

2008

The Construction of Identity and Musical Identities: A Literature Review

Cecilia A.R. Torres

Univerdidade Estadual do Rio Grande do Sul/UERGS, Rio Grande do Sul/Brasil

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme>

Recommended Citation

Torres, Cecilia A.R. (2008) "The Construction of Identity and Musical Identities: A Literature Review," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 11 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol11/iss1/2>

The Construction of Identity and Musical Identities: A Literature Review

Cecilia A. R. Torres
Fundação Municipal de Artes de Montenegro/FUNDARTE/
Universidade Estadual do Rio Grande do Sul/UERGS,
Rio Grande do Sul/Brasil.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify the many aspects that constitute musical identity. The article discusses issues of body, cultural identity and personal identity gleaned from the literature, with an ultimate goal of understanding identity construction among female schoolteachers inside and outside of music education.

This article concerns the constitution of musical identity and the memories of a group of twenty female graduate students, all schoolteachers or future schoolteachers. My intention is to discuss the musical identities of those teachers/students by exposing the diversity and multiplicity of their individual voices and narratives gleaned from their musical biographies. I begin with a discussion of the ideas of authors from different fields including Music Education, Cultural Studies, Sociology and Education, combining life histories with career, feelings and memories.

When we discuss and reflect on the notion of identity, some words and concepts such as difference, genre, hybridism, context, place, locality and others, emerge. In this vein, Grossberg, (1996) a researcher in cultural studies argues that:

[I]dentity is always constituted out of difference and complements that there is an alternative understanding of the relations of the modern and identity that suggests that the modern transforms all relations of identity into relations of difference. Thus, the modern constitutes not identity out of difference but difference out identity. (p. 92)

The author purports that ideas of cultural identity suggest a struggle between the ideas of Foucault and Derrida. He focuses on the “influential work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) which has contributed significantly to the theoretical frameworks which cultural studies has approached questions of identity” (p.94). du Gay links this study with his own analysis of the cultural identity.

In the article *Who needs identity?* Stuart Hall (1996) notes the discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of identity, at the same moment “as

it has been subjected to a searching critique” (p.1). He analyzes the strategic position of identity and the possibility of connecting it with conceptions of time, discourse, and history. Further,

[i]t accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. (p. 4)

Hall explains that actual identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture, and he emphasizes that identities are constructed within, not outside representation and discourse. (p.4). Hall describes

identity to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellant’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken.’ (p. 6)

In relation to the issue of identity, Olsson (1999) examines aspects and doubts, as if “established identities are cultural means that their stability and coherence can be challenged prefiguring the establishment of other identities (p.35).” He analyses Foucault’s work with regard to the notion “that ‘identities’ are ‘representations’ or ‘fixations’ that are neither fixed nor stable” (p.35). These ideas can also connect to multiple discourses and to questions involving the meaning of subjectivity and the construction of identity.

Barker (1997) contends that *national identities* are replaced by *hybrid identities*. The “concept of hybrid identities is important” and related because of the influences “of the process of accelerated globalization and is critical to differential and hybrid ethnic and national identifications” (p.191). The author emphasizes the links between identity as depicted on global television and describes specific examples from Brazilian *telenovelas* (soap operas) and the implication of TV in the construction and production of Brazilian national identities.

Reflections about musical identity

Frith (1996) writes:

But if musical identity is, then, always fantastic, idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits, it is, secondly, always also real, enacted in musical activities. Music making and music listening, that is to say, are bodily matters; involve what one might call social movements. In this respect, musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy – it is not mediated by dreams – but is experienced directly: music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be. (p. 123)

Frith's concept of musical identity, that of shifting and sharing with many others' ideas, definitions and the voices and writing of teachers, is an important one.

According to Born (2000), the theorization of music and the articulation of social identity is "presently a major preoccupation" and describes a *new model* that emerged from critiques of Frith, with the "[proposition] that music 'reflects' nothing; rather, music has a formative role in the construction, negotiation, and transformation of sociocultural identities." Born comments on the *aesthetic pleasure* of music and emphasizes that music can construct new identities while reflecting simultaneously on existing ones. Barker (1997) also refers to this dualism.

