

Speaking and Healing through Music:

A Proposal to Bridge the Gap Between American English Use and Psychological Expression

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Abstract

Over the last half-century, a notable body of examinations has suggested that the American English language is often inadequate at facilitating authentic self-expression in a manner that benefits an individual's psychological health. Drawing from evidence provided by previous research on sociolinguistic identity, psychological expression, and the psychosocial impacts of American individualism, this thesis suggests that the extent to which individuals can productively express themselves in psychotherapeutic situations depends on both the role American English plays in constructing an individual's self-concept and the philosophies held by US society regarding interpersonal relationships. To attempt to curb the disconnect between everyday language use and the use of language-based therapy intended to create psychological stability, this thesis further proposes the application of an entity that is in many ways similar, but also distinct from the language that we use to speak and write: music.

Key Terms: psychological expression, music, American English, individualism

Even trained for years as they all had been in precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?

– Lois Lowry, *The Giver*, 1993

What is one to do when one has something to say, but does not have the words to say it? What if one cannot say it, for reasons not related to a linguistic deficit, but rather to psychological and/or social pressures? One can choose to remain silent, solemnly harboring a hoard of thoughts, however incessantly they may burn the roof of the mouth, until the day comes when the pain can no longer be endured. Alternatively, one can choose to let thoughts fly freely – or perhaps more accurately described, fall freely – stumbling across a jumble of nervous expressions ultimately deemed too inappropriate, if not completely inadequate, to bear their own weight. Either way carries its own risks, as vulnerability is prone to do. How, then, can such risks be alleviated?

Over the last half-century, a notable body of evidence has suggested that the American English language is often inadequate at facilitating authentic self-expression in a manner that benefits an individual's psychological health (e.g. Altarriba et al. 2009; Deng and Ng 2017; Rintell 1989; Scheibman 2001). Such evidence often refers to the psycholinguistic properties of American English as well as the sociocultural context of the society in which it is used. Within the scope of this thesis, I use the term *psycholinguistic properties* to refer to the characteristics of language that enable it to construct an individual's perception of both their own self and the world around them. Alongside this, I use the term *sociocultural context* to refer to the society in which the language in focus functions. Both of these concepts are necessary for determining the ways that English, as it is used in everyday American life, is embedded in *individualism*, an ideology viewed by many sociocultural linguists, when analyzing language practice in the United

States' current neoliberal era, as linked to a limited, rather than exalted, capacity for self-expression (e.g. Gershon 2011, 2014, 2016; Urciuoli 2008). If, as these scholars have claimed, the means through which one expresses oneself has become not only the primary method for shaping one's identity, but also the sole determiner of one's success, how could one not experience psychological pressure?

Drawing from evidence provided by previous research on sociolinguistic identity, psychological expression, and the psychosocial impacts of American individualism, this thesis suggests that the extent to which individuals can productively express themselves in psychotherapeutic situations depends on both the role American English plays in constructing an individual's self-concept and the philosophies held by US society regarding interpersonal relationships. To attempt to curb the disconnect between everyday language use and the use of language-based therapy intended to create psychological stability, this thesis proposes the application of an entity that is in many ways similar, but also distinct from the language that we use to speak and write: music. By providing a thorough understanding of the extent to which individuals' use of language and their processing of music may be intertwined, I offer evidence in support of the essential roles that both music and language play in the maintenance of psychological health. My bringing together of research on language and music with respect to psychological well-being is the original contribution of this thesis. My hope is that synthesizing these literatures will, in turn, constitute incentive for further research to be conducted on the issue of how music may be applied to American English language use so that the latter is effective in removing, rather than perpetuating, current psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic barriers of self-expression.

‘Self-Expression’: A Justifiably Complex Facet of Human Interpersonal Communication and Its Relationship with Language and Culture

When evaluating American English’s ability to facilitate authentic self-expression, it is suitable to begin by defining what “expression” even is. In the broadest of terms, “expression” is often defined as merely “the communication of an emotion, thought or behavior” (N. 2013). The “communication” component is key here, as clearly, without access to a viable means to communicate, expression cannot, by definition, exist. It is by this perception that an inextricable link between expression and language begins to present itself.

By many accounts, language has been understood as a defining medium of human communication, having evolved to support what appears to be the uniquely human desire to both create and express abstract meaning (e.g. Chomsky 1980; Cornish et al. 2015; Scott-Phillips 2014; Smit 2016). The linguistic diversity that has resulted from this communicative need has ultimately led to the use of language as not only a means to communicate, but also a way to establish one’s identity in relation to oneself and others. If one’s “selfhood” or “individuality” is directly embodied by the psycholinguistic properties of the language one chooses to speak (Johnstone 1996:7), it follows that an individual comes to associate their own identity, as well as the identities of those around them, directly with their use of language.

