

To Be or Not To Be: Gender and Relationships in a Youth Choir

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Adolescence is considered a time of transition, of separation, of individuation, and autonomy seeking, as described by early 20th-century psychologists. This developmental concept has influenced every aspect of western culture, including music and education. In the latter half of the 20th century, psychologists began studying women and girls as a distinct group and discovered that the attributes of adolescence were not universal, but somewhat tempered for girls, as the importance of maintaining relationships does not diminish as it does for boys. While theorists no longer consider females' relational ties to be pathological, conflicts between the expectation of separation, individuation and autonomy, and the desire to be connected often surface in adolescent girls.

Engaging in voluntary associations can be part of the process of separation and individuation in adolescence, depending on the value placed on the association within the wider culture. The choice of activity or connection has disparate consequences for males than for females. Choral music is one such activity. By voluntarily joining a choir, boys and girls may exhibit behaviour that represents individuation and autonomy if it disturbs the cultural norms. If the association does not disrupt the cultural norms, then the activity maintains relationships that are valued by the culture and individuation and autonomy may not be facilitated. Psychologists report that during adolescence girls tend to react more negatively to stress than boys, and by selecting associations that are supported by the wider culture, girls are less likely to encounter stress associated with autonomous actions.

Twenty-eight young people, ages 14-18, were interviewed for this study. There were 8 boys and 20 girls, representing 50% of a female choir and 47% of a male choir, and 48% of the mixed choir that resulted from the combining of the single-gender choirs. They live in a community that is predominantly Caucasian, upper- to middle-class, and there is very little choral music in the local school systems. These choirs are part of a choral training enterprise, where tuition is a requisite for belonging to the organization. This paper addresses the analysis of responses to questions about friends and about participation in a mixed chorus. All names used in the paper are fictitious.

Friends

Close friends of Males

Responding to questions about close friends participating in the choir and whether the involvement of their friends affected their feeling about participating resulted in two themes for males: (1) having their closest friends in the choir, and (2) making friends after joining the choir. Jim describes the difficulties encountered by not knowing anyone in the choir prior to joining:

I think before I started, it [having close friends in the choir] affected my willingness to go participate, because there was no one that I knew, there was no one to say "oh come out, try it, you'll like it" . . . there was no connection between me and anyone in the

organization . . . but not having someone that was involved in the choir certainly made it more difficult to make the leap and say "ok, this is something that I'm going to go try." I think that the group of my closest friends sort of understood my personality and what I was doing and why I was doing it, and sort of I'd had conversations with them about the organization, and what my activities were and what sort of things I was doing and why I liked it. And so they had a really good understanding of why I was involved and all sorts of stuff like that.

Although Jim was hesitant about joining the choir, he still had support from his closest friends in the form of unspoken understanding. Richard, grade 9, expresses sympathy toward those who might not have close friends already in the choir:

Well, I like knowing someone that I really know . . . that I can . . . I kind of feel more comfortable . . . than like when I first joined I'd really feel awkward . . . like some people have joined this year and I kind of think well, what if I'd joined like them without knowing anyone. But it's helped me know the other people in the choir better . . . I've been able to come, kind of friends with them too, because [my friend] knows them and I get introduced.

Without peer support, especially the support of their closest friends, these male adolescents can be apprehensive about being associated with the choir. Richard expresses concern about the future of the friendship with his best friend:

Well, I kind of get disappointed . . . because my best friend, he . . . I've asked him to come to concerts a few times but he's not really interested . . . he can't sing . . . he's not musical . . . oriented at all . . . that doesn't really affect my friendship with him . . . sometimes I've asked other friends to join that I think can, but they haven't really told me "no, that's stupid, I don't want to" . . . they've kind of said, "no, I'm busy" or "I can't do it" and I understand that . . . it doesn't really affect my friendships.

Although Richard protests that the response he gets from friends doesn't bother him, his first comment reveals some genuine ambivalence about the situation. Not having friends in choir does make a difference for many students, especially the younger ones.

Making friends with the other choir members is another important aspect of remaining connected with the organization.

Well, I only really know these guys from singing anyways, so . . . yeah, I don't think I would sing if there weren't people [like] that (Bill, grade 10).

