
Teaching Tools & Techniques

Say It in a Song: Using Popular Music to Teach About Marriage and Romantic Relationships

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Purpose

Explore the use of popular music in the family studies classroom with a specific focus on the use of popular music to teach about marriages and romantic relationships.

Objectives

Provide a list of songs that can be used to teach about marriage, relationship disillusionment and communication problems, relationship dissolution, divorce, and remarriage.

Describe three techniques for using popular music.

Rationale

Today's human development and family studies undergraduates grow up and live in a media rich world. In fact, recent U.S. Census Bureau (2007) projections estimate that the average U.S. citizen will spend 3,518 hours consuming various forms of media over the next year. Not surprisingly, college instructors have attested to the benefits of incorporating a variety of media types into their teaching (Ahlkvist, 2001; Albers & Bach, 2003; Baker-Sperry, Behringer, & Grauerholz, 1999; Martinez, 1995; Scanlan & Feinberg, 2000; Seery, Cobb, Harpel, & Hertzog, 2002; Sollie & Kaetz, 1992). Among the most popular forms of media incorporated in the social sciences are television and film. For instance, Scanlon and Feinberg described how the animated television series, *The Simpsons*, could be used effectively to illustrate sociological concepts and

promote critical thinking in an Introductory to Sociology course. Strategies for incorporating popular films into Introduction to Marriage and Family courses have been presented (Author citation, 2002).

In addition to the use of visual media, however, academics are investigating the ways in which popular music can be used to enhance learning. Dating back to the 1960s (Lewis, 1999), sociologists have been writing about the pedagogical potential of music for highlighting key sociological concepts (Ahlkvist, 2001; Albers & Bach, 2003; Elterman, 1983; Martinez, 1994, Walczak & Reuter, 1994). For instance, Albers and Bach (2003), Walczak and Reuter (1994), Ahlkvist (1999, 2001), and Martinez (1994, 1995, 1998) describe how they employ music in diverse sociology courses including Introduction to Sociology; Social Theory; Sociology of Deviant Behavior; and Race, Class, and Gender. Similarly, instructors in psychology have employed music in Abnormal Psychology (Potkay, 1982), Child Development (Daehler & Miller, 2004), and Personal Adjustment (Hughes, 1984). Little attention, however, has been drawn to the way in which music can be incorporated into the family studies classroom (see Ho & Settles, 1984 as an exception). Given that family related issues are generally abundant in popular lyrics, music holds great potential as a teaching tool in family studies courses. The purpose of this paper is first to review the ways in which music has been incorporated into the college classroom and then to provide specific suggestions for using this genre in teaching about family life. In doing so, we fill a gap in the existing literature by focusing specifically on the use of music to teach about marriage and romantic relationships in the family science discipline.

Incorporating Music in the Classroom

Previous research in the social sciences suggests that there are a variety of ways to incorporate music into one's teaching. More generally, the use of music appears to fall into the

following three categories: (1) fostering the learning environment, (2) illustrating course concepts, and, (3) developing comprehension and analytic skills. In terms of fostering the learning environment, the use of music has been found to encourage student involvement and participation (Albers & Bach, 2003; Elterman, 1983), to stimulate class discussion (Martinez, 1994, 1995, 1998), to facilitate self disclosure (Ho & Settles, 1984; Hughes, 1984), to promote emotional connections to the material (Ho & Settles, 1984; Hughes, 1984), and to build connections between teachers and students (Albers & Bach, 2003). Albers and Bach reported that 75% of their students attributed the use of music in the classroom to their comfort level with the class.

In addition, music has been successfully used in the college classroom as a means of illustrating important course concepts. Daehler and Miller (2004) explained how they coupled music with projected images and text prior to the beginning of a class in order to set the stage for the day's topic (see also Albers & Bach, 2003). Their students reported that this practice was interesting, relevant to lecture, and should be continued. Similarly, Martinez (1994, 1995, 1998) distributed lyrics to students and then played the corresponding music as a means of generating class discussion about sensitive concepts. For instance, Martinez (1994) described how Lyle Lovett's song, *An Acceptable Level of Ecstasy*, can be used to illustrate African American experiences during Jim Crow. As these examples allude to, incorporating both the audio and visual (lyric) component of music is important for enhancing the learning process in regard to the comprehension of key concepts.

