EDITORIAL

The Myth of Political Neutrality

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When readers access *Voices,* they are greeted with the words: "*Voices* is an Open Access peer reviewed journal that invites interdisciplinary dialogue and discussion about music, health, and social change. The journal nurtures a critical edge that refines the focus on inclusiveness, socio-cultural awareness, and social justice." This is our mission. This mission was an intentional choice; it was a political act. *Voices'* mission presupposes that readers will enter a democratically discursive space as opposed to an authoritarian regime. It is "Open Access," which involves a certain freedom of accessibility. There is the assumption that the journal is open to critical works that challenge "fixed" disciplinary hegemony, "pure" epistemic boundaries. Any dialogue about music, health, and social change comes with various assumptions about who matters, what matters, what ought to matter, power, normativity, institutional rigidity, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of institutional arrangements, and so on. And the emphasis on inclusiveness and socio-cultural awareness makes little sense when disconnected from politics. In fact, these terms challenge a certain form of politically driven ignorance and exclusionary practices. Concepts of inclusiveness and socio-cultural awareness are about challenging power relations, modes of building hierarchies, the ordering of space, who occupies the space, and who controls it. In each issue, contributors add to the discourse on complex social issues related to music, health, and society with the aim towards advancing and enhancing the professional community towards what is *just*. We consider contributing to this discourse to be a political act, one that reinforces critical engagement as an important feature of an ethically thriving demos.

We hold a broad and critically-engaged understanding of *politics*. The word political comes from Old French *politique* (14c.) and directly from Latin *politicus* "of citizens or the state, civil, civic," from Greek *politikos* "of citizens, pertaining to the state and its administration; pertaining to public life," from *polites* "citizen," and from *polis* "city" (Etylomolgy, n.d.). The word politic has been defined as "wise and showing the ability to make the right decisions" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In his text, *Politics*, Aristotle described "the role that politics and the political community must play in bringing about the virtuous life in the citizenry" (Clayton, n.d). In fact, it was Aristotle who claimed that human beings are by nature political animals. In line with this, Smith (2023) notes:

> Politics is our realm of public life. It's where [people] of diverse backgrounds, ideals, and opinions work, directly or indirectly, to shape our society. We all participate in politics, whether we know it or not: What we buy, who we agree with, who we disagree with, our daily discussions, our donations and volunteer hours, every daily act that favors the common good or advances our individual interests – all of these are political acts. (para. 4)

We understand the meaning of what constitutes the political in terms of various issues that are of deep social value; ways that we choose to live within complex systems of differences; priorities that we set economically, culturally, and socially; roles and modes of being that we hold to be generative and worthwhile; who and what we hold to be important; our social locations (gender, race, age, ability, sexualities) that position us and from where we perceive the world around us; and a basic understanding that we affect each other within local, regional, and global systems through our choices, beliefs, and perspectives.

We take the position that all personal actions are inherently political, and that all political issues affect us at a deeply personal level (Hanisch, 1969; Winter, 2019). Bringing a critique to music therapy, Thomas and Norris (2021) note, "we recognize that the sociopolitical realities within our practice are continually diminished as the profession strives toward legitimacy within the broader arenas of healthcare and popular culture" and "we … have yet to fully embrace how the professional and personal are tethered and inherently political" (p. 5). As professionals at the nexus of music and health—both spaces that are inseparable from culture and society—we are inextricably tied to an arena where complex political issues are at stake and are negotiated.

There is an understanding amongst some music therapists that there should be a clear separation between what is understood as music therapy and what is understood as the "political"; that therapists are somehow "politically neutral." Some hold a similar understanding that music therapy journals should, by their very nature, be politically neutral, and that it is a misuse of our purpose to engage in political acts. What is most fascinating about this view, however, is that it is fueled by the myth of political neutrality.

A myth is an organizational principle in narrative form; it communicates a certain understanding about who we are and what we value. Just as important as what a myth says, though, is what a myth does (Coupe, 1997). The myth of political neutrality discourages us from being actively and personally involved in social issues; in doing so, it is a narrative that privileges power and discourages critique. In the mid-1980s, Desmond Tutu is said to have stated, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." The myth of political neutrality reinforces the hegemony of the status quo. As Stige (2002) notes, we either "contribute to social control [the status quo] or to social and cultural change," and that "the alternative to social change is not equilibrium, but injustice, social control, and subjugation" (Stige, 2002, p. 278). As a journal dedicated to music, health, and social change, *Voices* is a forum for critical engagement with various values; in other words, with issues of political importance. These are issues regarding how a community embodies and acts upon values, whether those values are shared or in conflict.

