

## Project **SPP** Soundscapes in Public Places

Bernd ROHRMANN (*University of Melbourne, Australia*)

Memo^99

**THE END OF IT**

20-05-09

### ❖ Project SPP in 2009 - Continue or close it down?

After running the research on "Soundscapes in Public Places" for several years, I designed an expert workshop, the 2009 '2M3R' = Melbourne Multidisciplinary Risk Research Roundtable, about "*Physiological & socio-psychological risks from loud music in public venues*".

It was planned to be a crucial & critical event for the evaluation of the findings gained so far and their implications for future activities. The event took place in April 2009.

The multifold outcomes of this workshop, as well as general considerations of the utility and feasibility of my research agenda, led to my decision to *completely abandon* Project SPP. In the following, I will outline my thoughts.

### ❖ The history of Project SPP

= AIM =

The project started in 2003, with a study in Melbourne in which sound level measurements were taken and customers interviewed in a set of cafes and restaurants. This led to a series of follow-up studies.

The research aim was defined as: To observe and describe which kinds of sound occur in different public places (including teaching venues, pubs/cafes/bistros/restaurants, music venues, cinemas, theatres, transportation, shopping centres, sport venues), which average and peak levels the sounds create, how people exposed to such soundscapes respond, and what the impacts on socio-psychological processes such as interaction and communication are.

= BUDGET =

This project has no formal funding. All studies were financed privately. This includes data collections in Europe and the organization of workshops and conference contributions.

= SUB-STUDIES =

The project consists of 13+3 sub-studies; see Memo^3 and Memo^7 for detailed information about the design and timing of these studies. Overview:

- o Studies conducted in Melbourne: MCR, SLC, SIM, SIE, MLM, IMC, SSM, MVM.
- o Studies in Hamburg/Germany: MLH, SIH, SHH.
- o Studies in Innsbruck/Austria: SII. Study MLI is not yet conducted.
- o Studies in Bochum/Germany: MLB.
- o Studies planned for Utrecht/Netherlands: SSU and MLU; these could not yet be realized.

The studies were either a combination of interviews and sound level measurements, or only acoustics or only surveys. The studies in Europe were conducted in collaboration with Psychology or Sociology researchers. All data were collected by a trained team of student assistants.

### PUBLICATIONS

I have twice presented the SPP results on congresses and given several colloquium presentations. Once I got my text into a conference booklet. A full presentation in a journal, or as a book chapter, is intended. This won't be easy, because the project is not 'classical' research, the issue is too cross-cultural and interdisciplinary, and my main findings are Australian and may therefore not be of much interest elsewhere - but I will try it anyway.

## ❖ Reasons for ending Project SPP

### *SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNICATION IMPAIRMENTS DOUBTED*

The main reason for me to devise Project SPP and to run it for several years was the assumption that loud music in pubs, cafes, restaurants, gyms and shops does have an impact on social interactions, especially on communication style and intensity, and that there is a risk for conversations between people to be impaired while they are customers in a venue with intense music provision.

Yet some participants of the '2M3R' Workshop doubt that communication via talking is impeded by venue music. Consequently, they don't assume that there really is a communication problem in such venues. If this were true, verbal communication is not at risk from 'music-loaded' soundscapes, which seem to be standard in the current culture for social environments ... So may be the SPP research is needless?

### *CRITIQUE OF MY METHODOLOGY*

I always knew that my "SPP" project is not top-level quality, but I thought it's good enough to grab the essence of what I tried to investigate, and therefore I gave it priority within my last four projects and did not hesitate to finance it. Yet some comments during the '2M3R' Workshop about my methodology and data were harsh, questioning the validity of the sound level measurements, or disputing the interview and scaling procedures I had developed to investigate how customer deal with loud music situations. This devalues the project's findings - yet in my view the more sophisticated technologies I know of where not feasible during field studies in venues where the 'access time' tends to be restricted.

### *(UN-)FEASIBILITY OF FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS*

Given my professional situation -- I have only 7 months left for my research program before I must retire and thereby will lose my office and my Environmental Psychology Lab at the university -- it would be difficult for me to either repeat previous sub-studies or to utilize some advanced psychometric approaches I had in mind in extensions of my Project SPP.

Furthermore, I do not have any support for my cross-cultural research in my Dept, plus, ongoing projects may overdemand my financial resources. In sum, I think it is unfeasible for me to continue my empirical research on "Soundscapes in Public Places."

## ❖ A final philosophical consideration

Based on my ethical and anthropological tenets, I always had and still have a vivid belief that verbal communication is fundamental for human beings - and so I worry for years that this is (a) getting harder, (b) is losing some of its richness and depth, and (c) is less desired by many people. <By the way, this has nothing to do with my hearing impairment>.

Before the workshop I never doubted that this is a significant problem and deserves to be acknowledged and dealt with -- yet now I have to wonder, is this just a biased idiosyncrasy of mine? Do I not sufficiently comprehend the current social world? Well, I am still convinced that life in an environment with loud music soundscapes about everywhere puts human communication at risk - unwanted socio-psychological impacts may occur.

As you know by now, I will not continue my "SPP" research - - but I ask *you* to keep your observations and thoughts open, to use your social context for raising this issue if indicated, to enhance research to further investigate whether exposure to high-level music does impede on communication quality or not, and to reflect on the relevance of all this for our culture ...

= CONTACT =

A/Prof. Bernd ROHRMANN Dept. of Psychology, University of Melbourne, Vic 3010, Australia  
E-Mail: rohrmann@unimelb.edu.au WebSite: <http://www.rohrmannresearch.net>