

# Othering versus Empowerment Decolonial Approaches in Music Mediation<sup>1</sup>

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Lisa Gaupp

## Introduction

Music mediation fosters “diverse relationships between people and musics” and is often designed “for specific dialogue groups” (Petri-Preis and Voit 2025). The term “dialogue group” is gaining acceptance over the more one-directional “target group”, since it acknowledges the negotiation processes inherent in music mediation. However, music mediation still aims to define and include (heterogeneous) groups (Schippling and Voit 2023, 179). This paper explores the foundations of group concepts from the social sciences and cultural studies, examines their link to social inequalities, and discusses how contemporary social movements influence aspirations for empowerment in cultural fields. Finally, it considers decolonial approaches that emphasise individual and collective agency and their relevance to music mediation practices.

Music mediation, including various marketing efforts, typically considers both the people and the music, as well as the quality of the relationships formed between them. This chapter primarily examines how dialogue groups should be addressed or included. Social developments can serve as an indicator of how appropriate a specific group concept is. Earlier approaches to music mediation focused on addressing (Reh and Ricken 2012) target groups, which were often defined on the basis of social identity categories or socio-demographic traits such as age, gender, ethnicity, or class. While numerous sociological studies on audiences and cultural consumption (DiMaggio 1992; Lena 2019) have sought to justify or broaden the reach of target groups (Renz 2016; 2022; Mandel 2014),

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these group classifications frequently reinforce “othering” effects. By categorising individuals on the basis of predetermined social identity labels, they are reduced to a single characteristic, reinforcing their status as the “other” (Sökefeld 2004, 24). These classifications contribute to exclusionary mechanisms and discriminatory practices, again reinforcing social inequalities and power imbalances between the addressers – those who define the groups – and the addressees – those being addressed (Stoffers 2023, 107).

Criticism of these effects has led to calls for empowerment in music mediation, challenging or reinterpreting both identity attributions (Gaupp 2016) and reflections on the relationship between people and music. The concept of dialogue groups, which encourages re/addressing (Reh and Ricken 2012) and redefinition through active participation in “mutual communication and negotiation processes”<sup>2</sup> (Petri-Preis and Voit 2023, 25), aligns with this shift. This change is not just about terminology, but must be understood within broader social discussions and movements such as *Black Lives Matter* and *#metoo*, which highlight the need for more inclusive and participatory cultural practices.

## Social and Cultural Group Terms

Different fields in social studies often define and describe social groups, society, and social belonging. When sociology first emerged as a discipline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, society was understood in two main ways: as a group connected by shared interests, and as an organised structure where people follow common rules and traditions. These shared norms and values, known as institutions, help maintain social order (Durkheim 2016).

Early theories took a structuralist approach, meaning that people’s roles and identities were seen as shaped by their social group and institutions (Bourdieu 1996). Based on this view, past research on music mediation treated target groups as uniform and categorised them by specific traits. This approach often overlooked social inequalities and reinforced stereotypes by linking ethnic backgrounds to specific cultural practices, a tendency referred to as the “fallacy of conflation” (Archer 2005), or culturalisation (Barth 2013). These practices contributed to exclusion and power imbalances, reinforcing a divide between dominant groups and marginalised “others” (Gaupp 2021a; Stoffers 2019).

More recent theories in social studies take a constructivist view, emphasising that social identities are flexible and shaped by different factors, including

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2 German quotes have been translated by the author.

context and personal experiences (Luhmann 2012, 12; Hirschauer 2021). This perspective acknowledges contingencies (Reckwitz 2004, 3) and overlapping identities (Mecheril 2023, 205; Winker and Degele 2015), and warns against simplifying people's identities into one category, a mistake known as "tokenism" (Hess 2015). These ideas have influenced music mediation, encouraging a shift toward open dialogue and negotiation processes with diverse dialogue groups (Schippling and Voit 2023, 179), in recognition of the fact that people engage with culture in varied ways (Peterson 1992). A more inclusive approach values participation, reflects diversity, and encourages broad cultural engagement (Gaupp 2016).