Much evidence has been garnered in support of language’s ability to project an individual’s unique identity. One argument to this end is founded on the nature of human language as a “complex semiotic system” – i.e., a method of attributing meaning to objects in not only a literal or referential sense, but also in a social sense (Bucholtz and Hall 2004:377). Such

linguistic capacity enables a speaker to both interact with the physical world around them as well as form personal associations with select communities, as in the instance of using expressions (e.g., contemporary slang) that resemble the language practices perceived to be characteristic of a particular group of speakers (e.g., hip-hop artists) (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). This further supports the assertion that creating identity – as well as producing the language that helps to relay it – is predominantly agentive, as it highlights the choice possessed by individuals when deciding how to use language in a variety of contexts. An additional illustration of this agency is presented in the perception of language as fundamentally private and individual. Although forms of linguistic expression are cultivated in social groups, no two people use language in exactly the same way, in part because people acquire different “linguistic memories” and make various generalizations about what they hear as they are acquiring language (Johnstone 1996:8). Additionally, there is the perhaps basic, though nonetheless pertinent fact that every person holds a slightly different vocabulary, varied interpretations of the nuances of word meanings, and differences in grammar practices (Johnstone 1996), all of which function simultaneously in language production and may be altered by the language user, albeit with limits (Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

While each of the aforementioned characteristics speaks to language production as a highly distinguishing practice at the individual level, it is important to remember that all characteristics are informed, either indirectly or directly, by the community of speakers to which individuals may perceive themselves to belong (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Therefore, in addition to reflecting the unique life experiences possessed by every individual, language also indicates the extent to which these same life experiences, despite their “unique” quality, are shaped by the surrounding sociocultural context. Ultimately, language and identity have become so conflated

that language is often conceptualized as one of the most fundamental ways in which individuals are able to recognize, and thereby associate with (or not), one another (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005; Johnstone 1996).

In addition to enabling identification on the level of the individual, through its expressive potential, language also serves as a primary means of constructing *culture*¹ (Duranti 2003). As a society develops, it adopts a usage of language that is not only reflective of its experiences, but also a constant mold of the behaviors of the society's inhabitants, ranging from their cognitive performances to their interpersonal relationships (Duranti 2003; Kim 2010; N. 2018). This is partially illustrated through the use of words with abstract and subjective meanings – e.g., words that convey feelings (as in “happiness”), evaluations (as in “satisfactory”), and abstract ideas (as in “equality”) (N. 2018). Because such words' referents are open to personal interpretations, the meanings that a speaker attributes to them are comparatively more susceptible to the influence of the predominant cultural attitudes of the speaker's respective community. Evidence to this end is also observable on the level of discourse behaviors, such as signaling interest in an interlocutor's conversation, deferring to an interlocutor of higher social status, or interrupting an interlocutor to assert dominance in the conversation (Bucholtz & Hall 2005; Deutschmann, Lindvall-Östling, and Steinvall 2020).

Conversely, as a community's language is modified to align with its members' life experiences and perspectives of the world, so does it eventually come to symbolize and even further develop these same experiences and perspectives. A prime example of this relationship can be found in linguistic stereotyping, which commonly results in broad, often negative

¹ “Culture” as it is used in the scope of this thesis primarily draws from the definition proposed by Tylor (1871) - i.e., the shared social beliefs and behaviors of a particular group. Tylor was a significant influencer in the field of modern anthropology and is considered to be one of, if not the first, to coin a comprehensive definition of the term (Cambridge University Press N.d.).

judgements falling on individuals and/or communities that may have become associated – however slightly – with particular words and/or other linguistic behaviors (N. 2018; see also: Dovchin 2020; Deutschmann, Lindvall-Östling, and Steinvall 2020). All evidence considered, it can be seen that language not only embodies, but also perpetuates the cultural norms, beliefs, and knowledge associated with a society, as by continuing to communicate the perceived effects of an experience, it simultaneously reinforces the cognitive processes – whether negative or positive – that have become associated with the experiences being described. This phenomenon may stand as a leading cause of the social withdrawal and discrimination that have so deeply pathologized the United States, particularly in situations laced with cultural differences.

Seemingly in stark contrast to the latter point, by offering a comparative analysis of how European Americans and Asian Americans each view unsolicited verbal expression, Kim (2010) suggests that American culture actually enhances the tendency to verbalize one's thoughts and feelings in order to receive social support. While there is some truth to this claim in the context of her study, it is primarily based upon comparing Americans of European descent with Americans of Asian descent, which Kim defines as two separate entities (rather than as a comprehensive group) in her overview of American cultural attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, the main evidence she provides in support of her argument consists of the positive responses of her European American study participants (compared to her Asian American participants) when asked to verbalize their thoughts while completing a task. Therefore, her assertion that an unconditional encouragement of authentic self-expression exists in American culture is lacking in the way that she does not account for potential linguistic and/or behavioral discrepancies within, across, or beyond the European and Asian American demographics she has defined. Nor does her analysis overtly mention the presence of racial, ethnic, and/or linguistic stereotyping of

Asian Americans, all of which have been shown to pose challenges for not only this community, but also other marginalized demographics in terms of their ability to self-express (e.g., Dovchin 2020; Reyes 2022). These marginalized demographics include not only those defined by race or ethnicity, but also the other “protected” classes recognized in the United States. I enclose “protected” in quotation marks to emphasize the superficiality of the term as it is used in this context, given that even as anti-discrimination is written into the country’s law, everyday American English practices continue to perpetuate the stereotypes and other negative associations that circulate in discourses regarding sociocultural differences. As Carey Candrian, Associate Professor of Internal Medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, has emphasized in her critique of the treatment of patients of non-heteronormative genders and/or sexualities: “hate is a product of language”, and can therefore only be alleviated by “breaking the script” of modern discourse (Candrian 2023).