Table 1 shows that the most frequent response to the question about their closest friends, was that the boys either had close friends who were already in the choir, or had close friends who did not sing at all.

Table 1. Themes about close friends: Frequency of occurrence

	Number of statements	Males	Females
Already in choir	13	4	9
None sing	12	4	8
Good friends, not closest	6	1	5
Some sing/some don't	4	2	3
After joining choir	2	0	2

Close Friends of Females

Most of the girls had close friends that were already in the choir (see Table 1) or who were supportive of their participation. This was also very important to the girls. Ellen, grade 11, puts it like this:

It's not a lot of fun if you don't know anybody and if everybody ignores you during choir. Because, you know, choir's like this team thing, and if you don't know anybody and if like nobody talks to you and helps you out, then it's no fun. So a lot of the allure of choir is the social aspect.

Carla's story of a friend of hers describes the consequences of not having friends in the choir:

I had a friend who was in the choir before I was, and she was there for the first year, and she left because she had no friends. She didn't know anybody to start with, and she was the sort of person who bubbles over with enthusiasm when it comes to meeting new people, and it wasn't the same experience with [the Choir] I had because she didn't have the friend aspect. She still enjoyed singing, but it's not quite the same.

Carla's comment about the response to her friend's bubbly personality in this particular choir refers to the social structure of the ensemble, but this aspect of the choral experience will be dealt with in another paper.

When close friends were not in the choir, some girls, like Lois (grade 13) also expressed concern about the future of their current friendships:

Well, sometimes, to be honest, I worry a little bit, because my very closest friends are not in the choir, but I have met a lot of new people. And I try not to worry about it because I've been in . . . well this is my third year, so it's getting a little more used to it, but I'm not an overly outgoing person so I did worry about it at first.

A few girls indicated that they had negative responses from friends to their association with the choir, although far fewer of them than the boys. The perception that choral music is an appropriate association for girls may not be universal in all subsets of the wider culture. Tina, another grade 13 student, indicates that a change in the way her friends responded to her participation occurred over the years:

When I first joined they kind of teased me about it, but now, maybe it's the maturity level or not, but they're interested and they like to know what kind of songs I sing. It's changed over the years I guess.

The personal circle of friends is also critical to the continuance of the choral music activity. In Ann's school there are many students who sing in this particular choir. She still believes that she would be strong enough to join the choir anyway, but is glad that she has the peer support.

Well, they're all musical . . . I hang around with musical people at school and they're always doing some kind of musical activity in school. Most of them are in the choir, but some of them don't sing but play instruments and stuff, so it's great . . . I guess it's more encouraging. I'm just thinking that if they didn't feel that way it would be a lot different. But I think I'd still do it, but I just wouldn't talk about it as much . . . because I'm always "[Choir] this" "I'm going to [Choir]" blah, blah, 'cause I really love doing it. But guess it's nice to have friends because I can talk about it and be excited about it, and they are excited with me, you know. It's good.

Although friends are a major influence on the participation of these young people, it is not the only influence. Parental, familial and community influences are also very significant to these adolescents. As shown by Table 2, only two choristers indicated that they would not sing in the choir if they did not have a close friend in the choir. However, 36% of the students said that choir is more enjoyable and is easier to join if a close friend participates also.

Table 2. Themes about close friends: Reasons for response

Reason	Frequency
makes choir more enjoyable; easier to join	10
it would be more difficult if no close friend	7
opportunity to make new friends	5
it does not matter	4
would not sing otherwise	3
provides a common interest	2

everyone else was joining	
knowing enough people to enjoy choir	
choir does not occur in conversations	
choir is different from other interests	
not sure	

Schoolmates of Males

A frequent response to the question about what other schoolmates thought about the boys' singing in a choir was "no opinion." This was coupled with many "I don't know" responses, indicating that this is not a topic for conversation among their peers. Bill, a grade 10 student, has close friends in the choir, but has different friends for his varying interests.

Well, the school group that I like to hang out with, they don't really think it's a bad thing or a good thing. They don't really have an opinion, but their friends, two of their friends, sing in the girls' choir . . . or three of them . . . not . . . so . . . I'm the only guy they know that sings.

