September 2006

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Recommended Citation

Watts, M., & Ridley, B. (2017). Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Drake Music Project: A Capability Perspective of Dis/ability and Musical Identities. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.10.2.13>

Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Drake Music Project: A Capability Perspective of Dis/ability and Musical Identities

Michael Watts & Barbara Ridley

Introduction

As part of our evaluation of the Drake Music Project (Watts *et al.*, 2005; Watts & Ridley, forthcoming) we attended a concert in which a number of cover and original pieces were played to what we considered a very high standard. Indeed, all in all, the evening was very enjoyable. Yet we were confronted with a problem: How to provide a theoretical framework for the evaluation that would enable us to focus on the identities generated by the music that was made. To put this problem into context, imagine two of these musicians who we shall (in pursuit of their anonymity) call Thelma and Louise. Both are guitarists: Thelma plays acoustic guitar and Louise bass. Both are competent musicians, although Thelma has been playing for much longer than Louise, and both got to demonstrate their competence with a few solos. Both are also wheelchair users and registered as disabled. However, while Thelma plays a normal acoustic guitar Louise uses a foot pedal linked through a computer system to play her bass. The use of the word 'however' in the preceding sentence is deliberate and the essentialist difference it predicates was central to our problem of using a framework that would enable us to focus on their musicianship rather than their disabilities.

The Drake Music Project (www.drakemusicproject.org) uses electronic and computer technologies to enable profoundly disabled people to explore, compose and perform music. To meet our evaluation brief of considering how effectively Drake was meeting this remit, we focused on the musicians' sense of identity. Although they acknowledged both biological and social aspects of their disabilities, the musicians themselves were concerned to emphasise their musicianship over their disabilities in their own construction of their identities. In particular, they stressed that they considered themselves to be engaged with participatory music making rather than therapeutic music practices. As one of them explained:

Being with the Drake Music Project is a chance to be a musician and not someone with a disability. Because we don't do music therapy... If people think we do music therapy, that's what people with disabilities do. But here, with the music, we're musicians. It's just that we're musicians in wheelchairs. But we're musicians here. The music gets us away from being disabled. It's like it gets us away from the wheelchairs. But if you think it's music therapy, then that's like it puts us back in the wheelchairs.

As this comment makes clear, they wanted to be seen as musicians and they wanted to be judged by their musicianship. However (and perhaps this should not be too surprising) prevailing theories of disability draw attention to the individual's disability and therefore risk drawing attention away from the music. To address this, we needed an evaluative framework that would enable us to focus on their musicianship without either overstating or ignoring the influence of their disabilities.

To do this we turned to the capability approach of Economics Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (*inter alia* 1987, 1992, 1999). In this paper we consider the benefits of using the capability approach to address the issue of disability, music making and identity. We begin by addressing the role of music in identity formation and summarising the complex interplay between dis/ability, music and identity. We then introduce the capability approach and outline the findings of our capability-based evaluation of the Drake Music Project. The paper concludes with a reflection on the ontological benefits of using the capability approach in disability studies.

Music and Identity

From ring-tones on mobile phones to Wagner's Ring Cycle at the Opera House, in one form or another, music—rather like love in the old Troggs' song (Presley, 1967)—is all around us and, whether or not we whistle along with Walt Disney's Seven Dwarves while we work, we could so far as to assume that music is universal. Indeed, in her defence of universal human values (2000, pp. 34-110) the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum includes music in her list of central human functionings (that is, those activities we value and should have the freedom to pursue, if we so wish) that make up the 'good life':

Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education... Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressive works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, *musical*, and so forth... Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and *artistic* speech... (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 78-79, italicised emphasis added)

This is not cultivation in the sense of high culture but of education and learning or, in Nussbaum's terms, flourishing; and it serves as a reminder that we are taught

who we are and what we value. That is, we learn to construct our own identities and shape our own images of ourselves. The music that we listen to and make can play a significant role in these processes. Drawing on Paul Willis' *Profane Culture* (1978) DeNora explains how musical tastes can be seen as analogous to valued ways of being, as a means of representing how we want to be identified (2000). For example, singing the (British) National Anthem is an expression of one particular identity while joining in with, say, the Sex Pistols' own version of *God Save the Queen* (Lydon *et al.*, 1977) is an expression of a very different identity (and one that we allude to in the title of our paper). However, this does not necessarily require choosing one identity over the other as we typically make use of multiple identities, drawing on different identities for different occasions, and it would not be unusual to find someone capable of singing both songs with conviction at different times and in different places. Similarly, the musicians working with the Drake Music Project have multiple identities including those identities associated with their musicianship and their disabilities (amongst many other identities).