Upon taking into account both its facilitation of individual expression as well as its ability to shape and perpetuate cultural patterns, language can be viewed as a double-edged sword in terms of its communicative potential. While it certainly provides a means through which an individual may imprint their unique identity on the world, it also poses a critical threat to social inclusivity in its capacity to articulate and reinforce prejudice. Ironically, this prejudice in large part stems from how non-conforming and inferior the self-expression of marginalized individuals is often perceived to be by more powerful “listening subjects”, to borrow a term from sociocultural linguistics (Inoue 2003; Flores and Rosa 2015). As shown through the definitions above as well as the following analysis of American English use in the context of expressing psychological turmoil, it is the language's paradoxical ability to both endorse and inhibit self-expression that makes it inadequate in facilitating authentic self-expression. This in turn

makes the introduction of an alternative communicative medium (such as music) even more appealing.

The Importance of Self-Expression and Language in Psychotherapy

In addition to self-expression playing an indispensable role in constructing an individual's identity, its presence in psychotherapeutic practices is quite significant, arguably to the extent that if not fully used within this context, the entire foundation of psychotherapy would deteriorate. Indeed, so integral has self-expression (and therefore, the language used to convey it) become in modern psychotherapeutic practices that it has been argued that the very definition of psychotherapy depends on the interpretation of meaning that patients may associate with words and expressions (N. 2018). There is evidence in support of this argument in both the ways in which psychotherapy is effective as well as the consequences of receiving inadequate psychotherapeutic treatment. Within the scope of the former, many psychotherapists base their practices on the idea that verbalizing one's feelings and thoughts is key in relieving the pain that these same feelings and thoughts may be causing. One example of this idea in fruition is general verbal psychotherapy, which functions on the belief that verbalizing one's feelings not only alleviates the pain associated with these feelings, but also improves the patient's ability to engage in interpersonal communication regarding their feelings (Amir et al. 2007). A similar example to this end is the "pacing and leading" therapeutic approach, which in addition to asserting that understanding and fully empathizing with the patient must be achieved before attempting to improve the patient's depressive state, emphasizes the necessity of effective verbal expression by the patient in order for the target empathy to be achieved (Amir et al. 2007).

Conversely, support for the importance of verbalized self-expression in maintaining psychological health can also be found in the reported cases where psychological health is not up to par. Both burnout and major depressive disorder (MDD) have been linked to either a lack of willingness in a patient to self-express, or a combination of this lack of willingness with a patient's absence of emotional awareness, which may be further interpreted as a result of lacking knowledge of how to use the language given to them to effectively express their feelings (Amir et al. 2007; Zarzecki 2023). Ultimately, expression's presence or the lack thereof in the context of psychological health supports its relevance in both the treatment and persistence of psychological illness. This relevance further amplifies its position as a major contender in the control of society's perception of psychological disorders in general, a control which, as will soon be demonstrated, has long been linked to a society's culture.

The Impact of Culture on Self-Expression and the Language of Psychological Health

It is no secret that the culture assumed by a society has a direct influence on the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of its individual inhabitants. Such a relationship is explicitly reflected through, if nothing else, the society's predominant language, which, as mentioned before, serves to both transport and create perceptions of experiences, new and old, from end to end of a society. A prime example demonstrating the extent of culture's (and therefore, language's) effect on the individual is through the conceptualization of psychological health. According to a report on the reduction of suicide given by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Math (2002):

Society and culture play an enormous role in dictating how people respond to and view mental health and suicide. Culture influences the way in which we define and experience

mental health and mental illness, our ability to access care and the nature of the care we seek, the quality of the interaction between provider and patient in the health care system, and our response to intervention and treatment. (p. 193)

In essence, this statement not only summarizes the effect that a society and its culture may have on how psychological health as an abstract social construct is understood, but also begins to imply how this construct may shape the society's perception of what constitutes *normality* regarding the individual psyche. Considering culture as a construction of language, there is much support for this conceptualization of *normal*, both from a general perspective and in terms of mental health specifically. One piece of evidence to this end is the theory that language not only reflects, but also constructs reality through its enabling of meaning exchange with others (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005; Lester and O'Reilly 2017). By a similar token, language is often defined as a "performative" action in which reality is conceptualized as being an outcome of the very practices enacted by social actors through their language use (Lester and O'Reilly 2017:210; see also Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005). Both understandings of language re-emphasize its ability to shape and perpetuate social perceptions of reality, including the norms established from this reality (Flores and Rosa 2015).