Males were more likely to receive comments that were less supportive of their participating in a choir, and the comparison with sports was quite common. The reasons for the more negative reactions were varied, but were related to the perceived value of the activity in the wider culture. Sam, a grade 12 student, says that singing in a choir isn't very well respected, especially when compared with sports. Bill, the grade 10 student, puts it like this:

Well, yeah, I know that at least two years ago everyone thought I was the weirdest person on earth because I sang, and they weren't very accepting because of it, I don't know why really, but also certain of my sports friends I just stay away from that side . . . friends of them through sports, don't really have other common interests with them, so . . . if they want to know, they can, and if they don't like it, then maybe they're not my friends after all.

Jim puts it like this:

But sort of the rest of my classmates I would have to say that when they'd ask, when I'd make comments like "I have choir practice" or whatever, the comment was like "oh, you sing?" Sort of like, as if they're surprised, that it's not a normal thing for people to do. Oh, I don't know if that makes any sense or not. But their reaction was certainly different to some extent than if I'd said "oh, I have football practice" or something like that. It was looked upon differently somehow, I don't know how it was looked upon differently, but it was certainly a different reaction than if I'd said, "oh I have a football practice" that I'm going to do, or something like that . . . certainly something unexpected.

An attempt to keep a personal distance from disapproving remarks is illustrated in the story told by Richard (grade 9):

There used to be another boy in the choir named [the boy] . . . and we were on the volleyball team . . . and he'd said . . . someone had asked me if I'd gone to the choir and I said yes, and then they asked if [the boy] still went and I said "yeah, [the boy] goes" and then [the boy] came to the volleyball practice and they were making fun of him and stuff and then he quit the next week . . . I don't let it affect me.

Although Richard says that he can withstand this peer pressure, it is evident that many boys and girls cannot.

Schoolmates of Females

Although the girls did not report as many negative responses from schoolmates, they were sensitive to the issue of peer support. In this study, 75% of the singers came from one school and the supportive school environment was very important to them. Ellen, Francis and Kelly attend this school:

At [our school] basically everybody has a friend who is in choir . . . or almost. So, I mean choir's a really accepted thing, I guess, at [our school] at least . . . from different groups. (Ellen, grade 11)

I'm glad I don't have peer pressure not to do it, because in that case I might feel that I shouldn't do it or something. (Francis, grade 12)

Sometimes choirs are looked at being uncool, but I think that [the Choir] is a really great choir to be in. It's really well recognized and you're not a nerd if you're in it . . . so . . . especially at my school. (Kelly, grade 12)

These girls acknowledge the various attitudes in the wider culture, but recognize the importance of the support of their peers. Francis' comment that she might feel pressured not to belong to the choir is indicative of the reluctance of females to damage existing relationships. Ann, grade 11, says she doesn't really know or care what other schoolmates think but her viewpoint may be influenced by the protection offered by her group of friends at the school:

I don't know [what other students think] if they know . . . I don't know how they feel. It doesn't bother me at all . . . but I think there's a community of [the Choir] people at my school, so it's like a clique almost. Like we sort of . . . we kind of hang around together and hanging around together we don't know what happens with them, and they don't know what happens with us. It doesn't bother me.

Other relationships can also put a strain on the association with a choral ensemble. Sally, a student in grade 12, tells of her experiences with male coaches:

I play [soccer] and I'd have to leave from [soccer] to go to choir practice . . . and so I got a little bit of slack from my male coaches for that . . . but I mean I just don't really care . . . brush it off . . . choir, I don't think, is really considered a . . . really like "cool" thing to do.

By singing in the choir and playing a sport that is often regarded as masculine, Sally is exhibiting uncharacteristic autonomous behaviour. Both girls and boys need support to engage in their desired activities.

Males vs. Females

The students were asked if male schoolmates responded differently than female schoolmates. Many of them did not notice any difference in responses, such as Jim:

I would always say that it didn't matter [male or female friends] . . . no, I would definitely say that I didn't ever notice a difference in reaction that I got.

Molly, grade 13, thinks that gender makes no difference:

I think people get really annoyed their gender doesn't make any difference . . . they might react different ways . . . it's just the style.