Finally, music can be employed in the classroom in order to encourage the development of analytic skills. Walczak and Reuter (1994), for example, devised a series of homework assignments requiring students to sociologically analyze song lyrics over the course of the

semester. When possible, the corresponding music videos were also shown and discussed in class in order to further assist in students' comprehension. Similarly, Elterman (1983) required students to summarize the major themes emerging from song lyrics as they related to concepts covered in class. In addition, Elterman engaged students in the process of reflexivity by having them analyze personal experiences that supported or disconfirmed the situations discussed in the song. Given students' lack of experience with some issues, course material may be difficult to explain or understand. Music can be used to clarify such abstract theories and concepts (Ahlkvist, 2001). For example, Ahlkvist (2001) used progressive rock music in combination with lecture to teach social theory to one class of students, while at the same time using only lecture to teach another class the same material. Compared to the lecture-only class, the class exposed to the progressive rock scored significantly higher on the social theory component of the final exam, thus providing empirical evidence that the use of music in the classroom "eases students' introduction to social theory and helps them retain a basic understanding of this difficult material" (p. 479).

Given the use of music in the classroom, one may wonder why music is such an attractive pedagogical tool. Further, why is it that the combination of seeing the printed lyrics and hearing the music appears to be particularly effective for the understanding and retention of material? Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences offers a plausible explanation to both questions. According to Gardner (1983), some individuals possess a musical learning style or intelligence. Such individuals are sensitive to sound and rhythm and are drawn to music. Other individuals possess a verbal/linguistic intelligence that involves the use of words. These individuals benefit from reading text. A rich learning environment should take advantage of as many intelligences or learning styles as is possible (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006). Thus, the use of popular

music in the classroom may tap the natural learning style of students who possess musical intelligence, while the provision of printed lyrics will accommodate the learning style of those who possess verbal/linguistic intelligence. Furthermore, according to Dale's (1996) Cone of Learning, greater retention occurs when students both see and hear the material of focus. Thus, when students see the lyrics in print and hear the song at the same time, they are more likely to retain the material. Retention can be enhanced further when the use of music is accompanied by a discussion (Dale, 1996) of the lyrics in relation to class content.

Selecting Music

In selecting music, published accounts have suggested that in addition to mainstream pop music, instructors successfully have employed a variety of music genres. For example, Ahlqvist (1999, 2001) described the use of progressive rock and heavy metal in teaching sociology and Lewis (1999) advocated the use of country music. According to Lewis, country music particularly is useful when teaching about gender roles and family stressors, as the "themes and lyrics of country today are familiar to a very large number of students and can be used in classes to explore contemporary problems and issues" (p. 64). Walczak and Reuter (1994) cautioned, however, that just as instructors seek to tap a variety of learning styles, they should also seek to include a variety of music in their classes. Music may be chosen by instructors, particularly early in a course. Later, students may be given the opportunity to select relevant songs, making them active participants in the learning process (Martinez, 1995; Walczak & Reuter, 1994).

Techniques for Using Music in the Classroom

There are multiple ways to use music when teaching about marriage and romantic relationships. In the following sections we describe general techniques for incorporating music in family studies courses, which entail the use of music during class periods and as out-of-class

assignments. We then provide specific examples related to lyrics from the song list outlined in Table 1.

Illustrating Course Concepts

Popular songs can be used to illustrate a course concept, theory, or issue during a class period. This technique works particularly well for abstract course material and when combined with a mini-lecture delivered either before or after playing the song. The technique involves the instructor selecting a song that illustrates course material. Lyrics are circulated to the students and the instructor plays the song during class, while students follow along with the printed lyrics. It is also helpful to provide students with questions to focus their attention during listening, although this is not always necessary. Following the song, the instructor leads the students in a discussion about the course material as portrayed in the song.