In the complex social world we inhabit, one in which once-rigid social distinctions continue to break down, we have a greater responsibility for leading the lives we want to lead and selecting the appropriate identities to match (Giddens, 1994; Hall & du Gay, 1996; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that this has become something of an inevitability and that we have 'no choice but to choose how to be and how to act' (Giddens, 1994, p. 75). However, this should not be interpreted as the *freedom* to choose how to be and how to act because these 'choices' are 'very often bounded by factors out of the hands of the individual or individuals they affect' (*ibid.*) and the identities we choose—or, rather, seek to choose—may well be overwritten by factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and dis/ability. Moreover, there is a complex and dynamic relationship between the identities we try to present of ourselves and those that others seek to pin on us and, like so many other aspects of society, the power to manipulate these identities is not equally distributed. Those members of society with less social power, those on the margins of society, have fewer opportunities to present their chosen identities and are more susceptible to the identities ascribed to them by others.

The music we identify ourselves with, as well as the music other people identify us with, can play its part in the maintenance of these social structures. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written at length on the ways in which musical tastes and musical identities act as a medium for the construction of social differences (1984). Bourdieu's argument was that culture is a medium of interaction or a form of 'capital' that can, like economic capital, be used as a measure of status within social hierarchies. People, in other words, can and do use culture as a site and as a means of social competition; and, within this sociology of cultural consumption, the Wagnerian operas that make up the Ring Cycle are typically seen as having high cultural capital whereas reduced to a ring-tone on a mobile phone the music would have low cultural capital.

There is, then, a dynamic (and typically unjust) relationship between music and identity: whilst the music we identify with may, to some extent, help determine our identities, these same identities may also determine both the amount of cultural capital invested in any music and its location in the hierarchy of legitimacy. At the same time, identity (which may well be expressed through music) is not simply about who and what we are but who and what we are not. Given the extent of public uneasiness and even fear about disability, and given that we have multiple identities, other people may choose to focus on one identity (such as the identity of disability) rather than the individual's preferred identity (here, that of the musician) as a means of reasserting their own able-bodied identity. This means that the disability may become salient and the musicianship either ignored or overlooked.

One of the challenges facing musicians with disability is to break through the social constructions that can leave people seeing only the disability and not the musicianship. Thus, the issue we found ourselves addressing was 'not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them' (Frith, 1996, p. 109).

Dis/Ability and Music

The distinction that the Drake Music Project makes between participatory and therapeutic music is, therefore, extremely significant because of the associations these two approaches have and because music can be used as a means of denigrating and repressing others (Willis, 1978; Bourdieu, 1984; Cloonan & Johnson, 2002). Most of the literature on music and disability is concerned with music therapy. There is much that music therapy can achieve: it has been shown to decrease anxiety levels of children with physical disabilities, assist in physical and mental rehabilitation and encourage peer interaction in adults with learning disabilities (*inter alia* Thaut, 1992; Paul & Ramsey, 2000; Hooper, 2002). Moreover, we found that participation in the Drake Music Project had therapeutic benefits for the musicians (Watts *et al.*, 2004, pp. 47-48).

However, music therapy typically operates within an essentialist (or individualist, biological, medical, clinical or deficit) model of disability which conceptualises it as an abnormality that is clearly distinct from an assumed state of human normality (Baylies, 2002; Burchardt, 2004; Terzi, 2005a & b; Watts & Ridley, forthcoming). Music therapists tend to 'observe the client's use of music, and how problems or difficulties may get in the way of interactive communication' (Duffy & Fuller, 2000, p. 78) and the common assumption that disability is 'some kind of sickness to be healed as opposed to a condition that can limit access to the usual opportunities of life' (Everitt, 1997, p. 128) carries considerable implications for how disabled musicians are seen because musical therapy is characteristically seen as mimetic and often doomed to failure rather than as a means of celebrating individual expression. It is therefore not surprising that many people 'still have an image of people with

disability not having anything to say' (Prendergast, 1996, p. 88) and that music performed by disabled musicians is still often seen as 'a second-class activity for those who must be, by implication, second-class citizens' (Everitt, 1997, p. 20).