At *Voices*, we are upfront about our political stance. Lead editors, article editors, authors, article reviewers, copy editors, and production editors each bring an understanding of and investment in critical discourse, power dynamics, and social justice. Our choices are guided by this political stance. We have chosen to remain open access, which has influenced readership (both for and against), influenced the journal's desirability for authors submitting content (both for and against), and affected the types of available funding support. Our choices, which have been made to promote accessibility to readers and contributors, restricts the journal's access to impact factors and thus has an unintended consequence of disincentivizing some contributors in certain scholarly environments from submitting to *Voices*.

While we have decided at *Voices* to be transparent about our political choices, it is important to understand that **all** music therapy journals engage in political choices and actions, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. For example:

Who you cite and do not cite is a political act.

What language you write in is a political act.

Whose perspectives you share is a political act.

What you write about is a political act.

That you are submitting to a journal is a political act.

Which journal you decide to submit your work to is a political act.

The genre of your contribution is a political act.

How you engage in reflexivity is a political act.

If engaging in research, the research design you employ is a political act.

If engaging in research, who is credited for the research is a political act.

If writing about music therapy work, the music you engage with, the instrumentarium, and the therapy theories you draw on are all political acts.

Similarly, how goals are created and evaluated is a political act.

Who is chosen to review your contribution is a political act.

What the reviewer chooses to focus on in their review is a political act.

Whether or not the contribution is accepted for publication is a political act.

The style guide upheld by the journal is a political act.

Whether or not your place of employment values where you published is a political act.

Whether or not you have to pay in order to access articles is a political act.

Whether or not you have to pay to publish an article is a political act.

So, if political neutrality is not actually possible or even a value that we should strive for, what does it mean for this myth to exist within our profession? Advocating for political neutrality is, in itself, a political act. What are the forces that have a stake in this myth? Who does it serve?

In This Issue

The contributors to this March 2024 issue each engage in political acts through their work.

Marjolein Gysels, Chris Tonelli, and Thomas Johannsen describe an innovative improvising choir who bridge music, sound, and play to connect with people with dementia in a care home. Their immersive approach highlights residents' personhood and creativity and, at an implicit level, challenges the other-izing potential of a therapist-client dyad.

Sarah Bishop shares experiences of composers in the Gambella region in Ethiopia near the South Sudan border who used their Christian songs for coping and resilience in the face of trauma. With an ethnomusicological frame, these stories explore healing and meaning-making within a complex and politically unstable post-colonial context.

Petra Jerling, Carmen Angulo Sánchez-Prieto, and Isabel Solana Rubio describe the process of selecting music for Music & Imagery within a triadic relationship of therapist, client, and witness. The authors weave together each others' perspectives while shifting through these roles in a trioethnographic approach.

Anthony Meadows, Lillian Eyre, and Audra Gollenberg focus on the experiences of early professional music therapists in the US with particular interest in the challenges they have faced and how these might be addressed. The researchers intentionally chose to attend to the voices of those who are vulnerable in our profession due to low income, high stress and burnout, and overall lower happiness than more experienced music therapists.

Sahitya Rajagopal, Alexander Street, and Stephen Philip report on music therapy in a rural community in northern India using an evolving approach that combined neurologic music therapy approaches and community music therapy principles. In working with a woman recovering from a stroke, a music therapist and music therapy intern embrace Jugaad: a way of working flexibly and creatively when resources are limited.

Amy Clements-Cortés, Melissa Mercadal-Brotons, Hakeem Leonard, Vivian Chan, Gro Trondalen, Tao-Deva Stingl, Thomas Stegemann, and Claudia Zanini reflect on the differences between education and training programs globally, which vary according to the local culture, educational needs, theoretical background, and scope. Their discussion highlights issues of values that are central to music therapists' work, shared from the perspectives of educators as well as students.

And, finally, cognizant of the importance of remembering those who pave the way for others to follow, Colin Lee reflects on the life and contributions of Rosemary Ganzert Fischer whose teaching and music-centered clinical work has left a meaningful legacy for future generations of Canadian music therapists.

Appreciation

We warmly welcome four additional Article Editors to our *Voices* editorial team, Gabriela Asch-Ortiz, Jasmine Edwards, Maevon Gumble, and Rebecca West! We are excited to have these talented people join the team and share with us their various backgrounds and perspectives. We would also like to take this time to congratulate Journal Editor, Claire Ghetti, on the birth of her child and wish her the best while she is on leave from *Voices*. Very kindly, Tim Honig and Maren Metell have temporarily shifted their duties to cover some of the tasks at *Voices* that help keep the journal moving forward. Tim has been working alongside Sue Hadley, Haruna Inagaki, and Hanne Fosheim on the editorial portions of the production process and Maren has been linking authors with article editors, working with language translators, as well as other helpful processes. Thank you both for stepping into these roles so graciously.

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