However, despite efforts to promote dialogue and individual perspectives, many approaches still assume that people have limited power to challenge dominant gatekeepers and institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1994). The next section explores newer theories that focus on empowering individuals and groups to take an active role in shaping their cultural experiences.

## Individual and Collective Empowerment

The crisis of representation (Geertz 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986) in anthropology, combined with the rise of post-structuralist and post-colonial critiques from around the 1960s and 1970s, has led to an increasing focus on constructivist approaches in social and cultural studies. This shift, known as the "reflexive turn" (Bachmann-Medick 2016; Gaupp 2021a), emphasises the importance of individual agency in understanding group dynamics, especially when contrasted with older, more structuralist viewpoints (Bachmann-Medick 2016, 103). These new approaches acknowledge that power relations influence how we categorise and label people, but they also highlight how individuals can act within and challenge these structures. This creates space for both resistance and regulation: individuals can resist oppressive norms while simultaneously confronting how these norms are enforced (Stäheli 2000, 62–63).

A key debate within sociology centres on the balance between the social structures which shape people's experience and individual agency, or the ability of people to act independently (Kirchberg 2017). In his major work *The Constitution of Society* (1984), Anthony Giddens elaborated the structuration theory, which offers a framework that blends both perspectives, showing how social structures and individual actions are deeply interconnected and mutually influential. This theory can be applied to understand how individuals in various cultural or social settings influence, and are influenced by their environments.

In the broader social and political sphere, liberation movements have emerged to challenge exclusionary practices and unequal living conditions. Movements like *Black Lives Matter*, *#metoo*, and *Fridays for Future* are pushing back against established power structures and advocating for social justice on a global scale. These movements have also sparked internal critiques within their own ranks, similar to the way in which feminist groups have re-examined their structures in order to ensure inclusivity.

In German-speaking countries, these global trends can be seen in the evolving cultural policies and practices, particularly in music mediation. Efforts are being made to promote diversity and to empower under-represented groups. Educational approaches that emphasise participation (Gaupp 2016) encourage a shift away from external labels (addressing) – such as identifying young people with a migration background – as the focus moves towards self-definition (re/addressing), e.g. BIPOC. Changing the terminology, from exclusionary to inclusive, is just one part of this transformation. The goal is not just to update language but to address the deeper, systemic inequalities that affect these communities and challenge longstanding power dynamics in established social institutions.

These efforts, however, have had limited success, as deeply rooted inequalities persist in the cultural sector (Gaupp 2020). To address this, the emphasis is shifting from individual agency, as often discussed in sociology, to collective action. An intersectional perspective is used to highlight how different social categorisations – such as ‘race’, ‘gender’, and ‘class’ – interact and shape experiences. This shift focuses on challenging the dominant power structures rather than reinforcing them. It also critiques canonical sociological approaches such as Giddens’, which often overlook voices from “non-Western” or marginalised communities. These intersectional approaches, in turn, are also criticised for constructing and pinpointing group categories that intersect but are still rigid. In response to this critique, more recent approaches seek to dismantle such rigid group categories, focusing instead on fluid and dynamic relations between individuals (Walgenbach 2007).

This decolonial shift is not limited to academic theory (e.g. Bhabra et al. 2018; Gutiérrez et al. 2016; Icaza and Vázquez 2018; Dussel 1998; Mbembe 2016; Gaupp 2021b). There is a growing movement within cultural production itself, where self-organised groups are gaining more visibility and support. These groups, committed to dismantling unequal power structures, are working to promote the decolonisation of cultural fields, pushing against dominant norms and stereotypes (Bundesministerium für Kunst, Kultur, öffentlicher Dienst und Sport 2023). Music mediation, for example, offers a powerful opportunity for such work by creating spaces where marginalised voices can redefine them-

selves, rather than be defined by external labels. In practice, music initiatives that emphasise diverse participation and representation can be seen as part of a broader effort to transform cultural landscapes and contribute to a more equitable society.