How, then, does language's construction of normality influence the perception of mental health, both collectively and on the level of an individual? The answer appears to in part lie in the linguistic structures that have resulted from this construction. Despite not even existing in the English language until the mid-nineteenth century (Lester and O'Reilly 2017), the word *normal* has since come to embody what it means to be an "acceptable" member of society (Hall, Levon, and Milani 2019:483). Correspondingly, the ways *normativity* is constructed through language has become an important topic of investigation for sociocultural linguists. Essentially, the idea of "normal" is constructed within social interactions, which, due to their broad variety,

establish normality as something that is more scalar than it is absolute (Hall, Levon, and Milani 2019). This is to say that the conception of “normal”, “average”, or “acceptable” may change and be negotiated among individuals depending on the sociocultural context. However, no matter the contextual specificity, it is to some prescribed “norm” that members of a society traditionally aspire to conform, even if doing so appears to be antinormative (Hall, Levon, and Milani 2019; Lester and O’Reilly 2017). To this end, Hall, Levon, and Milani (2019) point out that even if an individual defies the norms set by one community, they still end up conforming to their own idea of “normal” relative to others. A direct consequence of this idealization of normality - whether it be indirect or direct - is a deeply ingrained sense of polarity among individuals of a society. This polarity is represented clearly in the language used to describe what is perceived as “abnormal”, which has become laden with vocabulary based on deficiency and pathology (Lester and O’Reilly 2017). Such language ranges from formal medical terminology, such as the use of “medical intervention” or “cure” when speaking of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), to colloquial expressions, such as “mad”, “crazy”, or “nuts” (Lester and O’Reilly 2017:21). All terms are typically associated with stereotyped depictions of the mentally distressed as being either intentionally deviant from social norms or chronically ill, and in some cases even a mixture of both (Lester and O’Reilly 2017). Thus, by the means of crude stereotypes perpetuated by deficit-based language, negative connotations of psychological disorders continue to exist in English discourses about psychological health as a whole. These negative connotations have a detrimental effect on the willingness to express one’s own mental health, especially if it may be perceived as abnormal.

While the formal medicalization and diagnosis of so-called “disorders” have led to the legitimization of many harmful psychological conditions previously dismissed (e.g., PTSD),

doing so has also heightened such conditions' effects on individuals' conceptions of their own identities. As stated by one expert in the educational studies of counseling psychology, by categorizing a psychologically afflicted individual as medically disabled in some form, both the medical community and society as a whole are introducing "a host of other constraints on [the individual's] well-being" (Strong 2017). These "constraints" include not only the troubles associated with the diagnosed condition in itself, but also the social consequences of the individual's diagnosis – namely, the fact that their condition may be perceived as making them inferior to other members of society. This perception of inferiority is perhaps most evident in the stigmatization of mental health.

Generally speaking, *stigmatization* is a process that is both constructed and relayed through social interaction, particularly language (Black 2018; Goffman 1963). According to Lester and O'Reilly (2017), this process consists of two fundamental elements: first, recognition of the attribute(s) that differentiate from the majority of society; and second, the moral devaluation of the individual or group that possesses this(these) attribute(s). In terms of psycho-cognitive conditions specifically, support for stigmatization as primarily dependent on social interaction is provided through the following conceptualization:

...Stigmatization is not achieved through an overt attribution of labels, but instead through a turn-by-turn interaction in which the sequential organization of interactions between care staff and individuals with learning difficulties resulted in limited response options for those with learning difficulties. (Lester and O'Reilly 2017:153)

Thus, the act of labeling individuals with perceived psychological disorders is a critical part of stigmatization, not only through the way in which it attempts to divide the normal from the abnormal, but also by its encouragement of oppressive social interactions involving the diagnosed individuals. This social oppression may further result in the diagnosed individuals

experiencing a deficit in language suitable for expressing themselves such that they are acknowledged and respected by others. A direct consequence of this limited expression manifests in the diagnosed individual's assumed identity, which may ultimately be perceived as incomplete, broken, and to use a word taken from Goffman's (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, "spoiled".

Certainly, while stigmatization is often subtle, the negative effects it poses on an individual's self-concept are critical to their behaviors, especially in terms of managing their psychological health. Much prior research has shown that when faced with the prospect of being stigmatized because of their psychological conditions, individuals tend to refrain from openly expressing their conditions to others and in some cases even refuse to admit to themselves that something is different about them, even if this difference is causing them pain (Lester and O'Reilly 2017). Other research has shown that after facing stigmatization, most individuals tend to isolate themselves, which may cause further deterioration to their psychological well-being (Goffman 1963). To reference the multiple "constraints" (Lester and O'Reilly 2017:69) faced by individuals upon diagnosis with a mental health affliction, the stigmatization so often resultant of diagnosis ultimately presents compounded challenges for the diagnosed individual: as noted by Corrigan and Watson (2002), the individual must deal with challenges related to their initial mental stress as well as face the stigma associated with a label. This stigma often appears in the form of deprecating comments from others, including those that imply their perception of the diagnosed individual as less than capable because of their condition (Wahl 1999).

Despite the extensive history of the largely destructive relationship between a society's language use and their conceptions of psychological health, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the efforts already made to change this relationship for the better. Over the last

century, industrialized societies have demonstrated a genuine interest in dismantling mental health stigma through “neutralizing” the terminologies used in the field – for example, replacing the perceptively offensive “mentally retarded” to “special/disabled”, and later replacing this descriptor with the term “psychosis” (Majumder 2017), with terms continuing to evolve to reflect changes in society. While attempting to modify the language used to describe this controversial subject is certainly a reasonable place to start when aiming to inflict positive change in people’s views of psychological health, it is unwise to invest completely in the constructive power of language in this regard. Support for this argument is primarily found in the fact that the principal constructs being described in this case – that is, mental health and normality – are variable in and of themselves, “each so amorphous, heterogeneous, changeable in shape that we can never establish fixed boundaries between them” (Frances 2013:16). This makes it fundamentally impossible for language alone to both comprehensively and fairly describe real psychological experiences, as how can language capture an objective, “neutral” meaning of something if there is no objective meaning to be had? Additionally, the nature of a society’s established values and morals may also contribute to the elusiveness of language ever adequately relaying objective meaning; as described above, language both actively constructs and perpetuates its culture of use. The following section seeks to demonstrate the fact that American culture possesses an attribute that makes it even more likely to affect individuals’ perceptions in a way that is ultimately detrimental to both recognition and preservation of psychological health. This critical attribute is known as *individualism*.

