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Making Music as an Adult: What do the Spouses Think?

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In efforts to better understand adult instructional needs, research has examined adult perceptions of music participation. Adult participants in musical organizations have cited musical (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Heintzelman, 1988; Kruse, 2008; Patterson, 1985; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) and social (Coffman, 1996; Coffman & Adamek, 1999, 2001; Dabback, 2006; Kruse, 2008; Rohwer, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012; Spencer, 1996; Tsugawa, 2009) benefits from participation in music. The cited benefits typically are associated with the musicians themselves, with social benefits usually concerning friendships and interactions between the musicians.

Adults have expressed perceived challenges with music participation, including issues related to health (Rohwer, 2005, 2008, 2012; Rohwer & Coffman, 2006), finances (McCullough, 1981), attendance, and recruitment (Rohwer, 2010). Research has documented information about adult musicians' backgrounds, with many adults having participated in a musical activity in their youth, and many having had musical families (Bowles, 1991; Coffman, 1996, 2002, 2009). In addition to backgrounds, though, there is a need to understand adult musicians' "foregrounds." What do they do with their free time, and how is music participation fitting into their lives and relationships with key others in their social circles?

The issue of support from key individuals has been studied in youth and professional musicians. For instance, the support of parents, teachers, and even positive audience member responses can be important factors in student growth toward musical success (Hargreaves & North, 1997). In particular, "a stable and structured family life when it exists can contribute towards sustaining and motivating learning activities" (Hargreaves & North, 1997, p. 197).

There is a need for research on the extended relationships of amateur music makers, specifically adult hobbyists. Clearly, relationships with key others may be differentially affected across the stages of life, with retirement age triggering changes to how married couples interact and perceive their quality of life (Orthner, 1975). Research has shown that wives can resent the increased presence of their husbands in the home, which may suggest a need for retired couples to have some individual activities (Hill & Dorfman, 1982). This recommendation supports that of Orthner (1975) who proposes that across periods of their marriage, husbands and wives may want to experience leisure in different ways from one another.

As Szinovacz and Davey (2005) state, "more research should address linkages between work and family realms during transitions such as retirement and explore the negotiation processes

surrounding such transitions” (p. 387). In understanding the benefits and challenges associated with adult music participation, then, it may be important to look not just at the music participant, but also at the family unit. Since “developmental and social contexts shape an individual’s retirement decisions and experiences,” there is a “need to consider couples conjointly rather than viewing individuals in isolation” (Kim & Moen, 2001, p. 83). The purpose of the current study was to describe perceptions of adult band member spouses concerning musical participation to obtain a contextual and socially integrated picture of lifelong learning in music.

Method

Forty-two band member spouses took part in the study. The sample consisted of 15 males and 27 female spouses with an age range from 50 to 87 years ($M = 69.09$, $SD = 8.80$) who had been married an average of 41 years (ranging from 10 to 64, $SD = 13.62$). While 31 of the spouses were retired and 31 of the band members were retired, there were four couples that had a retirement mismatch; two of the couples were composed of a retired male spouse and a non-retired female band member, and two couples were made up of a non-retired female spouse and a retired male band member. The respondents were married to band members who played the following instruments: woodwind (28), brass (12), and percussion (2). Three married couples (six participants) in the responding sample were all band members.

The sample was obtained from a population of band members in a New Horizons Band in the Southwest. The study was introduced at a band rehearsal in the spring of 2012. It must be noted that because this study used spouses from only one band, the results may not be generalizable to other band spouses. The band that served as the accessible population had been in existence for 15 years, and served as a developing band for adults; the group played music that ranged from grade one to grade three. Approximately half of the band members had joined the band as beginners on their instrument; the other half had returned to music many years after playing in public school music programs.

An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to band members who were asked to forward the notice to their spouses. The researcher sent two email reminders and made three reminder announcements in band rehearsals as follow-ups to the initial invitation. Of the 74 band members, 65 were currently married and therefore eligible to have their spouses answer the questions for the purposes of the study; the final convenience sample of 42 participant spouses represented a 65% response rate from the accessible population.

The questionnaire comprised 23 questions in several formats, including quantitative, short answer, and open-ended queries. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, ranges, and percentages were used to analyze the quantitative data. All short answer and open-ended qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis procedures to determine the central issues across the responses. The questions were assessed for content validity by a panel of three experts in the area of lifelong learning. An external evaluator analyzed the qualitative coding categories for accuracy and consistency across responses.