Although Molly says that gender doesn't make any difference, she does point out the style differences. Awareness of gender differences among this group of students is related only to overt behaviours such as attending concerts or actually singing in the choirs:

More female friends generally come to concerts. It doesn't make any difference to me. (Betty, grade 12)

Some of my male friends they sing but they don't think it's cool to sing, but then other guys like, a lot of people from . . . a lot of people at my church . . . like from [another country] . . . I mean the guys there like singing . . . it's . . . in [another country] I think for some guys it's not such a sissy thing or something . . . and they play guitar and they sing at the church and stuff like that. (Ellen, grade 11)

Well, sometimes they make fun of it, because they haven't really done anything with a choir before . . . probably the girls make fun of it more than the guys do . . . but that's just because they know me better. (Judy, grade 9)

Again, the negative comments are not restricted for the boys. Girls are also subjected to ridicule about participating in more traditional choral ensembles.

When asked how they felt about the combining of the two single gender choirs to form the youth singers, girls often reflected on the challenges that boys face. Carla, a grade 12 student, and Ellen, grade 11, note the level of motivation that boys need in order to join a choir:

Most of the guys here are pretty well rounded. It doesn't seem to bother them that much, but there are a couple of them that are embarrassed about it sometimes Especially with these guys . . . because they all like mostly the same things we do, 'cause they're obviously there, and girls I find, are encouraged to sing. If a guy is in the choir, he has to really want to sing . . . because it's not so much as easily accepted. If there's a guy in a choir he's usually quite good . . . and he really wants to be there, which means that he's a lot more fun to be around. (Carla, grade 12)

I think for the guys it's even harder for them . . . they have to be even more committed. Because like nobody, you know, it's sissy to sing or something . . . and it really shows, because it was like at the special practice or something, like half the girls showed up but like almost all of the guys showed up. (Ellen, grade 11)

Most of these explanations are quite common (Green, 1997; O'Toole, 1998) but the concept that boys who really want to participate are more attractive is notable. Ellen's evaluation of the boys' potential as a friend and colleague indicates a more balanced approach to relationships with the opposite sex.

Togetherhness

When asked about how they felt about the combining of the two single-gender choirs to form the youth singers, three main themes emerged: (1) the group dynamics within the choirs, (2) the music, and (3) how working together affected them.

Group Dynamics

Although there were no direct questions asked about the group dynamics of the choirs, some students mentioned this aspect of their experience. The experience of the all-male choir is apparently quite different from that of the all-female choir.

The same rules apply [as for school], and bend the rules a little more, because it's, especially in the guys choir, it's just a little more loose and open The girls' choir . . . when you have the guys choir, with each person talking, it's not such as big a deal . . . when you have 45 or 65 women, singing, or talking. (Bill, grade 10)

The combining of the male choir with the female choir has an impact on the experience of the resultant youth choir:

[The guys], well some of them, always joke around, so they keep the mood a little more relaxed than sometimes us girls get concentrating a lot and you know, so focused or so into it that sometimes we don't joke around and it can get a little tense, and then they usually lighten the mood with a joke or something . . . so it's nice. (Lois, grade 13)

Most of the boys and girls feel that the mixed choir is a great experience. The group dynamic is frequently more exciting than that of their single-gender choir, yet they are grateful that they have that experience as well. Bill describes these opportunities:

It's amazing . . . there's a different energy level that you get from it. I know with the guys it's a fun energy level . . . with the girls it's sort of the same, depending on the piece, it can be a lot more serious . . . yeah, a different energy level when we get to sing with the girls. It's really amazing, and when we hear the product of what it makes . . . It's just a great experience, I think. To be able to sing with a really great choir like that, and then to also have the side of the young men, where you get to have fun, and it's a great experience. (Bill, grade 10)

Males and females perceive the social aspect of the mixed choir differently however. Jim describes the experience as being cooperative, not competitive:

And also it makes for really good . . . a really good social situation within the choir. It's not the guys have the choir, the girls have the choir . . . sort of in the end it goes toward making the family atmosphere that we're so happy with around here in terms of not being segregated into this gender or that gender, but instead having this mix that happens all the time, and so we go away and practice our stuff and then we come together and be a big happy family again and go on to do something amazing. And I think that brings a really good atmosphere. And it's just way fun!

Holly (grade 11), who has a sibling in the all-male choir, has a very different perception:

It's really, you wouldn't think that it would, but there's a fair bit of competition. I know like my little brother says "eh, we did this better than you" . . . it's kind of like a subtle thing, but it is there. (Holly, grade 11)

All girls did not appreciate the light-hearted behavior of the boys. Ellen says:

Sometimes they can be a bit obnoxious, but usually they're ok.

