

Seniors' autobiographical memory of musical experiences: Insights and new questions from an interview study

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Overview

The purpose of this study was to identify, collect, analyze, and discuss the pedagogical implications of songs remembered by elders living in a large, ethnically diverse urban center. Initially, of particular interest, was the sung repertoire and its meanings for elderly women and men, cultural transmission, and intergenerational application. The study involved ethnographic tools of inquiry including field observations, in-depth interviews, and recording of songs, singing, and interviews. Observations about elders' memory quickly surfaced and new insights and questions emerged from the data itself.

Method

This qualitative study documents the personal lives of Angeleno elders from childhood through adulthood. Through a researcher-designed interview protocol of 35 variables, eight ($n=8$) elders between the ages of 69-93 were interviewed by two researchers.

While all participants were highly engaged by the invitation to share their stories and a variety of songs, musical practices, and life memories emerged, noteworthy were differing abilities for musical memory recall.

Related Literature

Distinct patterns of self-report were observed for different memory styles...love of listening to music was associated with the memory style that is high in both verbal and autobiographical memory but low in prospective memory (Schulster, 1995)

Autobiographical memories for events high in self-reference were dated more accurately than memories for events of less self-relevance (Betz & Skowronski, 1997).

Older adults' ability to retrieve memories related to music was more related to whether or not the music elicited an emotional response (Schulkind, Hennis, and Rubin, 1999).

Autobiographical memory is recollected from an individual's life and based on a combination of episodic and semantic memories (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Snyder, 2009).

As one's autobiographical memory is related to self-perception, it may provide valuable information of personal identity (Conway & Holmes, 2004) and psychological well-being (Singer & Salovey, 1993).

While autobiographical memory has been extensively considered by psychologists and sociologists alike (Conway & Holmes, 2004), few studies in music education have addressed autobiographical memory in seniors using qualitative approaches.

Considering that one's sense of self is critical in both the encoding and retrieval of autobiographical memories (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000)

Vignette 1

It is really challenging to think of the memory and then talk about it simultaneously. It comes in "pictures" but then you have to translate the memories too quickly. It would be much easier to write them down first.

Vignette 2

In elementary school, one day each week, we listened to the Standard Oil Broadcast of classical music. This was the beginning of my music appreciation and this is what I thought was good music.

Participant Memory Prompts

#	Age	Gender	Observed Prompt
1	93	F	Daughter was present during the interview. This proved most helpful in translating her Spanish and thinking into English through prompting.
2	88	F	Son was present during interview but provided few prompts. Participant had an easier time than P1 in recollecting thoughts and translating them into English. Took breaks between each section of the interview which proved to decrease stress.
3	75	M	Seemed despondent after realizing that he could not remember titles of songs and artists he enjoyed.
4	74	F	Had personal songbooks and many music scores in the interview room so she could look at them to promote her memories.
5	72	M	No particular prompt needed
6	70	M	Had short break as he asked for it and he brought a lot of memories after the break.
7	69	M	Prior to interview, participant wrote three pages of autobiographical information about singing in school and throughout life. Participant could not recall ANY of this information during interview.
8	67	F	Her husband was P6 and he provided many cues to prompt her memory while staying with her during the interview.

Breaking Stereotypes

- Images of singing grandmothers--- elders could not recollect singing with their grandchildren and only a few could recall singing with their children
- Engagement in music through singing, listening, and performing --- participants say they don't sing as elders
- Music therapy for aging populations --- participants are not receivers of music therapy
- Repertoires elderly choose to sing --- participants do not sing in groups or by themselves

Findings

- It is possible there are associations between personal meaning and the ability to recall music-related experiences in advanced age.
- Memory appears related to the concepts of participants' views of themselves
- Formal music learning experiences, SES, and education level did not show strong associations with the participants' abilities to recall their musical memories.
- Cues and special interview techniques seemed crucial to facilitate the process of the elders' musical memory retrieval.
- In some cases, participants had an easier time writing prior to the interview song titles, artists they liked, and musical memories than remembering "on-the-spot" during the interview.
- Taking short breaks during the interview appeared to help some participants to recollect their memories.
- Elders had little trouble expressing opinions they were passionate about.

New Questions for Education: Research & Practice

- Elders appear to appreciate the interview process and outside interest in their musical lives. Are there ways that interviews can be made less stressful for elders yet gain deeper understanding of their life experiences?
- Researchers have utilized a variety of approaches to elicit autobiographical memories associated with music learning. What kinds of cues, facilitated by interviewers, might assist elders with increased recall?
- How might greater numbers of elders be invited to participate in an on-going and larger inquiry to understand musical learning in early life and how it relates to their lives as elders?