American Individualism and its Adverse Effects on Psychotherapeutic Language and Perceptions

As is embedded into its very name, “individualism” may be defined in the simplest of terms as a “political and social philosophy that emphasizes the moral worth of the individual” (Lukes N.d.). Since the dawn of the eighteenth century, it has been a core part of the American identity, having developed from the influence of sociopolitical ideals already popular at its inception, such as Jeffersonianism, New England Puritanism, and the philosophy of natural rights (Lukes N.d.). Despite the prominent influence it has demonstrated in shaping modern American culture, all recorded interpretations of it are far from equal, which is ironic considering the fact that the belief in equal opportunity, whether in terms of social acceptance or economic prowess, is a key component of the United States’ individualistic approach.

Soon after establishing itself at the turn of the eighteenth century as a primarily “universalist and idealist” sociopolitical framework, individualism underwent a significant change upon adopting one of the principal ideas proposed by social Darwinism – i.e., the theory of natural selection, a.k.a. “survival of the fittest” (Lukes N.d.). This adoption gave individualism a “harsher” edge in the way that it encouraged a shift in not only emphasizing the inherent value of the individual, but more so their value in comparison to others (Lukes N.d.; see also Gershon 2014). Such a shift opened the door to a number of criticisms, most of which were and continue to be aimed towards individualism’s apparent promotion of selfishness and narcissism (Lukes N.d.). Many, if not all, of these criticisms have stemmed from the perceived values of engaging in public life or fulfilling one’s civic duties for the benefit of not only their own well-being, but also for the prosperity of the entire society (Lukes N.d.).

Of course, just as these criticisms garnered support, so too did they spark a response from believers in individualism, a response that consisted primarily of clarifying both the moral components of individualism and how it may be further applied for the benefit of society. One

aspect of individualism's direct application to society's well-being was argued to lie in its relevance to society's structure, ranging from the organization of its inhabitants to the social events that take place within it. Explanations of this relationship have involved the specification of individualism in terms of the composition of a society – e.g., “methodological individualism”, which states that “any explanation of [social events/groups] ultimately must appeal to, or be stated in terms of, facts about individuals—about their beliefs, desires, and actions” (Lukes N.d.), as well as “ontological individualism”, which includes the “thesis that social or historical groups, processes, and events are nothing more than complexes of individuals and individual actions” (Lukes N.d.). Regardless of the credible sociological theories that these concepts may offer, both ultimately circle back to supporting the likelihood of psychological harm resulting from individualistic practices, particularly in consideration of the chance that these practices may manifest into complete, self-absorbed isolation. In other words, while emphasizing that society is merely a collection of individuals with only loosely connected agendas can provide some valuable insight regarding the internal structure of a society, more so does it highlight the society's fragmentation, the latter which has been directly linked to higher rates of psychological distress among individuals (Abrutyn et al. 2021). One empirically supported example of this link is Durkheim's classic account of differential suicide rates in terms of degrees of social integration, which essentially states that being socially integrated (whether measured at the collective level or through individual perceptions) as opposed to distant is protective against suicide (Abruytn et al. 2021).

Undoubtedly, the growth of American capitalism over the last century has caused the individualist approach to surge in working Americans, specifically in terms of career success. This increased prevalence has manifested into *neoliberalism*, which, regarding its impact on the

individual, supports the idea that every person is equivalent to a “business” with a unique brand (Gershon 2011, 2014, 2016). With this conceptualization comes the idea that an individual is the primary one responsible for how they are perceived by society - specifically in professional contexts - and what results from this perception in terms of one’s socioeconomic status. What this conceptualization lacks, however, is the fact that all constructions of a person’s projected identity - or in this case, “personal brand” - are impacted by a variety of external influences, including interpersonal actions. Therefore, similar to the broader idea of individualism, neoliberalism poses as a contradiction to itself, as it argues for the need to establish a relatable, easily communicable “brand” while still being distinct and essentially isolated from everyone else (Gershon 2014). Ultimately, the belief that an individual is on their own when it comes to not only navigating their professional development, but also establishing the most authentic and therefore healthy projection of their identity compounds the negative psychological toll of individualism already described, rather than supporting the innovation and self-sufficiency it supposedly encourages in capitalist America.