Frith continues:

Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers to the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives...This is, perhaps ironically, to come back to music via spatial metaphor. But what makes music special for identity – is that it defines space without boundaries (a game without frontiers). (p. 124-125)

Richards (1998), a music educator, uses the term identity to "name a set of practices which subjects may adopt in sustaining both the individual and, to varying degrees, collective continuity" (p.47). He notes a dislike for the "implicit in the concept of identity and explains that identity can be used to imply more than being identified or identifiable" (p. 47).

Hybrid identity or cultural identity?

Linking ideas about identity and the diverse roles identity plays in our everyday lives, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) state that:

Identity is not seen as a thing that we are, property of individual, but as something we do. It is a practical accomplishment, achieved and maintained through the detail of language use. (p. 133)

In the process of identifying the relationship of discourse cultural and hybrid identities, Barker (1997) comments that "since identity is constituted in and through discourse, it is, by its very nature, not possible to separate identity from ways of thinking about it" (p.192). For Barker, there are two positions from which identity can be understood – one perspective is to regard identity as the name for a collective 'one true self', for example, of a 'British identity' "expressed through symbolic representation." The second perspective, or key concept, is an example of 'Black identity' or 'Black

Atlantic’, in which “the assumptions of an essentialist argument are immediately made problematic” (p.192).

To Gilroy (1993), the expression in musical examples is pertinent to the analysis and understanding of Black identities, including similarities and differences. Gilroy argues against essentialist notions of identity and says that in a more contemporary vein, Rap and Hip-Hop have become prominent musical forms not only of the Black Diaspora but of youth culture in general. Referring to the work of Frith (1996), he examines some points relating to the analysis of musical identity and popular music, highlighting that:

The academic study of popular music has been limited by the assumption that the sounds must somehow ‘reflect’ or ‘represent’ the people. The analytic problem has been traced to connections back, from the work (the score, the song, the beat) to the social groups who produce and consume it. What’s been at issue is homology, some sort of structural relationship between material and musical forms. (p. 108)

Professional identity or class identity among Women Schoolteachers

The construction of a social identity among women teaching in primary schools in different sets of times and spaces, are influenced by musical choices, tastes and consumption. Authors like Nias (1999), who writes on the identity of primary school teachers and the so-called *culture of care*, Smith (1993) who discusses women’s autobiographies – including subjectivity, identity and body – and Wodak, et al., (1999) in the book *The Discursive Construction of National Identities*, make references to those influences.

Richards (1998) conducted interviews with teachers and analyzed various narratives and explanations on the subject of class identity, including responsibility, aspiration and intention. In describing his work, he explains that:

...being a teacher, acquiring that work identity, is represented more as a position within an institutional domain than as the attainment of an earlier identification projected into an adult future. (p. 191)

Another approach is suggested by Jenkins (1992), who looked at Bourdieu’s work, and highlighted the importance of research on class identity – as an occupational class – which is to know and understand the complexity of social life. Further, when looking at the issue of cross-cultural identities, Born (2000) proposes that:

it is precisely music’s extraordinary powers of imaginary evocation of identity and of cross-cultural and intersubjective empathy that render a primary means of both marking and transforming individual and collective identities. (p. 32)

In Brazil, one finds many examples, such the *Brazilian rappers*, the Japanese *rock and roll bands* or the performance in European and North American countries of beats and dances from Latin America which are consistent with Born's conceptions.

In the article *Rethinking Popular Music After Rock and Soul*, Hesmondhalgh (1996) analyses the links across regional and national boundaries. The author comments, "for example, we could talk about the connections and differences between the alternative rock scene in an American college town, and that in a provincial French city" (p. 200). Parker (1998) also approaches youth cultures and identities, linking the spaces and the geographies of young people.

Identity in the body

The structure of the show, a combination of glamorously staged revue and comical and sexual folk vaudeville, is designed to fulfill the ideal of pleasure demanded in popular entertainment. The rhythmic gyrations of the women dancers or *haang kruang* in their sexy costumes, is the culmination of the show's visual pleasure (Siriuyvasak, 1998, p. 214).

