

# Playing together in ways that cater for and fulfill student musicians' psychological needs

**Gary E. McPherson**

School of Music, University of Melbourne, Australia

This study applied Self-Determination Theory to study the psychological needs of a sample of 34 highly involved year 11 and 12 student musicians in a large Midwestern state of the United States who possessed the ability to become professional musicians. Content analysis of survey responses and face-to-face interviews sought to clarify how the psychological needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence were being met by the musicians' musical engagement in and outside of school. Results demonstrate complex motivational forces in action during this key stage of development. Being around like-minded peers, supportive teachers, and an environment that was conducive challenged them to achieve at a constantly higher level. Many were agonizing with personal and external influences however, which left them with self-doubts about whether they should go on to become a professional musician, whether they would still feel the same way about music in the years to come, and whether they felt capable of obtaining a position in music that would provide sufficient satisfaction for them personally and professionally.

*Keywords:* self-determination; psychological needs; self-beliefs; motivation; musical development

In the psychological literature on motivation, studies concerned with self-beliefs are so prevalent that they dominate the field. Yet the powerful explanations that arise from close examination of this literature have rarely been explored as these relate to learning music. Because music is a subject that involves a high level of personal choice, students are influenced by their own and others' beliefs about and valuing of music perhaps more than in other areas of learning.

Among the most prominent motivation theories is Deci and Ryan's (2002) Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This organismic, dialectical per-

spective is built around the central premise that “all individuals have natural, innate and constructive tendencies to develop an ever more elaborated and unified sense of self” (Deci and Ryan, p. 5). SDT is concerned with the choices people make on their own and how they choose to behave in a manner that reflects their autonomy and their behavior, free of the need to receive an external reward. In this way, SDT is used to examine the degree to which an individual’s behavior is self-endorsed and self-determined. A key component of SDT is the three innate and universal psychological needs which Deci and Ryan state are essential to an individual’s psychological health and wellbeing. The need to feel competent underpins our desire to believe that we are capable and competent and in control of our environment. When we feel competent, we are better positioned to seek further challenges and to engage in an activity at a more concentrated level. According to Deci and Ryan, when autonomous, “individuals experience their behavior as an expression of the self, such that, even when actions are influenced by outside sources, the actors concur with those influences, feeling both initiative and value with regard to them” (p. 8). Finally, people also have a need for relatedness, to be connected with and cared for by others. The sense of belongingness that can come from participation and involvement in a musical ensemble, for example, is one way this psychological need can be met, especially given that this dimension “concerns the psychological sense of being with others in secure communion or unity” (p. 7). In summary, SDT proposes that individuals are active in their pursuit to satisfy these three psychological needs and is being applied in various disciplines to explain why people become sufficiently intrinsically motivated that they will engage in an activity for its own sake and at a level that becomes fully internalized and autonomous.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the degree to which 34 highly involved young school-aged musicians believed that their personal learning agenda was being fulfilled, and the ways in which the teaching and learning process to which they were exposed satisfied their psychological needs as defined by Deci and Ryan’s (2002) SDT.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study involved individual interviews with 34 musicians during their last two years of high school (years 11 and 12). All were identified by their teachers as among the most dedicated and highly involved in a large Midwest state in the United States. The musicians ranged from those who were section leaders in one of the most prominent youth symphony orchestras in the country, to

students in school music programs that have received national and international recognition for the quality of their program, through to others who were performing and composing for highly regarded folk ensembles and rock groups.

### **Materials**

All students completed a background questionnaire to gather preliminary evidence concerning the level of their involvement and commitment to music, and then face-to-face interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes in order to understand more precisely how they felt about music, the support systems which facilitated their progress, and the beliefs they held about their capacity as musicians. Emergent themes were identified after a content analysis of full transcripts of the interviews for each participating musician.

### **Procedure**

As shown in Figure 1, key issues covered in the interviews focused on how the three psychological needs were being met, the quality and quantity of involvement and engagement with music, the types of networks (such as peers, social groupings, parental support) which facilitated the musicians' interest in music, their sense of purpose as a musician, and the degree to which their involvement in music both socially and personally was a valued part of their lives. Additional issues concerned what these students hoped to accomplish in music both now and in the future, and the extent to which their personal musical learning agenda was being met through their participation in formal and informal learning processes, plus whether any of these might complement or conflict with other aspects of their learning. To clarify this last issue, questions were asked about the musicians' short and long-term goals in music, and the influences that were impacting on their decision whether to choose music as a career beyond high school.