Results

The majority of band member spouses tended to view retirement as a favorable aspect of their lives, with responses ranging from ‘Strongly Agree’ (scored 5) to ‘Disagree’ (scored 2) ($M = 4.55$, $SD = .63$, 60% Strongly Agree ($n = 25$), 38% Agree ($n = 16$), 2% Disagree ($n = 1$). The

respondents described the most common shared hobbies they had as travel ($n = 19$), music ($n = 16$), reading ($n = 10$), and going to the movies/theater ($n = 8$). Responses ranged in level of independence, with one spouse stating,

We enjoy any time together. We have bicycled and motorcycled and traveled and read and worked together as a self-employed couple.

On the other end of the spectrum, a spouse stated,

We don't have any shared hobbies. We are pretty independent and respect each other's own interests and time.

For respondents whose partners were also band participants ($n = 6$), the perceived benefits of band participation were associated with time together in an activity they both enjoyed, as suggested in the following comments:

We met in band and have spent 60 years together – music is an enjoyable and integral part of daily living to us.

Band has been good for our relationship because now we have one more shared interest.

The most commonly cited hobbies of the spouses that differed from those of the band member were crafts/needlework ($n = 9$), reading ($n = 7$), and yard work ($n = 6$). When asked about their perceptions about playing a musical instrument in a group, more spouses cited a lack of interest in playing ($n = 31$) than an interest in playing ($n = 11$), with the most common reasons for not wanting to play being a lack of talent ($n = 8$), a lack of time ($n = 7$), and opting to be an audience member ($n = 5$), as represented in the following comments:

I can't carry a tune. I have no musical ear and wouldn't be good at playing a band instrument.

I am so busy in retirement doing so many things that I just don't have time to add one more.

I think I am good "audience material" and that's important too! I enjoy listening and watching others enjoy making the music.

Those citing an interest in playing a musical instrument displayed a lack of knowledge of the instructional resources available to them through the New Horizons program, as suggested in the following comment:

I would like to play an instrument, but I never had music theory or lessons or learned to play when I was a child. I sang in various choral groups and always wanted to learn an instrument but I don't own one and don't have the money to buy an expensive instrument now.

The spouses most commonly perceived positive effects of their spouses' band participation to be sheer enjoyment/happiness ($n = 18$), making friends ($n = 15$), making music ($n = 14$), and learning ($n = 10$), as suggested in the following comments:

I see only positives about his playing in band. He looks forward to rehearsals and interacting with other band members. I love to see and hear the happiness he has.

He stays very busy and has many new friends. It provides his life with a structure.

My husband retired so that he could join more bands that met during the day. Playing increases his happiness but sometimes adds frustration too, but I think that is healthy.

One issue indicated by some spouses as a benefit and cited by others as a negative was time away from their partner. Four participants saw band as a positive distraction that helped keep their marriages healthy. One participant wrote,

Since my spouse is newly retired, he needs time out of the house. This is a positive because it allows me some alone time.

The value of band rehearsals filling free time was noted specifically when one spouse was retired and the other was not, as in the following quote:

I work full time and my job requires a lot of travel. The band provides him with something to occupy his days when I'm working.

When discussed as a negative issue, respondents indicated their band member spouses' time away during rehearsals and performances as a problem. Seven spouses saw band as a possible distraction that caused scheduling conflicts and took away from time that could otherwise be spent together as a couple:

Because he is in multiple bands and has so many practice sessions it is hard to find time to do some of the things I would like to do together. I believe this is what caused his divorce from his first wife.

At times we disagree on the priority of band in our lives as a married couple. I attend many of his band performances but I enjoy other types of music, and he is usually unavailable to attend because he's at a band practice. He's currently in 6 bands.

We have attended his concerts together. Now that he is retired I do not mind all the rehearsals and concerts where I stay at home. Prior to his retirement there were times when I resented his going off at night, etc. and our together time was shortened.

Overall, more spouses reported that their husbands' or wives' band participation improved their relationship ($n = 24$) than those who felt it distracted from it ($n = 7$, or $n/a = 11$). The most common relationship improvement topic mentioned were supporting one another ($n = 7$), time together making music ($n = 6$), and having something important to talk about ($n = 4$). Even in

neutral responses it was evident that support of band member spouses was an important component of the couples' relationships:

Band hasn't improved or detracted from our relationship. We have a good relationship. I am proud of him for sticking with it but it hasn't changed us as a couple.