The reasons for the differences in the group dynamics are likely complicated. But if equity for girls and boys is a goal of choral music, they must be examined, as they affect adolescent development.

Music

The music was the most important factor in the choral experience for nearly all participants. Both males and females had strong positive experiences with the SATB music of this mixed youth choir. Jim puts it like this:

It's fabulous. I think just on a strictly musical level, it allows us to do stuff that to me is so much more interesting . . . I guess maybe because I've never been exposed to that whole bunch or anything like that, but the combined stuff is always, sort of raises the bar of my expectations . . . Every time we go through combined stuff, the combined stuff gets a little better, and it's very impressive how that ends up working out.

Jim's observation that the mixed choir is improving, as well as his reflection on the level of performance reveals an important aspect of motivation for choral music. Ida, a grade 10 student also likes the music:

I always enjoy the music, sometimes a lot more than the music with just the girls . . . I'm the kind of person who likes different kinds of voices altogether, really low and really high, and that's what you get with the guys . . . and it sounds really good.

Alice, grade 13, observes that the styles of music are different for each choir, although she does not make any judgment about the merits of each:

I find the girls choir tends to do more soft, kind of folk-y songs and the guys tend to do more jazzy songs . . . when we get together we do traditional pieces.

While Alice does not make judgments about the selection of music, it is advisable for teachers, conductors and music publishers to reflect on the availability and selection of music for single-gender choirs, as well as music for youth mixed choirs. The cultural expectations for each gender are also situated in our music.

The musical experience is not restricted to the enjoyment, but also includes various aspects of the vocal parts.

For tenors and to a lesser extent the baritones, it's a completely different experience. (Paul, grade 13)

Daisy, grade 11, is glad that the girls have some music where the parts are not quite as challenging:

Usually we're not singing quite as many parts in the girls choir, just two instead of three or four, and that's usually easier, but it's also . . . it's nice to sing like that.

Daisy is not referring to the number of actual parts that the all-female choir sings, but rather to the number of parts the girls sing when they are preparing the SATB music. Some of the negative experiences of singing in the mixed choir were related to balance, and vocal lines. The small number of boys participating in the choir does influence the overall effect, and the girls remarked on this far more frequently than the boys did. Ellen, grade 11, likes the mixed choir experience:

Except there's sometimes are too little guys, right. Like at our last concert last year, another girls choir came and like, the guys were drowned out. It was almost really funny, right, because they were like shouting, but still didn't hear them, very much.

The selection of SATB compositions may be limiting for the inner vocal parts, especially traditional compositions. Ellen has quite a bit to say about this issue:

A lot of SATB music, at least the traditional ones, the altos and the tenors don't sing anything. Like I was doing grade four harmony, right, and we were harmonizing the alto part and I had already given them like five F-sharps in a row. And so we went to this next chord, and Mr. C says like what should we put there, and I was like, "let's give the altos a D" and he was like, 'but it's more smooth if you give them an F-sharp.'" And like they already sung 5! nd I empathize, because I sing alto, right, but I'd like to sing bass. If I could sing any part in the world, I'd like to sing bass because the bass is a cool key . . . and nobody seems to understand . . . well, one or two of my friends understand.

As girls are often more experienced singers, they benefit musically from the more challenging vocal parts found in SSAA music (O'Toole, 1998). This can be one of the arguments for maintaining the requirement of singing in single-gender choirs at the same time as singing in a mixed choir, especially for girls.

Molly, an OAC student (grade 13) observed that there are gender associations with some vocal parts:

a lot of girls don't like to sing alto . . . it's not feminine.

Distinctive characteristics of masculinity and femininity are common in our culture and these traits extend to the mixed chorus tradition of Western music (O'Toole, 1998). What is acceptable for male and female singers is considerably different, and the singers in this study have learned these lessons well.