As American individualism continues to be applied more intensively to the country’s conceptions of psychological health, the issue of language inevitably comes to surface. Truly, American culture constitutes a prime example of a culture that both influences and depends on the nation’s predominant language (considered to be English) in terms of its meaning. From the perspective of language as it is influenced by culture, it may be deduced that Americans’ beliefs about and uses of language are significantly impacted by the individualistic values considered so central to the American identity. Conversely, speech, as well as the overarching ability to express oneself, is by many accounts viewed as essential to American individualism’s existence, specifically as the free use of language for expression constitutes “a notion that is closely

associated with a horde of positive concepts, such as freedom, creativity, style, courage, self-assurance, and even healing and spirituality” (Kim 2010). In this respect, American English and American individualism may be conflated into a single cultural entity – an entity that by enabling the so-called freedom of expression, further endorses the strength of each individual within a society composed of billions. Self-sufficiency and independence are thereby viewed as necessary for individual prosperity, not only for the benefit of said individual, but for the benefit of many in the sense that the success of the individual will enhance the betterment of the majority (Hoover 1922).

While the above perspective may certainly be perceived as desirable within the context of preserving the functionality of a democratic, self-determinate society such as that which the United States claims to be, it is difficult, if not impossible, to deny the paradox it exposes regarding the relationship between how individualistic values are defined and how they are perceived as essential to maintaining social well-being among members of a society. There is a blatant contradiction present in the theory that self-sufficiency and independence create a unified, healthy society. This is demonstrated through the philosophy that societal health and unity may be most reliably measured by a society’s degree of *social connection*, a construct held of constantly increasing importance in the field of social psychology (University of California, Berkeley N.d.). By definition, social connection does not result from individuals of a group consistently maintaining physical and/or psychological distance between each other, as results from individualism; rather, it is a manifestation of the interpersonal acts of intimacy, openness, and compassion into a holistic sense of belonging within a group (University of California, Berkeley N.d.). Therefore, on the basis that societal unity is made possible by social connection, the individualistic traits historically fundamental to American culture hold little-to-no bearing in

constructing a healthy, interconnected social dynamic in American society; in fact, they may even function as more of a detriment to the latter. There is perhaps no better way to portray this detrimental functionality than by returning to language, particularly as it reflects American cultural trends. While American individualism advocates for unconditional freedom of self-expression, such a freedom is far from realized, ultimately due to the implicit cultural barriers that this same ideal of individualism places on the degree of social connections made and therefore the extent to which individuals are socially permitted to express their full, vulnerable selves. A direct result of these linguistic and cultural barriers amounts to America's routine treatment of psychological health, and specifically those who suffer from conditions that have in some way damaged it. Ultimately, as the national race for individualistic, self-made prosperity continues in America, so do millions of individuals fall deeper into their own psychological turmoil, as both the culture with which they identify and the language they use continue to discourage them to give voice to their troubles, connect with their fellow humans, and thereby help themselves in the way that only authentic self-expression can.

Music Use and Its Efficacy in the Domain of Psychological Expression

Given the complexities so far attributed to American English's construction, it seems fitting to consider alternative options for effective facilitation of self-expression, and consequently, the maintenance of psychological well-being. Exploration already conducted in pursuit of this alternative indicates that one need not look any further than *art*.

The arts as a whole have long been viewed as a highly effective means by which humans may express themselves creatively and freely (National Endowment for the Arts 2012). In the

United States, this view has ultimately resulted in the widely recognized claim that artistic engagement plays a significant role in maintaining the nation's positive attitudes towards freedom of expression, both at the individual and communal levels (National Endowment for the Arts 2012). Besides contributing to the preservation of America's values of freedom, creativity, and innovation, the arts have also been described as an ideal medium through which individuals of all backgrounds may satisfy their innate drive to express themselves – i.e., “make a creative mark” (Byrnes 2022). Indeed, when compared to language, art may be viewed as the predecessor of the former, given the evidence that some of the earliest formally written communication systems derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics, which today may be perceived as more like visual art than linguistic expressions (Zarzecki 2023). All of these perspectives considered, art as a comprehensive entity may reasonably be judged as essential for the prosperity of a community, never mind the overall quality of life for every individual community member (National Endowment for the Arts 2012).

Arts' importance with respect to individual health can be further supported by its long history of use in psychotherapy. Through its expressive potential and subsequent ability to foster empathy, art is often deemed as critical in both establishing and preserving social connections, which as described previously, is considered essential for not only societal stability, but also individual well-being (University of California, Berkeley N.d.). In turn, art has been introduced in the process of helping to restore the psychological health of struggling individuals. One example of this application exists in the trauma therapy groups increasingly being offered to healthcare workers, including those in the state of Colorado. As summarized by one insider of this practice, “...art intrinsically creates community, helps the healing process and connects people. Those characteristics are key to helping people overcome their trauma. ... In the group

sessions, participants can show each other they aren't alone and validate each other's experiences" (Zarzecki 2023). Certainly, art of virtually any kind carries the potential to effectively communicate expression between individuals, and as a result, helps restore and maintain psychological health with notable efficacy. However, there is one art form in particular that seems to dominate the rest in terms of its presence in psychotherapy – namely, *music*.