For example, the first author has used the popular song *Daughters* by John Mayer (2003) to demonstrate the concept of internal working model. The following lyrics illustrate the way in which relationships with parents during childhood serve as a blueprint for behaviors in romantic relationships during adulthood:

*I know a girl
She puts the color inside of my world
But she's just like a maze
Where all of the walls all continually change
And I've done all I can
To stand on her steps with my heart in my hands
Now I'm starting to see
Maybe it's got nothing to do with me
Fathers, be good to your daughters
Daughters will love like you do*

To begin the lesson, the instructor distributed lyrics and played the song for the students.

Following the song, students were asked to describe the focal point or message they heard in the song. In addition to speculating that the dissolution of the current relationship was in some way

due to the woman's childhood relationship with her father, the students also discussed the impact of paternal absence and parenting behaviors on adult relationships. The instructor followed the discussion with a mini-lecture on the internal working model, again drawing on the lyrics to illustrate the concept. Informal discussions with students indicated that this exercise clarified the concept by making it more real and assisted them in remembering the material for the exam.

As another example of this technique, Martina McBride's recording of *All the Things We've Never Done* (Bickhardt & Penning, 1995) can be used during a unit on relationship longevity. As a couple celebrates their wedding anniversary, the husband laments about all the things the couple has never done during the marriage, while the wife reflects on the stability of their relationship by crediting all the things they've never done.

*You never walked away
When I needed you to stay
Or made me feel I'm not the one
There've been no broken vows
And the reason we're here now
Is all the things we've never done*

In this case, the instructor could use the song and lyrics as a catalyst for a discussion about issues that contribute to relationship longevity. Following a discussion of the factors illustrated in the lyrics, the instructor can deliver a mini-lecture on factors identified in empirical research, such as friendship, communication, flexibility, conflict resolution, commitment, and intimacy (e.g., Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Olson & Olson, 2000). As an alternative to the in-class discussions described above, the instructor could ask the students to free write a paragraph in which they describe how the course material was illustrated in the song. Students can either turn in their paragraph for participation points or the instructor can select and read a sampling of the paragraphs as a springboard for class discussion.

Identify and Critique Assignment

When the goal is to enhance critical thinking about course material, the “identify and critique” assignment is one option available to instructors. The assignment involves students locating one or more songs that illustrate a course concept, theory, or issue that has been discussed in the class. Students then analyze the content of the lyrics and write a paper, citing corresponding course materials. Assignments in this category often incorporate out-of-class homework, given that they require more time and resources than are typically available to students during a class period.

The first author has used this type of assignment in a Family Stress course to exemplify relationship stressors, such as divorce, although it can be used to investigate any issue, topic, theory, or concept. In setting up the assignment, the instructor can provide the students with an approved song list, or the students can be required to search for and locate a song on their own. In the later case, the instructor may wish to provide guidelines about types of songs that would be considered appropriate for the assignment.

In preparation for the assignment, the instructor should develop specific questions to guide the students’ analysis. Along these lines, the instructor may wish to specify particular course concepts or issues that students are required to investigate within the lyrics. Providing specific parameters can eliminate the risk of students choosing a topic not central to the course. In developing specific questions for the assignment, we suggest students first be asked to discuss the presence of particular course content in the lyrics, using the lyrics to illustrate the concept and to demonstrate the level of student comprehension. Next, students can be asked to compare and contrast the experience portrayed in the song to what they learned in class. How is the experience similar to or different from what they have learned? The first author has also found it helpful to ask students to discuss the tone of the song. Does the song send a positive message

about relationships and marriage, or does it reflect a negative message? How does the tone reflect larger discourses about marriage and family life in our society today? Finally, if the lyrics merit such a discussion, students can speak to whether they perceive the experience portrayed in the song to be realistic, noting ways in which it does or does not reflect reality as well as reasons for any discrepancies.

