

Does music soothe the savage?

No one can doubt that music is an important part of human life. An average person spends 10 to 20% of their waking time listening to music, and most Polish people claim that musical activities are important or very important in their lives. Yet, little is known about how music influences our social relations. Although in human history, music has probably always been a means of bringing people together, modern psychology has only begun to study this topic in the last two decades. There are already some findings showing that musical activities can make people more cooperative, helpful, and generally prosocial. However, it is not known for sure whether these effects can extend to making us less prejudiced towards people from out-groups, how this process works, or what conditions are necessary for it to happen.

In my project, I aim to investigate whether, how, and under what conditions listening to music can make people more prosocial and less prejudiced towards others. To do this, I will first collaborate with a music producer and musicians to create and produce a set of songs for the experiments. This approach will allow for better control of differences between conditions in the experiments. For example, we can ensure that differences in prosociality stem from differences in the lyrics of the songs and not from other factors such as a more moving melodic line. Once the songs are created, I plan to pretest them to ensure their quality and likability are high enough for participants to feel like these are songs they could casually encounter on the radio or streaming platforms.

After pretesting, four experiments will be carried out. In the first two experiments, I will examine whether differences in music genre and lyrics affect the effectiveness of music in increasing prosociality and decreasing prejudice. I predict that the pop/alternative genre will be most effective in both increasing prosociality and decreasing prejudice. Regarding lyrics, my hypothesis is that music without lyrics will be the least effective, while lyrics typical for the genre or those that are not understandable to the listener will be more effective in making people more prosocial and less prejudiced. Additionally, I anticipate that prosocial lyrics will be effective in increasing prosociality but not necessarily in reducing prejudice.

In the third and fourth experiments, I will explore the roles of synchrony and attention. Since synchrony is known for its social-bonding influence, I predict that the more actively people synchronize - by tapping their fingers or clapping their hands to the rhythm of the song - the more effective these musical activities will be in increasing prosociality and decreasing prejudice. Similarly, with attention, I predict that the greater the level of focus, ranging from background music to listening on headphones with additional focus on lyrics or sounds, the greater the social impact of the music will be.

Beyond these mechanisms, I will also investigate how the social impact of music occurs by examining two possible pathways. Firstly, since musical activities can increase empathy, I will test if this is the case in my experiments and if the empathy evoked by listening to music will further enhance prosociality and reduce prejudice. Secondly, since music is known for its capacity to influence mood and regulate emotions, I will verify if different mood and emotional characteristics, such as activation, valence (positivity/negativity), or feelings of being moved, which are influenced by listening to music, will in turn increase prosociality and decrease prejudice.

I truly believe that this project can bring interesting knowledge and significant practical benefits by showing how music can help us create a world where prosociality is a default behavior, enriching the societies in which we live. Such knowledge could also enhance the practical repertoire of social workers, social campaign creators, and other decision-makers trying to create more friendly environments. In the longer term, positive results may provide an opportunity for better planning of social initiatives (social integration), music education, and music promotion.