Linking music and body with dance and choreographies, Born (2000) discusses the process of musical identities that provide a bridge between the musical performance and the experience of the body in the micro social field. This involves the formation of identity. Grossberg (1992) brought to the fore the matter of rock music and the possibilities of youth identifying with beats and body, connecting the ways of rock to the identification of youth with "new possibilities of belonging to the construction of temporary mattering maps" (p.179).

The musical identities of the youth are articulated with rock music and the body in movement. Grossberg (1992) compares the identity of youth and the politic of fun in different groups. He cites Walkerdine's statement:

Youth was a material problem; it was a body...As a body, it had to be located in its own proper places and its movements had to be surveilled and constrained. And as a body, its gendered identity had to be neatly defined, its behavior regulated and its sexuality policed (Walkerdine in Grossberg, p.177).

Linking women's identities and autobiographies with the conception of body, Smith (1993) focuses the history of the body and the intersections with subjectivity in many narratives of the autobiographical "I". For instance, she asks, "What specific body does the autobiographical subject claim in her text?" and "Does the body drop away as a location of autobiographical identity?" (p.23).

Gilroy (1996), in his study involving multiculturalism and identities, considers the importance and implication of diversity, writing that:

A political understanding of identity and identification – emphatically not a reified identity politics – points to other more radical possibilities in which we can begin to imagine ways for reconciling the particular and the general. (p.48)

Some considerations

This comment from Gilroy (1996) links identity with the subjectivity of female schoolteachers. Gilroy states:

Identity as sameness can be distinguished from identity as subjectivity because it moves on from dealing with the formation and locations of subjects and their historical individuality into thinking about collective or communal identities: nations, genders, classes, generational, ‘racial’ and ethnic groups. (p.40)

Woodward (1997) discusses concepts of identity and subjectivity, exploring the feelings, the emotions that constitute our sense of ‘us’ and the subjects of the discourses. She writes: “The terms identity and subjectivity are occasionally used in ways which suggest that the terms are interchangeable. In fact, there is a great deal of overlap between the two” (p.39). To Woodward, subjectivity involves the unconscious and conscious emotions and thoughts, in a social context. The author proceeds in her reflection saying “yet we experience our subjectivity in a social context where language and culture give meaning to our experience of ourselves and where we adopt an identity” (p.39).

Woodward (1997) explains that:

The concept of subjectivity [that] allows for an exploration of the feelings which are brought and the personal investment which is made in positions of identity and of the reason why we are attached to particular identities. (p.39)

Woodward’s argument suggests that one cannot write about musical identities without discussing subjectivities.

Ransom (1997), in his book *Foucault’s Discipline, the Politics of Subjectivity*, posits that “Foucault takes the criticism of modern forms of subjectivity in Nietzsche and the concern over the inherently expansive drift of bureaucratic organizational forms in Weber and radicalizes them in a democratic direction” (p. 179).

He concludes that:

it was precisely Foucault’s intention to make possible new reflections on the way forward for political thought and action, as well as to thematize in a new way the more local struggles over subjectivity that have, in fact, developed over the past several decades. (p.179)

Another approach to subjectivity and body came from Olssen (1999), with the analysis of Foucault for understanding subjectivity. Olssen explains that “the body – recognized as the site of power – is the locus of domination through which subjectivity is constituted” (p.34). Foucault’s works are significant for feminism and have influenced some feminist authors with the concepts and ideas of constitution and constructions of identity. McRobbie (1994) focuses on the cultural sociology of youth and discusses different issues such as youth and subjectivity. She explains that in recent studies on subjectivity and identity, the self is a question which is “never resolved and fixed” and is open to transformations, relocations, shares and changes. According to McRobbie, this work suggests that the notions of full subjectivities are changing and being replaced by other concepts such as *fragile and hybrid identities*. In her discussion, she summarizes many points linked with youth and highlights the idea that:

different, youthful, subjectivities, for all the reasons of generational and institutional powerlessness which are the product of age and dependency require and find in youth cultural forms strong symbolic structures through which ‘who you are’ and ‘who you want to go put with’ can be explored, not in any finalized way, but rather as an ongoing and reflective social process. (McRobbie, 1994, p.192)