Music has long been used in therapeutic – as opposed to merely aesthetic – contexts, across both time and space. Historical music therapists, including tribal shamans, Egyptian priest-physicians, the biblical David, Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Plato, often based their practice on the understanding of music as a phenomenon that held the ability to connect with and even enhance a person's psyche, or to reference the words of Plato, "...find [its] way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten... making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful" (Plato 375/1994:271). In addition to its psychological impact, music was also perceived to be highly related to spoken language, practically to the extent that the two entities were deemed interdependent on one another in their expressive and communicative functions (Stansell 2005). The ancient Greek concept of *mousikas* demonstrates this perception through emphasizing that by default, music inspires language; in many cases, music was even considered inadequate if it did not include the language supposedly necessary for the rhythmic and melodic components to be fully comprehended and appreciated (Stansell 2005). Interestingly, the latter conceptualization of the relationship between music and language appears to reflect the power of language over music in terms of expressive potential, whereas in the majority of modern conceptualizations of this relationship, the positions of power are reversed (i.e., music dominates language).

Compared to ancient theories regarding the function and resulting effects of music in psychotherapy, modern music therapy practices generally operate based on the research-supported notion that music has an advantage over words in inducing emotions, enhancing communication, and even inducing mood (Amir et al. 2007). This theory is primarily based on an accumulation of observations made in developmental psychology as well as language acquisition, which altogether point to music existing as a “pre-verbal” form of expression and communication – i.e., the theory that pre-linguistically, music serves as the carrier for communicative intent (Amir et al. 2007:143). The fact that linguistic inadequacies resulting from trauma or delay often benefit from music therapy further supports the theory that in cognitive psychological development, sound and music play a principal role (Stansell 2005). In application, music’s status as expressively and communicatively superior to language have been abundant in American music therapy practices over the last quarter-century. One art therapist from Colorado recently reflected that 20 years of experience in the field have proven that in processing trauma, music is invaluable in its ability to serve as “a way of communicating that bypasses language” – an ability especially pertinent upon considering people’s tendencies to constantly “filter” their words (Zarzecki 2023). In this way, music may be credited with enabling raw, truly authentic expression by removing the barriers incessantly imposed by one’s spoken language and the culture that said language embodies.

Besides serving as a complete replacement, music may also use its expressive superiority to enhance language. An example of this enhancement is demonstrated through a study by music therapist Joanne Loewy, which entailed the treatment of an Alzheimer’s patient with frontal lobe damage. Despite the damage causing severely limited speech, engaging with music – in this case through the patient and his wife singing their high school song – proved music’s ability to “lodge

and then unlock memories and verses from specific moments in time”, a process which further supports its potential to enhance linguistic expression in cognitive recovery (Loewy 2004).

Additional evidence in support of music’s ability to enhance language use for expression can be found in a study by Amir et al. (2007) on the effect of exposure to music on individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD). The results of the study show that playing sad music to patients diagnosed with MDD has a high rate of efficacy in enhancing the patients’ verbal expression. This improves the likelihood that further treatment will be effective in the way that enhanced expression by the patients may lead to stronger understanding and empathy in the therapist’s approach (Amir et al. 2007). Ultimately, whether by replacing or enhancing linguistic communication, music – as well as its sister art forms, to an extent – constitutes an ideal tool for both facilitating and benefiting from self-expression, particularly in terms of maintaining adequate psychological health.

Coming to a Solution: How to Most Effectively “Bridge the Gap” Between American English Use and Psychological Expression

Returning to American English’s apparent inadequacy in comparison to music when tasked with facilitating matters of psychological health, the question remains not so much of *what* can be used to resolve the issue, but *how* the tools provided can help to do so. In terms of self-expression, it is clear that music is highly effective in enabling individuals to share the deepest contents of their psyche and expect genuine support and relief in return. Modern research has also shown that music possesses this capability largely apart from language; indeed, in many instances, it has been argued to exceed language in its expressive potential, at least in terms of its ability to authentically and effectively communicate one’s emotional or psychological pain (Amir

et al. 2007; Loewy 2004; Stansell 2005). That being said, it is important to remember that in spite of their perceived strengths or weaknesses relative to one another, music and language contain a bond with an expressive and communicative power that arguably extends far above any conceived by either entity alone. Keeping both this relationship and the indisputable presence of American English in mind, I advocate for an increase in U.S. society's therapeutic incorporation of language and music. While each entity certainly holds an influential place in American culture by its own right, when they are considered separately, a contradiction is exposed within the traditional American identity. By implying that certain subjects (such as psychological health) may only be expressed in specific contexts and/or mediums, constraints are imposed on the nation's much-celebrated freedom of expression. Thus, only by consistently and unconditionally partnering language with music may the ability to openly express oneself fully be achieved – a partnership which, like the aforementioned relationship between expression and psychological well-being, already holds much research-based evidence to its name.

Support for language and music functioning the most effectively when used alongside each other stems from the similarities in how they are neurologically processed. On the surface, interpretation of both language and music has been shown to use melodic recognition, contour processing, timbre discrimination, rhythm, tonality, prediction, and perception of the sight, sound, and form of symbols in context (Stansell 2005). A primary explanation for this similarity in interpretation draws from the earliest stages in a child's language development, all of which center around "pre-existing patterns of music" (Stansell 2005:3; see also Mora 2000). Such patterns range from "discourse intonation" – i.e., how the human voice's pitched sounds are ordered (Mora 2000:149) – to the general rhythmic and melodic contours onto which a language's linguistic units, from individual phonemes to entire phrases, are mapped (Stansell

2005). One developmental model goes as far as organizing first language acquisition into “Musical Stages of Speech”, which consist of 1) crying/comfort utterances, 2) babbling, and 3) acquiring and understanding words (Loewy 1995; Stansell 2005). It is argued that by enabling adequate development of the more “musical” aspects of speech, stages 1 and 2 of the model set a solid foundation for the development of more complex linguistic features, such as consonant and semantic placement (Loewy 1995; Stansell 2005).