In conclusion, movements that advocate empowerment and decolonisation are increasingly shaping both cultural and academic spheres. These efforts are not just about changing words or policies, but about rethinking power dynamics and creating opportunities for marginalised groups to reclaim agency. By focusing on collective empowerment and intersectionality, these movements offer concrete paths toward social and cultural transformation.

## The Decolonisation of Music Mediation? Looking Ahead

The various perspectives aimed at decolonising the cultural field, including those discussed above, share the common goals of challenging unequal representation, uncovering power imbalances, and avoiding exclusionary practices. In music mediation, this involves a “social orientation of music mediation” (Voit 2023, 71), e.g. breaking down the traditional divides between so-called ‘highbrow culture’ and ‘community culture’ or between us and them through inclusive, participatory approaches. For example, projects that encourage community building (Stibi 2023), and transcultural perspectives<sup>3</sup> (Bernroitner and Crnko 2023, 397) help bridge these gaps. These initiatives are often shaped by the communities themselves and aim to redefine established cultural labels, promoting a more equitable exchange. One example of this shift can be seen when individuals from the Global South, who were historically treated as minorities, reclaim their identity by referring to themselves as part of the global majority<sup>4</sup> (Tan 2021). This self-definition helps reveal power dynamics and emphasises collective empowerment.

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3 See for example Forum Transcultural Perspectives of the *Netzwerk Junge Ohren* [Network Young Ears], <https://www.jungeohren.de/transkulturelle-perspektiven/> (accessed June 5, 2025).

4 Here too, as with other othering mechanisms, the danger of adopting such a self-designation from a privileged position and using it to describe others must be reflected upon. Furthermore, even using this self-designation, there are diverse positions and dynamics, each with different contexts and power relations, which cannot be subsumed under just one collective self-designation. For example, a person in a South-Eastern Asian country may belong to the minority but dominant group there, but in the global context want to associate themselves with the global majority (Yachita 2022).

Despite the growth of community-driven efforts, political and funding structures in the cultural sector largely remain tied to dominant, traditional norms. For example, although networks like the *PostHeimat* network<sup>5</sup>, which represents actors from the global majority, receive significant funding and temporary recognition from the German Federal Cultural Foundation, these efforts are not always sustained or supported by larger, established cultural organisations. Similarly, initiatives promoting “feel-good” (Ahmed 2012, 69) concepts like participatory music or cultural democracy – ideas that emphasise public involvement in cultural life – face challenges. According to article 27 of the International Charter of Human Rights, people should have the right to “freely participate in cultural life”<sup>6</sup>, but this participation must be meaningful. This means that cultural organisations need to engage *with* communities as active participants rather than designing content *for* passive audiences (Matarasso in this volume).

Looking ahead, the institutionalisation of music mediation offers pathways for deeper, more sustainable decolonisation. To make this happen, it is crucial to broaden the range of voices and perspectives involved in decolonial approaches. This diversity can help identify and challenge institutional hegemonies, allowing for more inclusive practices. For instance, concepts like adhering to the practices of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011), diversity, and inclusion (Gaupp 2021a; 2021b; Stoffers 2019) can help foster a more open and dynamic cultural field. The decolonisation process cannot simply be about avoiding addressing, and resorting to re/addressing through individual agency; it requires ongoing collective agency that continuously redefines and negotiates the practice of music mediation. Hegemonic practices at institutions have to be unlearned, in order to allow power to be distributed more equally among a range of multiplural networks.<sup>7</sup> This shift calls for a deeper examination of power dynamics, where cultural practices are not controlled by a few dominant organisations, but are instead shared across a multiplicity of voices and experiences. By supporting such pluralism, music mediation can become a powerful tool for promoting sustainable change in the cultural sector.

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5 See <https://postheimat.com/de/> (accessed April 18, 2025).

6 See <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (accessed April 18, 2025).

7 The event “*Critiques and Disruptions of Power in the Arts*”, organised by about 40 different members of the co-curation board at mdw – University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna in April 2024, was an attempt to try out such concepts in practice (see <http://www.mdw.ac.at/ikm/veranstaltungen/critique-of-power-in-the-arts>, accessed April 18, 2025).

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