This highlights the significance of the Drake Music Project's focus on participatory music and the musicians' composition, exploration and playing of that music. To consider it as mere therapy is to establish a deficit framework that assumes deviation from an assumed notion of human normality and focuses on their disability and this prejudices the identities of the musicians and the aesthetics of their music. Moreover, and pragmatically, it creates significant methodological difficulties that we have indicated with the examples of Thelma and Louise: although both are wheelchair users and registered as disabled, and both therefore deviate from biological constructions of normality, Thelma's use of a conventional acoustic guitar sits uneasily within a deficit model of disability alongside Louise's need for specialised equipment to play bass. We sought to resolve this issue in our evaluation by turning to the capability approach of Amartya Sen because this allowed us to address the musicians' disabilities (which prevented most of them from using conventional instruments) as well as the opportunities they had to identify themselves, and to be recognised as, musicians.

A Capability Perspective of Disability

The capability approach was developed by the Nobel Economics Laureate Amartya Sen (*inter alia* 1987, 1992 & 1999) and is concerned with the substantive freedoms people have to pursue lives and ways of living that they value and have reason to value. Although commonly associated with evaluations of poverty reduction programmes in the developing world it was not intended to be geographically restricted and it has proved to be a very effective means of addressing issues of social in/justice. The main argument of the capability approach is that human development should aim to increase individual well-being by enabling access to the resources people need in order to choose and achieve what is important to them and it is in this acknowledgement of human diversity and its influence on individual well-being that the capability approach can make a significant contribution to disability studies (Baylies, 2002; Burchardt, 2004; Terzi, 2005a & b; Watts & Ridley, forthcoming).

Sen argues that utilitarian measurements of income, possessions and resources cannot provide a proper assessment of a person's well-being because possessions are not good in themselves but only for what they can do for people and people are not possessed of equal abilities to make equal use of the same possessions. Both points can be illustrated by the frequently used example of a bicycle (*inter alia* Sen 1985, p. 10) as something that provides no benefit to its owner if she cannot ride it because she is disabled or has never learned how to ride it. Similarly, a conventional musical instrument, such as an acoustic guitar, is of no value to someone like Louise whose cerebral palsy means she cannot play it. No matter how many guitars she

has at what cost, her well-being is not increased in any meaningful sense by possessing them. The capability approach recognises that there is more to well-being than being well off and that a person's standard of living 'must be directly a matter of the life one leads rather than of the resources and means one has to lead a life' (Sen 1987, p. 16).

This concern with the freedom to choose from 'the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead' (Drèze and Sen 1995, p. 11) provides a fuller account of an individual's well-being but it also poses methodological and analytical problems. To enable this focus on freedom, Sen makes use of the concepts of *functionings* and *capabilities*. A 'functioning is an achievement' that 'reflects the various things a person may value doing or being' whilst 'a capability is the ability to achieve' and 'is thus a kind of freedom... the freedom to achieve various lifestyles' (Sen, 1987, p. 36 & 1999, p. 75). A person's functionings and capabilities are closely linked but significantly different: functionings are 'in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they *are* different aspects of living conditions' whilst capabilities are 'notions of freedom in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead' (Sen 1987, p. 36, original emphasis). The difference between functionings and capabilities, then, is the difference between the realised and the potential, between outcome and opportunity, and between achievement and the freedom to achieve.

To assess well-being we must consider the alternative combinations of functionings from which a person can choose and so we must examine 'the *extent* to which people have the opportunity to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value' (Sen 1999, p. 291, emphasis added). These options form a person's capability set. Capability—or the capability to function—represents the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve and choose from. It reflects 'a person's freedom to lead one type of life or another [and their] freedom to choose from possible livings' (Sen 1992, p. 40). A person's well-being, then, is to be found in her freedom to choose from different possible functionings, different beings and doings, different ways of living life.