Evidence for the similarities in language and music in terms of how they are processed also appears in neurological analyses. For example, scans that trace blood flow through the brain have proven music and language processing are complementary in the sense that, while phonological processing occurs in the left hemisphere of the brain, including the left posterior and temporal parietal regions and Broca’s area, pitch discrimination occurs in the right hemisphere, particularly the right prefrontal cortex, the right superior temporal gyrus, and the right frontal lobe (Evans et al. 1992). Thus, a “musical-linguistic collaboration” is established within the brain, thus transforming an individual’s interpretation of their environment into a highly effective synthesis of separate, yet similar sensory inputs (Stansell 2005:5; see also Richards 1993). The magnitude of this collaboration is emphasized by the fact that out of all the human mind’s distinct cognitive capacities, music and language function the most similarly (Evans et al. 1992). Indeed, in some extreme cases, some linguistic and musical elements may be perceived to be so harmonious “...that they are indivisible in perception and lend themselves to meta-sensory feelings of wonderment, aesthetics, or the sublime” (Stansell 2005:5).

Ultimately, when considered together, language and music may be understood as two essential parts of the comprehensive whole that constitutes an individual’s interaction with the world around them. To deny or try to suppress their cooperative relationship through

approaching each in isolation – especially language – is therefore to attempt to defy human cognitive biology, which can only lead to more psychological pain rather than the prosperity that the use of individualism-entrenched American English implies. Therefore, when attempting to resolve the disconnect so prevalent between American English use and authentic American expression, one need only turn to the connection already in place between music and language, a connection that rather than further complicating current linguistic systems, simplifies and thereby strengthens them in their communicative and expressive potential. As Stansell (2005) suggests, “...music and language, the primary concerns of the temporal lobes, are a pair of sisters, close in age, opposite in personality, yet the best of friends. Like close sisters, music and language help each other in the process of learning human expression, a common goal” (p. 10).

Closing Thoughts and Applications for Future Research

While the research and analysis in this thesis focus on the faulty relationship between American English and self-expression, this is not to say that similar relationships must or must not exist in other varieties of English, never mind other languages. In the future, I hope to cast a more critical lens on English as it is learned and used by outer or expanding circle² speakers, particularly upon considering American English’s direct association with the neoliberal ideal of personal branding, which from both linguistic and economical perspectives is either nuanced or completely foreign in many countries outside of the U.S (Frendika et al. 2018). Along similar lines, it would also be pertinent to consider the acquisition and/or non-American usage of

² According to Kachru (1996), countries wherein English is present can be categorized into one of three domains: the “inner circle”, which includes nations that are the primary “norm-providers” regarding English use (e.g., U.S.A., Australia, U.K.); the “outer circle”, which includes nations that may be considered as helping to develop the norms set by inner circle nations (e.g., South Africa, Pakistan, Jamaica); and the “expanding circle”, which includes nations that are primarily “norm-dependent” when it comes to their application of English (e.g., China, Israel, Russia). The concept of the “circles” of English has grown in prominence over the last quarter-century as globalization has continued to expand/develop English practices around the world, and it holds various implications as to the social, political, and cultural influence of English on both global and national levels (Al-Mutairi 2020).

English through the lens of it as a language with an extensive colonial background and its resulting associations with both linguistic and overall cultural oppression. In light of both of these critical perspectives, I predict that outer and expanding communities of speakers may be impacted in uniquely severe ways regarding their ability to authentically self-express, specifically in terms of commanding the language to their specific needs, rather than following the sociocultural rules and expectations imposed by inner circle speakers. Additionally, it might be beneficial to conduct more research in comparing Western with Eastern languages (as well as cultures) in terms of expressing matters of psychological health. Even though there may be some similarities in how the two hemispheres fail to recognize and effectively treat mental health conditions, the reasons behind these inadequacies are arguably quite different between the two in terms of contrastive cultural values and the role that language plays in self-expression (Kim 2010).

Overall, the research and analysis outlined in this thesis are intended to provide a comprehensive theoretical backing for future studies regarding the relationships between English, American culture, expression, psychological health, and music. One such study I myself plan to conduct in the future involves directly observing human subjects as they measure and/or interpret the meanings of select psychological constructs (e.g., happiness, pain, stress, etc.) both before and after exposure to music. An extended consideration of the history and function of English semantics would likely have to be considered in this case in order to more concretely account for study participants' apparent differences in the interpretations and uses of words in psychological contexts. Conducting this study I believe would lead to an even more credible body of evidence in support of American English – and perhaps any language – as a construction of the culture in which it is used, and which therefore may be easily adapted for the better

through incorporating other cultural constructs, such as music. Ultimately, language is just one tool with the potential to ease one's neurological system; like all other tools, if it proves inadequate in fulfilling its intended purpose, it benefits from the aid of other resources. Music in this case functions as the ideal aid, both repairing and securing the unity between the deepest contents of our minds and the words we are free to utter.

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