The second author has used a variation of this assignment to explore Lee's (1973) love styles. Students first took a self-assessment, The Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Dicke, 1998), that identified their dominant love style(s) and then wrote a reflective summary of that style which incorporated examples from song lyrics that illustrated their corresponding styles. Students tended to utilize songs from a variety of genres including rock, country and R&B. For instance, one student brought in the lyrics to R. Kelly's (*Sex*) *Love is What We Makin* to illustrate Eros, another used *Every Breath You Take* by the Police to exemplify Mania, a third provided lyrics to Garth Brooks' *If Tomorrow Never Comes* as an example of Storge, and another employed Shania Twain's *From This Moment On* to represent Agape. Students then were asked to discuss which love styles were the easiest or most difficult to locate in popular music and what this might say about the discourse of love in today's society. This activity could also lead to a discussion of gendered perceptions of love by comparing and contrasting the tone of and categories represented by lyrics performed by women and men.

Finally, this type of assignment could be used to draw attention to changes in family. Virtually no songs focus on issues related to remarriage. Internet searches for popular songs about remarriage produced only three—Brad Paisley's *Didn't Have to Be*, Dusty Springfield's *Second Time Around*, and Bon Jovi's *Wedding Day*. A handful of more obscure songs were uncovered during the search, but were not included in our list as they are not widely available for

distribution and use. In fact, it appears that these more obscure lyrics were written by “less-than-famous” individuals who found themselves in need of a song appropriate for a remarriage ceremony. Based on the overall neglect of remarriage in popular music, an interesting assignment could involve students searching for popular songs about remarriage. In addition to producing the lyrics for the songs they uncover during their search, students could write a paper in which they examine the messages about remarriage in the lyrics, comparing and contrasting the experiences portrayed in the lyrics to what they have learned in class. Finally, students could discuss possible reasons for the absence of remarriage songs in popular music and consider the messages such an absence sends about marriage and family structure.

Compare and Contrast Activity

Akin to the “identify and critique” assignment, the “compare and contrast” activity provides opportunities for fostering the development of critical thinking among students. In particular, the activity requires students to consider opposing experiences or viewpoints of an issue. While the activity can be altered easily for an out-of-class assignment, we find that it provides excellent opportunities for discussion within the classroom. For this activity, the instructor selects two or more songs that illustrate contrasting viewpoints of marriage or romantic relationship issues covered in the course. After dividing the students into small groups, the instructor distributes the lyrics to the songs and plays each for the students. Specific questions should be developed by the instructor and distributed either before or after the songs are played. After listening to the songs, students discuss the questions in small groups and then the activity is debriefed as a whole class.

The “compare and contrast” activity is particularly fruitful in providing a forum for discussing real or perceived gender differences in relationships. While an instructor can attempt

to provide both sides and perspectives on an issue, solely using a lecture may fall short of truly capturing the essence of such differences. Incorporating music into the class may more fully illuminate both similarities and differences. To illustrate, the songs *Buy Me a Rose* and *Stealing Kisses* both reveal the changes that can occur in a marriage or relationship over time. Luther Vandross' recording of *Buy Me a Rose* (Funk & Hickenlooper, 1999) highlights the incongruence between the behaviors a husband perceives as fulfilling his wife's desire for a mate and the wife's actual desires.

*He works hard to give her all he thinks she wants
But it tears her apart cause nothing's for her heart
He pulls in late to wake her up with a kiss goodnight
If he could only read her mind, she'd say...
Buy me a rose
Call me from work
Open the door for me, what would it hurt?
Show me you love me by the look in your eyes*

The lyrics alone reveal the possible incongruence in perceptions of needs in addition to opening up a forum for discussion about masculine and feminine expressions of love. The context of gender becomes even more evident when the male perspective is coupled with a female perspective, such as in Lori McKenna's (2004) *Stealing Kisses* (performed by Faith Hill).

