The role of sensitising experiences in music performance anxiety in adolescent musicians
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Aim and objectives

This study assessed the degree to which negative sensitising experiences contribute to later self-report of music performance anxiety (MPA) in adolescent musicians attending schools for the gifted and talented.

Context

MPA occurs in all musicians, from amateur (Steptoe & Fidler, 1987) to professional, soloists, orchestral musicians and operatic choral artists (Kenny, Davis & Oates, 2004; Steptoe, 1989). Up to a third of adolescent music students report being adversely affected by MPA (Fehm & Schmidt, 2005; Osborne & Kenny, 2004), which can have negative consequences for educational achievement (Maroon, 2003) and performance evaluation (Kubzansky & Stewart, 1999).

Sensitizing or conditioning experiences have been implicated in the onset of a number of anxiety disorders, particularly specific phobias. MPA shares some common features with the anxiety disorders, in particular social phobia and specific phobias, given that MPA is context specific and usually does not impair global areas of social functioning. The role of sensitizing experiences in the development of MPA in adolescent music students attending schools for the gifted has not yet been assessed.

We considered Barlow's (2002) developmental model of anxiety to have heuristic value in understanding the development of MPA. Triple vulnerabilities are proposed to account for the development of an anxiety disorder. Genetic predisposition (i.e., generalized biological vulnerability) and sensitizing early life experiences (ii. generalized psychological vulnerability) may be sufficient to produce a generalized anxiety disorder. However, the third set of vulnerabilities (iii. specific psychological vulnerability whereby anxiety comes to be associated with certain environmental stimuli through learning processes) appears necessary to produce focal or specific anxiety disorders such as panic disorder or specific phobias. For example, in young performers who are high in trait anxiety (i), who come from home environments in which expectations for excellence are high but
support for achieving excellence is low (ii), exposure to early, frequent evaluations and self-evaluations of their performances in a competitive environment (iii) may be sufficient to trigger MPA.

Negative cognitions may have a more important role in causing performance disruption than the physiological and behavioural components of anxiety (Bruce & Barlow, 1990). In MPA, arousal appears to be subject to cognitive appraisals and may or may not optimize performance, depending on how it is interpreted by the performer (Cleaver, 1997; Salmon, 1990). Most and least anxious performers differ in their fear of negative audience reactions, as well as in their awareness of poor preparation and poor performance (Wolfe, 1989). Musicians with high MPA have significantly greater fear of negative evaluation than low MPA musicians (Osborne & Franklin, 2002).

This research tested two hypotheses:

1) Music students who reported a negative music performance experience would self-report higher levels of MPA than those who had not had previous negative performance experience;

2) Negative cognitions will be more predictive of adolescent MPA than the somatic and emotional components of the sensitising experience.

Methodology

Participants

Students (124 boys; 174 girls) from three performance secondary schools in Sydney, Australia agreed to participate. The mean age of the sample was 14.23 years (S.D. = 1.70 years, range: 11–19 years).

Measures

1) Demographics.

2) Music Performance Anxiety Inventory for Adolescents (MPAI-A) (Osborne & Kenny, 2004).

3) State-Trait Anxiety Inventory – Trait (STAI) (Spielberger, 1983).


5) Description of worst performance.
Results

Descriptions were obtained from 232 students [84 boys; 148 girls]. Descriptions were classified according to six domains: situational and behavioural factors, affective, cognitive, and somatic symptoms of anxiety, and outcome. Coding rules were developed to classify statements into the six domains. Coding reliability was assessed by the two authors blind coding a selection of accounts. Overall agreement was 98%. One point was allocated for each statement that corresponded to a negative statement/descriptor in each category. Scores were summed to provide a linear scale which was compared to MPAI-A and standardised trait anxiety scores, age and gender. MPAI-A was best predicted by trait anxiety and gender, and negative cognitions improved the prediction of MPA over trait anxiety and gender alone. These three factors accounted for 28% of the variability in MPA. No other factors added to the prediction. Females reported more emotional distress than males and had significantly higher total scores.

Key Contribution

These findings are consistent with established relationships between MPA and gender, trait anxiety and cognition. Females consistently self-report higher anxiety than males in music performance, tests, sports performance and other specific performance tasks (Osborne, Kenny & Holsomback, In press). Trait anxiety demonstrates moderate to strong positive correlations with MPA in child, adolescent and adult MPA research (Kenny et al., 2004, Maroon, 2003; Osborne et al., In press; Ryan, 2003).

Statements pertaining to fear of being negatively evaluated by others and negative self-evaluation comprised sixty percent of the total cognitions reported in this study. These themes are echoed throughout child, adolescent and adult MPA research (Kirchner, 2003; Osborne & Franklin, 2002; Ryan, 2003; Steptoe & Fidler, 1987), and other social-evaluative anxieties such as test anxiety (Prins, Groot & Hanewald, 1994; Zatz & Chassin, 1985), public speaking (Pelletier, 2003; Woody, 1996), and sports performance (Fletcher & Hanton 2001; Hanton, O’Brien & Mellalieu, 2003).

The significance of performance-specific negative cognitions and generalized anxiety in predicting MPA suggests that child and adolescent musicians could benefit from a performance preparation program that includes a cognitive-restructuring component. MPA intervention programs with older musicians demonstrates that cognitive restructuring techniques that identify and challenge self-defeating, negative and task-irrelevant thought patterns in addition to the likelihood and consequences of negative evaluation, significantly reduce MPA compared to behavioral rehearsal or musical analysis training (Harris, 1987; Kendrick, Craig, Lawson & Davidson, 1982; Sweeney & Horan, 1982).

This study provides initial evidence of the association between retrospective recall of worst performance experiences and the importance of cognitions to elevations in MPA in later years.
These insights will guide research into the development of MPA in this population, as well as the use of psychological intervention within a performance preparation program.

Key words: music performance anxiety, adolescents, etiology, cognitions, treatment

References