The most common hobbies that were perceived to have a greater impact than band on the couples' relationships were "together" activities, such as traveling ($n = 11$), and dancing ($n = 7$). One spouse wrote,

Other activities may have a greater impact on our relationship because we do them together.

In terms of changes that the spouses perceived since the musicians joined the band, increased friends was most commonly cited ($n = 36$), followed by increased concert attendance ($n = 24$), and improved health ($n = 8$):

I think band is great. When he first retired he just sat and read all day. With the band he has branched out into so many other activities and he loves making music with all of his new friends.

I think he is more interested in attending local concerts and explaining about the clarinet and playing and some talking about his past musical experiences from long, long ago.

I think he has stayed healthier and more relaxed because of being in band and staying active.

Three participants noted deterioration in health, including problems with back pain ($n = 1$), worsening eyesight ($n = 1$), and respiratory issues ($n = 1$), perceived to be related to band participation:

He plays bass in many area bands and this is hard on his back.

She's saying she needs to get her eyes checked because she is not seeing the music as clearly....a music-specific starting thing?

Band seems to have had a negative impact with more respiratory problems. I've heard wind instruments can do that.

Discussion

In the current study, band spouses noted similar perceived musical and social benefits to those cited by band members in previous literature. In general, spouses thought band participation was a favorable hobby for their husbands and wives. The only activities that were perceived as more important to the spouses were hobbies that the couples could partake in together. This finding may not be generalizable to adults who are less active and at home together more often. Another qualification may be for situations in which one spouse is retired

and the other is not. For these exceptions, the balance of individual and couple activities may need to be different. The appropriate, contextual balance of time together and time apart appears to be an important component of healthy and happy interactions of couples, and this topic may need attention and discussion at the various stages across a couple's lifetime. Since together activities tended to be viewed as favorable in the current study, perhaps adult bands could provide opportunities for couples, even those with a disparity in music experience levels, to participate together. Directors who can communicate with band members concerning opportunities for spouses may be assisting the balance of family dynamics. Information may be able to aid in the necessary negotiation process that is important in the health of any relationship (Szinovacz & Davey, 2005).

While music was perceived to be a valued activity by the majority of spouses, it may be important for directors to realize that band may also be seen in a negative light by some spouses due to the time commitment. To address this issue, directors might focus on bringing family members together and encourage non-musician spouses to advertise upcoming band events or organize receptions, for example. Some spouses in the current study clearly valued their participation as audience members, thus involving audience participation during concerts may bring a spotlight to the listening aspect of the music relationship.

Some couples in this study reported wanting more time apart, as documented also by Hill and Dorfman (1982). For these individuals' band member spouses, additional ensemble participation (e.g., jazz bands or chamber groups), teaching and coaching other musicians, and/or administrative service for local arts organization may provide other enjoyable, out-of-the-home musical experiences.

Directors who are cognizant of the global picture of band members' extended relationships may also realize the need to consider and accept the extended familial ramifications of organizing trips or planning concert and rehearsal schedules. While some band members may have the scheduling freedom to be at every rehearsal and concert, others might have to balance their required commitments with their optional hobby interests. Attending a rehearsal or traveling to a concert may not always be feasible for all members

Increased concert attendance was documented as one possible benefit of band participation. Because concert attendance is an activity that couples can partake in together, band directors may want to consider including time in rehearsals during which information concerning community concerts can be announced. There was also a perception of increased health derived from band participation. It may be worthwhile for directors to provide time for band members to engage in formal or informal discussions concerning issues of importance to them, including health. Directors may benefit from a thorough understanding of health issues common to older adults so that at least healthy physical approaches to performance are consistently encouraged

In conclusion, further investigation into attitudes and perceptions of the complete family unit is warranted to gain a better understanding of life issues affecting leisure participants (Kim & Moen, 2001). Since adult music making can be an enjoyable experience with many possible benefits, it is important for community music practitioners to consider ways to make music participation add to adults' life experiences. Knowledge about band member familial issues may help inform and assist band directors in making decisions that will facilitate healthy relationships at home for their band members. While this study is but a first look at the extended family as part of healthy adult musical engagement, obtaining a contextual and socially integrated picture of lifelong learning in music is an important goal for continued study.

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