Links between the ideas of McRobbie, with the changes of youth subjectivity, and arguments of McDonald (1999), on youth experience and identity, is a discussion to be explored and strengthened. McDonald postulates the fact that:

We are living a period of redefinitions: of changing relationships between public and private, between local and global, between structure and movement, between bodily experience and subjectivity, between self and the other. (p.11)

Discussing McDonald’s ideas, McRobbie also linked this period of redefinition with the argument that the youth are at a point of intersection of power with the decline of the models of subjective experience and the priority of the new. Grossberg (1992) contributes to these issues and focuses on cultural identity and the logic of temporality, analyzing the three planes and positions of identity, subjectivity and agency. He emphasizes that “the result is not only that identity is entirely an historical construction but that each of the three planes of individuation is constructed temporally” (p.100). He continues:

subjectivity as spatial is perhaps the clearest, for it involves taking literally the statement that people experience the world from a particular position – recognizing that such positions are in space rather than (or at least as much as in) time. (p.100)

Contributing a different point of view, Ransom (1997) examines subjectivities and the forces that produce subjectivity, as well as the possibilities of an historical and comparative analysis. The author considers:

a tired cliché involving those issues as the particular forms of subjectivity with which we are cursed today dehumanizes us; makes us incapable of creation or meaningful choice; condemns us to experience false desires and unsuitable values; turns into mediocre last men and women, rule-worshipping bureaucrats, unthinking agents of external powers – in other words, the whole weary refrain of the totality and our powerlessness in the face of it. (p.181)

Smith (1993) reports histories on subjectivity – specifically relating to women – and the narrative practices, considering that “histories of universal subjectivities and subjectivity” can determine many narrative practices from people in this century, and that this aspect may “take up as well as the provided subjectivities made available through those narratives” (p.17). Connections between body and subjectivity are present in the scenes that Smith (1993) describes in her research and explains as:

When a specific woman approaches the scene of writing and the autobiographical “I”, she not only engages the discourses of subjectivity through which universal human subject has been culturally secured: she also engages the complexities of her cultural assignment to an absorbing embodiment. (p.22)

Returning to the relationship between the term embodiment and the variety of sociological meanings, one looks to Shilling (1997) in her chapter *The Body and Difference* (in Woodward, 1997), with the following explanation:

Underlying its disparate uses in sociology and cultural studies however is common concern with how the bodily bases of people’s actions and interactions are socially structured in different ways. This view presupposes that conventional views of body as ‘simply biological’ are inaccurate, and suggests instead that a satisfactory analysis of human embodiment requires an appreciation of how our fleshly physicality is molded by social as well as ‘natural’ processes. In this context, the human body is important not only because it provides us with the basic ability to live, but because it shapes our identities and structures our interventions in, and classifications of, the world. (p.65)

Foucault (2000) begins with an explanation of the history of subjectivity, with emphasis on the “social divisions brought about in the name of madness, illness, and delinquency, along with their effects on the constitution of a rational and normal subject” (p.88). Rabinow (2000) analyses Foucault’s work, emphasizing the two “ideal” types of moral systems – the moral code and ethical practices. In the first ideal the subject refers his conduct to a *set of laws* while the second is “associated with the ancient world, it is the ‘mode of subjectivity’ – the way a subject freely relates to himself” (p. xxvi).

Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* – three works that tell the story of the hard labor that goes into the manufacture of subjectivities. (Ransom, 1997, p.179)

There are aspects in Foucault's book *History of Sexuality: I* (1998) that make it possible to link his ideas with the subjectivity of the body and, also, the pleasure of music. His argument on the changes of the body is compared to a “moment of revolution and happiness; or revolution and a different body, one that is never and more beautiful; or indeed revolution and pleasure” (p.7). Foucault would contend that it is our musical identity constituted through and inside our body? How can we sing the lyrics we love and listen to the music we keep in our memories, play the guitar, dance with our partner or feel the beats of the drums? It is with our body mixing movement, pauses and pleasure.