*I was stealing kisses from a boy
Now I'm begging affection from a man
In my house dress
Don't you know who I am?
Standing in your kitchen*

After listening to both songs, students are asked to discuss what the lyrics reveal about feminine and masculine expectations for intimacy and affection. These expectations could then be compared with the roles and behaviors necessary for maintaining long-term relationships. Students could first be asked to reflect on how well these perspectives fit their own or the textbook's definition of love. They could also be asked which dimensions of intimacy are

reflected in the song and how intimacy changes over the course of a relationship. Finally, students could discuss factors that may inhibit intimacy or set up unrealistic expectations for a relationship, linking themes in the lyrics to research presented in the text or during a mini-lecture.

The “compare and contrast” activity can also be a novel means of examining the issue of divorce. In particular, multiple songs can be used to explore male and female experiences and reactions to divorce, or the differences between adults and children. For instance, in their song *Broken Home*, Papa Roach (Dick, 2000) details the feelings of a child during the divorce process, including the feeling of being trapped between the parents, as well as confusion over the parents’ feelings toward the child.

*I can't seem to fight these feelings
I'm caught in the middle of this
My wounds are not healing
I'm stuck in between my parents
I wish I had someone to talk to
Someone I could confide in
I just want to know the truth...
I know my mother loves me
But does my father even care...
I'm crying day and night now*

The lyrics for Cher’s *You Better Sit Down Kids* (Bono, 1967), on the other hand, shed light on the adult’s experience of divorce in the song, while also illustrating the impact on the children.

*Keep in mind your mother's gonna need
Your help a whole lot more than she ever did before
No more fights over little things because I won't be here to stop them anymore
I know you don't want this, neither do we
But sometimes things happen that we can't foresee
Now try to be calm, kids and don't look so sad
Just cause I am leaving I'll still be your dad
Just remember I love you and though I'm not here
Just call if you need me and I'll always be near*

Finally, Suzanne Vega's (2001) *Widow's Walk* can be used to further demonstrate the adult perspective by focusing on the woman's emotions following divorce.

*Consider me a widow, boys, and I will tell you why.
It's not the man, but it's the marriage that was drowned.
So I walk the walk and wait with watchful eye out to the sky,
Looking for a kind of vessel I have never found.
Though I saw it splinter I keep looking out to sea,
Like a dog with little sense, I keep returning,
To the very area where I did see the thing go down
as if there's something at the site I should be learning.*

Discussion of the songs involves asking students to reflect on what the lyrics say about the emotional aspects of divorce for adults and for children. Students are subsequently asked to link the lyrics to factors that facilitate and hamper family reorganization (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999), focusing on similarities and differences in the child's versus the adult's experiences, feelings, and transitions. Finally, students are asked to compare and contrast the experiences and reactions portrayed in the songs to what they have learned about divorce through course readings, while encouraging students to develop possible explanations for any discrepancies between class material and the lyrics.

Conclusion

There are a variety of methods for incorporating music into family studies courses. The three strategies we have found useful and described are illustrating course concepts, identify and critique, and compare and contrast. Given the relational undertones of lyrics across popular musical genres, the possibilities are virtually endless. For this reason, our specific examples spotlight just some of the songs that can be used to teach about relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution. Several others topics in family studies, however, can be illuminated with popular music as well. For instance, a number of songs address the topic of family violence. Toni Childs' *I've Got to Go Now* and Shania Twain's *Black Eyes Blue Tears*

chronicle some of the challenges women face in their efforts to leave abusive relationships. *Me and Emily* by Rachel Proctor describes the abuse a woman suffered at the hands of her partner. The Nickelback song, *Never Again*, and Suzanne Vega's *Luka* can be used to discuss the effects of domestic violence on young children. Finally, in *Daddy's Song* Toni Childs describes a child who has been sexually molested by her father. In terms of parenting, Rodney Atkins' song *Watching You* illustrates the powerful impact of parents on children, while Harry Chapin's classic song *Cats in the Cradle* demonstrates the phenomenon of modeling. In addition, Tim McGraw's *My Little Girl* and Bob Carlisle's *Butterfly Kisses* can be used to show the changes that occur in the parent-child relationship over time.