The Value of Musicianship

The evaluation concluded that the musicians' substantive freedom to make music and to identify, and be identified as, musicians was extremely limited but that they were able to achieve these 'valued doings and beings' (or functionings) through the Drake Music Project with its specialised equipment and training. Musicianship was something these musicians valued and had reason to value. It brought them pleasure and enabled them to express their creativity. Participation in the Drake Music Project introduced them to new and different genres of music and therefore provided them with new learning opportunities that enabled them to expand their own musical abilities that enhanced the satisfaction obtained from

creative encounters with their music. It also provided them with opportunities for socialising with people who shared common interests.

Their music making gave them the opportunity to create and share something to be judged by its own criteria rather than with reference to their disabilities. Moreover, in composing and performing their own music they were engaging with something they had control over, something that enabled them to move beyond the restrictions of their disabilities. Live performances in particular, with no special allowance made for their disabilities, meant that they were just as likely to make mistakes as able-bodied musicians and their work as an ensemble meant that they had responsibility not only to themselves but to their fellow musicians and to their audiences. Music making, therefore, was a means of putting their disabilities into their proper place and of challenging normative societal views of musicians with disabilities. This gave them good reason to value their musicianship: it shaped their self and social identities. Participatory music making had the potential to enable them to transcend the salience of their disabilities and to identify as musicians who are able to both make and take music and who are able to compose, explore and to perform it.

The importance of this may be self-evident but there was a deeper significance that was made clear when other opportunities to achieve these valued outcomes were considered. Socialisation can take place through other activities that disabled and able-bodied people alike can engage in. Yet they did not offer the creativity of musicianship. Some of the musicians pursued their creativity through other outlets such as painting and poetry. However, these are more individualistic pursuits and, although they enabled socialisation with other artists and new learning opportunities, they did not carry the responsibility of group composition and performance. Nor did they necessarily allow for public demonstrations of ability. Sporting activities offer the thrill of live performance that was so important to these musicians but it is not something that everyone can, or wants to, take part in. It also tends to be segregated into activities and competition for the disabled so that although achievement may be celebrated it also reifies disabilities.

The deeper significance of their musicianship, then, is that there were few, if any, other opportunities for many of these musicians to achieve the valued outcomes generated by their musicianship and this gave them greater reason to value their involvement with the Drake Music Project.

Conclusion

As the same evaluative conclusions could be drawn from other forms of qualitative evaluation, we need to pause to consider why it was important to make use of the capability approach. The informational space of the evaluation did not focus on the musicians' disabilities or the specialised musical equipment that signalled those disabilities. That is, the evaluation did not take place within an essentialist framework that assumed a model of human normality from which these musicians

deviated because of their disabilities. It assumed, instead, the complexity of human diversity. We indicated this complexity at the outset with reference to Thelma and Louise who, despite both being disabled, had significantly different opportunities to make music using conventional instruments.

The physical manifestations of disability, as well as social attitudes and political responses towards it, may influence the individual's freedom to pursue a life that she values and has reason to value; and in using the capability approach to assess provision for those with disabilities we cannot overlook these potential restrictions on freedom. However, in recognising the inevitable diversity of human life, which necessarily includes disability, the capability approach rejects any normative conception of humanity against which disability is measured. Other models of disability, particularly essentialist models, assume levels of deficit. The musicians' disabilities cannot and should not be overlooked but they need not define them. The capability approach, we suggest, is able to negotiate these issues by focusing on the 'extent to which people have the opportunity to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value' (Sen 1999, p. 291).

The capability approach required us to consider the musicians' functionings—that is, those 'doings and beings' they valued and had reason to value—rather than focus on their disabilities or on the specialised musical equipment and training that signalled those disabilities. Only then did we address the physical and environmental factors that enabled or inhibited them to achieve these functionings. The significance of this is that it required us to consider the musicians first and foremost as musicians rather than as people with disabilities. That is, the capability approach gave us the ontological freedom to consider them as members of the extremely diverse human race rather than as being biologically deficient. And this gave us the evaluative freedom to focus on their musicianship without undermining their identity as musicians or the aesthetics of their music.

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