Working Together

The girls observed that working with males in the mixed choir improved their ability to work with males in general. Carla, grade 12, says that there are limited opportunities to work with boys at her school and she values the opportunity to be able to work with them:

It's a lot of fun. The guys are great. We all like the guys . . . except when they decide to do fencing, and concentrate more on their fencing and take off! That was annoying. [singing in a mixed choir] makes you more casual about . . . I find that the girls here are less "he, he, he, he" about guys, because you work with them. We are used to working with them on an almost daily basis. And that's . . . you develop better relationships with people because it's more of a casual thing. Particularly, I go to [a school], and there's not as much, I find, there's not much mix there. It's the girls, it's the guys . . . it's always been that way.

Carla and Kelly, grade 12, use the word *people* when they talk about the males. It's as if they do not have the correct term to use: that neither the word *men* nor *boys* suits the situation.

Another reason for maintaining single-gender choirs with a mixed choir is the social issue. Being in the presence of boys all the time can be limiting for girls. Kelly, grade 12, is concerned that the boys might intimidate the girls if they had to work with them all the time:

We know the boys quite well, but maybe we'd be intimidated by working with the boys all the time . . . like even though we know them it might be . . . we might be shy to sing out or whatever . . . I think it's just a male thing . . . you don't want to . . . if it's somebody you don't know that well . . . like you become shy around people you don't know or . . . you don't want to look silly in front of them. Maybe we'd think they'll generalize like "oh the girls choir is not good" . . . I look at the grade 9s and all the girls are really, really taken with themselves and so perfect. And now I wear sweat pants to school and I don't even care, so I think as you grow older you grow out of it.

Kelly's observation that maturity leads to a certain confidence was found more frequently in the interviews with the older students.

Daisy, grade 11, expresses the enjoyment that many of the girls experience when working with the boys:

I don't like this Monday night rehearsal as much, because we don't get to rehearse with the guys as much. Last year they'd come in just as we were finishing and we'd rehearse at the end. And now we're only going to be rehearsing right before our concerts . . . so we don't get to see them as much.

It is interesting to note that the boys did not express any concerns about working with the girls. This is not surprising, but perhaps revealing. The evidence in this study supports the assertion that girls and boys need different support in their pursuit of desired activities.

Discussion

If adolescence is indeed a time of transition, separation and quest for autonomy, then many of the students in this study are progressing toward this goal. Comments by many of the boys indicate that they are behaving autonomously by participating in the choirs at all. Bill's (grade 10) explanation that if his schoolmates don't accept his interest in singing in choir, then they aren't friends is an indicator that this adolescent is likely approaching individuation and autonomy. Richard's (grade 9) comment about not letting the behaviours of others affect him is another indicator of that same progress. However, this observation must be tempered by the fact that all of the boys but two (those who attend private schools) attend the same school, and this school is reported to have a supportive climate for their participation. This is important for teachers, parents and administrators, as they have considerable influence over school climate. Bullying of any form, including pressure to conform needs attention from influential adults, and interventions need to be initiated if choral music is to thrive in school settings. It is important to recognize that the choirs in this study are not school choirs and the choristers have many other kinds of support. The students can even conceal their association from schoolmates, thus surrendering choral music to organizations that rely on families who have financial and musical/cultural incentive.

While some adults may consider singing in choirs to be an acceptable association for girls, girls may want to engage in other activities that may not be as easily acknowledged. Teachers and parents often describe girls who exhibit uncharacteristic autonomous behaviour as "uncooperative." Individuation and autonomous thought in girls is not readily rewarded. Most

of the girls in this study were not "resistors" (Green, 1997). They belonged to the choirs because it was an accepted behaviour and were rewarded frequently for this association, at home, at school, after concerts, in the media, even by complete strangers. This also has consequence for choral music, as the motivation for choral singing often remains extra-musical. Other researchers (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Green, 1997; O'Toole, 1998) have examined many of the issues uncovered in this study. The group dynamics of the choirs were important enough for the students in this study to mention without being asked. If equity for girls and boys is important to choral music educators and conductors, then this issue should be critically examined, exposing the multifarious nature of the group experience.

Several students said that they simply did not associate with people who were not interested in choral singing or music. What is the implication of "staying away" from people who do not like or understand a particular type of musical organization? What is the consequence for traditional Western choral music? How does this relate to adolescent growth and what are the consequences for democratic values? The relational issues addressed in this study should be continued by further research to attempt to understand the complexity of engaging in choral music experiences for adolescents.

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