## **RESULTS**

As confirmed by their teachers, all of the musicians had the potential to become professional musicians. Most felt comfortable with their school or community music experiences, where like-minded peers, supportive teachers, and an environment that was conducive to their needs challenged them to achieve at a constantly higher level. Others had ceased participating in certain musical activities that they felt were not at the level of their own musical skills, while others were agonizing with personal and external influences

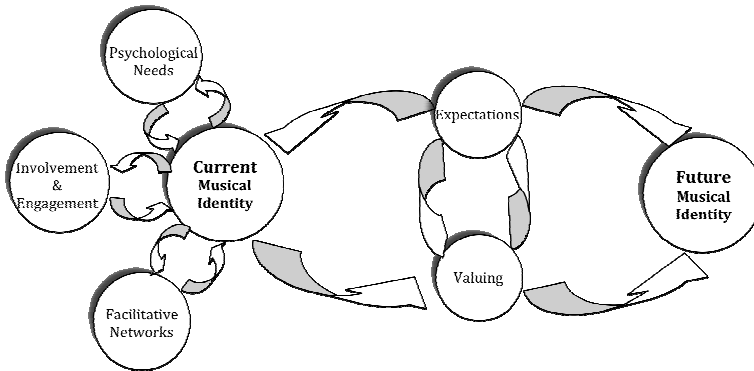


Figure 1. Flow of influences for current and future “musical” identity.

which left them doubting whether they should go on to become a professional musician, whether they would still feel the same way about music in the years to come, or whether they felt capable of obtaining a position within the profession that would provide ongoing satisfaction for them personally and emotionally.

Comments of a 17 year old flutist, who reported doing at least 24 hours of practice each week and spending every weekend rehearsing in ensembles (one of which is among the most prestigious youth orchestras in the nation) provide evidence of the complexity of these young musicians’ personal beliefs. In her case, feelings of relatedness and competence impacted on how she viewed music both now and into the future:

Music motivates me. It consoles me and excites me. It’s an intangible means of improving my life; it gives my life more glory than it often deserves.... It’s important to me because I enjoy it so much. I love the challenge. My entire weekends are eaten up by music. The kids I meet in the youth orchestra are amazing people. I love that companionship. To experience music with others is divine! It’s the most special thing I have.

As the only musician in her family, and recognizing also the commitment her parents had made to supporting her musically, this young musician worried that she takes “the limelight” away from her other two sisters. As one of the best flutists in the country for her age, there can be no doubt about the intensity and level of her current musical engagement. Digging more deeply to compare her current and future self however, revealed many niggling worries and self-doubts about whether she wanted a career in music, whether she

would still feel the same way about music in the years ahead, and whether a career in music was worth the effort, given the possibility that she may be separated from her family and the city she loved. Many of these worries and self-doubts were perceptions about music and musicians that she had picked up from others, with many of the more important coming from her mother:

I remember my sophomore year of high school. I started thinking about applying to music schools. My mom said “You know you’d be just as happy being an English major or a history major, and you’d be much more secure.” I was like, “OK, that’s fine”.... I still don’t know what to do. I’m still applying to music schools, but it’s hard to make a choice and I don’t want to make a choice. My mum is supportive but worried. I think she just wants me to be happy. She likes security. She’s worried that I won’t have a secure position, or my life will be sort of all over the place. She hates that.... I’d love to play in a great orchestra. But there is an opening once every seven years, and thousands of people are trying for that one shot. You have to move somewhere. My mom made me promise that I won’t leave [name of city]. She left her parents, and she doesn’t want me to do the same to her. I can always break my promise, but I would like to have options. And I think with music, you are very much bound to who wants you and if they will, whether they will have you.

For another student, a vocalist, guitarist, and composer who performs in three rock groups, strong competence and autonomy perceptions impacted on how he was preparing for his musical future: “it was so nice when we won the Battle of the Bands. The next day we played again, and I just remember looking out there. The entire front two rows were singing along to a song I wrote.... I must have smiled for like a week and a half after that.” These and other comments give a clear sense of what this young man wanted to do with the rest of his life, possibly in part because he came from a wealthy family that made it easier than might otherwise be the case to take more chances and to try out a lifestyle that may well end in disappointment. He reported that when he first told his parents that he wanted to be a musician “they were horrified.... They thought that I was losing valuable time.” Despite this, he regarded music as “the truest expression of my soul. The expression of my own feelings and stuff. Even if I don’t make it and I’m stone-broke somewhere, it will be OK. If I don’t give it my all, it will haunt me for the rest of my life. That’s what I need to do. It’s not like I *want* to be a musician. I *need* to be a musician.”

## DISCUSSION

Email correspondence 18 months later revealed that the flutist decided to pursue a double degree in music and English but was considering dropping English “because I have since discovered that it is unrewarding and unsatisfying.” She was also “still not entirely sure that I will become a professional musician, but for now it makes me happy.” The guitarist/composer on the other hand, was pursuing a path to becoming a professional musician and songwriter. Results such as these demonstrate the effectiveness of SDT for contextualizing the key transitional stages of development, such as in this study of young musicians who were devoting huge personal and physical resources to their musical development while learning how to cope with a demanding, competitive learning environment, overcome periods of self-doubt and performance slumps, and develop a tool kit of psychological and behavioral skills that would enable them to manage the many obstacles they will encounter along the journey to fulfilling their own personal dreams.

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### Address for correspondence

Gary McPherson, School of Music, University of Melbourne, 234 St. Kilda Road, Southbank, Victoria 3006, Australia; *Email*: g.mcpherson@unimelb.edu.au

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**Author/s:**

MCPHERSON, G

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