music artists and songs, practices such as singing and dancing along or the nature of domestic soundscapes, these children tended to speak of practicing their instruments, the sounds and songs played on them or experiences of public performance. Despite these differences however, at the level of the motivations and thoughts bound up with their musical practices, relational ties emerged quite prominently:

I Why do you enjoy playing [music]?

C Because I get to take my cello home...I like when I can take it home...I just want my mum and dad and sister to see. (Boy, age 6)

C It's really fun playing [musical instrument] at home because Mum and Dad and relatives get to listen to you. (Girl, age 11)

Indeed, within the accounts of those children who expressed the strongest interest in instrument learning, prior sequences of interaction once again appeared significant within children's understandings of subsequent interactions. The following interview excerpts, for instance, suggest how these children's ideas might relate back to previous *interactional-relational* experiences involving both (significant) other persons and relevant material arrangements:

C My brother plays the violin too and he sometimes teaches me...he's been playing since he was 11, now he's 22. He taught me 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star'. (Girl, age 8)

C I like learning new notes...[I] practice 10, 15 minutes every day...my brother plays bassoon too...Mum's favourite instrument is piano.

(Boy, age 9)

Interestingly, at certain points the accounts of these avid young instrument learners also revealed ways in which authority figures appeared to prescribe aspects of their music-related behaviour:

C My mum tells me I have to play my violin at least once a day.

(Girl, age 7)

C We have to play whatever the [music] conductor tells us to play.

(Boy, age 9)

In such cases, one might be tempted to interpret the findings via a substantialist notion of agency, invoking the force of generational or structural categories (adult-child) as most apt to understanding the relative degrees of agency available to the different persons. Crucially, however, this would be to ignore the import of *other* relations, as well as past interactions, on the ways children brought their interdependent knowledge and understanding to bear on their interpretations of such prescriptions. Indeed, for children such as the respondent cited below – who also spoke of a motivation to win school prizes, an enjoyment of homework (“you get to learn facts”) and encouragement in instrument learning from parents (“Mum says I’m getting better and better”) – the stipulations typically bound up with musical instrument learning were not presented as restrictive or limiting at all:

C The music I prefer is things we learn at school. They [music tutors] tell you what to do and give clear instructions. You can just do it like that [clicks fingers] (Girl, age 11)

Once again then, prior interactions, their specific character and the values and co-ordinations implicit in them, can be seen to have informed subsequent interactions as well as the kinds of interpretations made of them.

Conclusion

As the foregoing discussion has sought to illustrate, although varied and complex, the participating children's accounts of their musical activities bore marked traces of the *interactional-relational* nature of both action and thought. This was evident in how many children detailed the nature of their musical practices and preferences, the role of mediating technologies and in their thoughts about music and its meanings. Indeed, in many ways, children's ways of relating to music only seemed to take the form that they did by virtue of quite fluid and complex arrays of deeply relational interaction. As children's accounts revealed, these interactions involved not only other persons and various material arrangements but also appeared to be significantly informed by frames and understandings developed over the course of prior chains of relational interaction (albeit in a far from deterministic way).

Even though some similarities emerged in terms of the place of significant others (and especially parents it seemed) within children's accounts, the kinds of action and associated

meanings described varied from one child to the next and were far from predictable. To therefore assume the salience of social structural or generational factors in informing the kinds of music-related action detailed – and the sorts of subsequent actions to which these might give rise – would be to overlook the distinctive nature of the multifaceted interactional (or transactional) processes at their heart. Indeed, to adopt a *categorical-interactional* approach to the findings discussed in this article would not only divert attention from these processes, but would also appear to risk treating varied childhoods as bearing pre-given essences (on whose basis unsound assumptions might thereby be based) and enabling a substantialist view of agency too much centred on questions about enabling or constraining forces. This approach would be poorly suited to facilitating a fuller grasp of how children's way of relating to and with music(s) might take the varied forms they do. By contrast, considering the findings in *relational-interactional* terms, children's accounts could be seen to reveal the over-writing of structural and categorical matters by the characteristics of specific interactions between interdependent individuals.

These matters are not without wider significance, in at least two ways. Firstly, they concern how we might think about music and its relationship to people's (always interactional) actions, thoughts and feelings. With particular regard to children then, the potential scope of an *interactional-relational* prospectus for enlightening thinking in, for instance, music education might be suggested. Indeed how might a better grasp of the nature of children's relations to/with music – the ways complex chains of prior and ongoing interaction feed into interdependently held understandings, which imply some relations and ways of relating, rather than others – guide educationalists in confronting some of the noted challenges (e.g., Green 2001) facing school-based music learning/teaching? Secondly though, and much

more broadly, the foregoing discussion has hopefully helped disclose how social relations always refer to complex states of interdependency and that this insight offers considerable scope for thinking about and researching the deeply relational nature of children's lives.

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Notes

¹ Indeed, Leonard notes that agency should be seen as 'a practice not a possession' and one 'located in and practised within interdependent social relationships' (2016: 154).

² Within this framework, social phenomena are seen as 'nothing more and nothing less than the effects of specific transactions between interdependent individuals' (Dépelteau 2013: 180).

³ Although Dépelteau (2013) differentiates between the terms 'transaction' and 'interaction' (seeing the former as more relevant to deep relational approaches), for the purposes of this article both terms will be used to refer to the way social relations always refer to complex states of interdependency.

⁴ This project was entitled 'Understanding the cultural value of *In Harmony-Sistema England*'.

⁵ The percentage of children eligible for free school meals was well above the English national average at the participating schools.

⁶ This reflected the numbers of children involved in the *In Harmony* initiative at each location.

⁷ The team comprised the present author, Prof John Street and Dr Tom Phillips.

⁸ *In Harmony* is a music-based 'social uplift' programme whose approach and philosophy derives from the Venezuelan 'El Sistema' model in which participants learned symphony orchestra instruments.

⁹ Seven cards were used, with four representing different musical genres and three illustrating a range of contexts and media in and through which children might encounter music.

¹⁰ Throughout 'C' indicates the speech of a child while 'I' indicates that of the interviewer.

¹¹ *The X Factor* is a highly successful British reality television music competition.

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