Regardless of whether the techniques suggested in this paper take place inside the classroom as activities and discussions or outside of the classroom as assignments, the use of music represents a fun and creative way to foster learning about marriage and romantic relationships. More specifically, the use of music can create a positive learning environment which recognizes and draws upon the natural strengths and learning styles of students. This, in turn, assists instructors with the often difficult tasks of making abstract concepts more concrete and promoting analytic and critical thinking skills amongst their students.

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Table 1

Songs about Romantic Relationship and Marriage Issues by Topic

Topic Area	Song	Artist	Genre
Marriage	The Secret Marriage	Sting	Adult contemporary
	That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should Be	Carly Simon	Adult contemporary
	Cross My Heart	Michael W. Smith	Christian
	All the Things We've Never Done	Martina McBride	Country
	I'd Love You all Over Again	Allen Jackson	Country
	To the Aisle	Five Satins	Doo Wop
	Wouldn't It Be Nice	Beach Boys	Pop
	Chapel of Love	Beach Boys or Dixie Cups	Pop
	Wedding Day	Bee Gees	Pop/Adult Contemporary
	My Love	Justin Timberlake	Pop
	Wives & Lovers	Christina Aguilera or Frank Sinatra	Pop/Rock
	The River	Bruce Springsteen	Pop/Rock
	When I'm 64	Beatles	Pop/Rock
	Let's Get Married	Jagged Edge	R&B
	4 Ever	Lil' Mo	Rap or R&B
Relationship Disillusionment & Communication Problems	Stealing Kisses	Faith Hill	Country
	Hey Cinderella	Suzy Bogguss	Country
	Unfaithful	Rihanna	R&B
	Bad Connections	Cheryl Wheeler	Folk
	Ball and Chain	Sublime	Punk/Alternative
	Cold as Christmas	Elton John	Pop
	Superwoman	Karen White	Pop/R&B
	Work To Do	Vanessa Williams	Pop/R&B
	Unfaithful	Rihanna	R & B
	Buy Me a Rose	Luther Vandross	R & B
	Everything Changes	Staind	Rock
	Right Here	Staind	Rock

Relationship Dissolution	50 Ways To Leave Your Lover	Paul Simon	Adult Contemporary
	Daughters	John Mayer	Adult Contemporary/Pop
	He Stopped Loving Her Today	George Jones	Country
	Husbands & Wives	Brooks & Dunn or Neil Diamond	Country
	It's Not Over		Country
	Behind These Hazel Eyes	Kelly Clarkson	Pop/Rock
	What's Left of Me	Nick Lachey	Pop
	I Will Survive	Gloria Gayner or Cake	Pop; Rock/Alternative
	Goodbye to You	Michelle Branch or Patty Smyth	Pop/Rock
Divorce: Adult Perspective	It's Not Over	Daughtry	Rock
	Widow's Walk	Suzanne Vega	Adult contemporary/Folk
	D.I.V.O.R.C.E.	Tammy Wynette	Country
	She's Gonna Make It	Garth Brooks	Country
	You Better Sit Down Kids	Cher	Pop
	Band of Gold	Freda Payne or Bonnie Tyler	R&B; Rock
	Cheaper to Keep Her	Blues Brothers	R&B
	When Did You Stop Loving Me; When Did I Stop Loving You?	Marvin Gaye	R&B
	Divorce Song	Liz Phair (some explicit lyrics)	Rock/Alternative
Let's Stick Together	Ferry Bryan	Rock	
Divorce: Child Perspective	Broken Home	Papa Roach	Funk/Rock/Rap
	Because of You	Kelly Clarkson	Pop/Rock
	Family Portrait	Pink	Rock/Pop
	Wonderful	Everclear	Rock/Alternative
	Stay Together for the Kids	Blink 182	Rock/Alternative
	For You	Staind	Rock
Remarriage	Too Bad	Nickleback	Rock
	Didn't Have to Be	Brad Paisley	Country
	Wedding Day	Bon Jovi	Rock/Adult Contemporary
	Second Time Around	Dusty Springfield	Rock/Adult Contemporary