Foucault also examines questions that involve power and sexuality and their relationships with body, offering to consider that “the purpose of this study is in fact to show how we are directly connected to the body – to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasure” (p.152).

Some final considerations

In conclusion, one asks: Are the musical choices and tastes from our everyday lives articulated with these issues of body and power? How do the musical discourses interpolate these bodies? Attempts to conceptualize musical auto-embodiment, focusing the music experienced and *lived* with the body, are to be made.

When discussing issues of body and difference, Shilling (1997) says that Foucault's considerations in relation to the body are marked by fundamental tension. She refers to the body as “a product of constructing discourses” and that it is always ready to be constructed by these discourses. Shilling also underlines that the body is the “location for discursive power and is constituted by a diversity of external forces” (p.79).

Musical discourses and the subjectivity constructed in the body – or talking in the power of the body – can be articulated with this statement from Foucault (1998):

moreover, we need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasure, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing in secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow. (p.159)

McDonald (1999) writes about the struggles for subjectivity, with much research and reports of young people, – from gangs to anorexia – dealing with the body and the new dilemmas and crisis of subjectivity. He focuses on different social fields and the actor’s roles, with the conflicts and the relations, arguing that “once again we encounter the imperatives of mobilization, the reality of fragmentation, and the oscillation between different embodiments that breaks down subjectivity” (p. 212).

References

- Barker, C. (1997). *Global television: An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Born, G., & Hesmondhalgh, D. (2000). *Western music and its others*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Canclini, N. G. (1998) *Culturas híbridas*. São Paulo: EDUSP.
- Foucault, M. (1999). *História da sexualidade 1: a vontade de saber*. 13. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal.
- Frith, S. (1996). Music and identity. In: S. Hall & P. du Gay(Eds.). *Questions of cultural studies* (pp.108-117). London: Sage.
- Gilroy, P. (1996). British cultural studies and the pitfalls of identity. In: J. Curran, D. Morley, & V. Walkerdine (Eds.). *Cultural studies and communication* (pp. 34-49). London: Arnold.
- Grossberg, L. (1992). *We got to get out of this place*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S., & du Gay, P. (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage.
- Hall, S. (1996). Who needs ‘identity’? In S. Hall & P. du Gay, (Eds.). *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1-17). London: Sage.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. 1996). Rethinking popular music after rock and coul. In J. Curran, D. Morley, & V. Walkerdine (Eds.). *Cultural studies and communications* (pp. 195-212). London: Edward Arnold.
- Jenkins, R. (1992). *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge.
- McDonald. K. (1999). *Struggles for subjectivity*. Cambridge: University Press.
- McRobbie, A. (1994). *Post modernism and popular culture*. London: Routledge.
- Nias, J. (1999). Primary teaching as a **culture** of care. In J. Prosser. *School culture* (pp. 61-81). London: Sage.

- Olszen, M. (1999). *Michel Foucault: Materialism and education*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Parker, I. (1999). *Critical textwork: an introduction to varieties of discourse and analysis*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Rainbow, P. (Ed.). (2000). *Michel Foucault ethics: subjectivity and truth* (Vol. 1). London: Penguin Books.
- Ransom, J. S. (1997). *Foucault's discipline: the politics of subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Richards, C. (1998) *Teen spirits – music and identity in media education*. London: UCL Press.
- Shilling, C. (1997). The body and difference. In K. Woodward (Ed.). *Identity and difference* (pp. 65-118). London: Sage.
- Smith, L. M. (1994). Biographical method. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln, (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 286-305). London: Sage.
- Smith, S. (1993). *Subjectivity, identity, and the body*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Torres, C. A. R. (2003). *Musical identities of pedagogy graduate students: music, memory and media*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul/UFRGS, Porto Alegre, Brasil.
- Wodak, R., de Cillia, R., Reisigl, M., & Liebhart, K. (1999). *The discursive construction of national identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Woodward, K. (1997). *Identity and difference*. London: Sage.