

LUCY (Middle School): If you get a very good girl and a very good boy, sometimes you can't tell the difference.

ALBERT (HEAD BOY CHORISTER): The boys have a more pure ringing sound. The sound of the girls is much different from the boys.

HENRY (Junior School): Boys have a more solid voice. Their sound is louder and not so empty.

PETER (Junior School): Boys give a thinner sound. Girls give a thicker sound. It's like mixing two colours and making a new colour.

A variety of responses from participants at Wells Cathedral Choir School reveal various interpretations of how boys and girls voices compare or contrast with one another.

While parallels may be drawn between the aspirations of male and female choristers at Wells Cathedral, it is evident that the girls choir operates under the discretion of informal and implicit rule systems which are set in place to maintain various inherited roles and scripts within the Anglican Church. In addition, the phenomenon of assigning masculine and feminine characteristics to vocal music prevails in the discourse of both adults and children alike. Following in the footsteps of their Medieval counterparts, the girls at Wells are indeed traveling in the same direction but have been directed to take a different path. To use a more appropriate analogy, the introduction of girls within the Cathedral Choir has created a new mode for the twentieth century.

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Exploring a cultural myth:

What adult non-singers may reveal about the nature of singing

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Introduction

This presentation will describe several aspects of a doctoral study in progress. The study is about adults who feel they cannot sing, and have felt this way since childhood. It is about how that happened, also why, where and when, and what a non-singing life has meant to them. I will provide a general overview of the study, and then focus in particular on several aspects of it.

The research design embraces quantitative, qualitative and critical forms of inquiry. The quantitative element provides descriptive statistics which serve as a foundation for the study. Individual interviews and journal writing as well as group discourse supply qualitative data with relation to issues such as background, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. Attributional theory, with its focus on achievement and affiliation as the dominant motivators in Western society, provides a facilitative organization through which to structure discovery. Critical theory is being used to reflect upon and analyze the discourse through each stage of discovery. The primary research interest is in the discovery and possible evolution of non-singers' attitudes about themselves as such, with the knowledge thus garnered pointing toward the possibility of individual empowerment and change as well as leading to the wider possible implications for empowerment and transformation in the field.

The impetus for this study arose from a perception of the importance to individuals of singing or not singing within a culture, the identification of associated problems stemming from those who [felt they] were not able to sing, and from the possibilities to which the research literature pointed in terms of seeking/finding solutions to these problems.

Identification of this particular topic as a research focus has built steadily since I entered elementary music education practice seventeen years ago. After 'muddling through', attempting to help my young pupils who were 'uncertain' singers, [my pre-service preparation was lacking in this area of expertise], I gradually discovered and developed ways to facilitate children past their obstacles to singing success. It may be fair to say that this was largely due to the fact that I believed they could do it, and thought it was important enough to persist until I found solutions for them. When I eventually found my way to the relevant literature in graduate school, it confirmed my own observations

from practice that many young children experienced difficulty in learning to sing, that singing skill seemed to be developmental in nature, and that there were practices based on empirical evidence which could facilitate their singing success, in most cases.

There is a wealth of research evidence to suggest that significant proportions of the child population may grow into adulthood experiencing difficulty in singing in-tune in relation to the songs of the dominant culture (Welch, 1994). At the same time, there appears to be a dearth of evidence which focuses on adult singing (Mawhinney and Cuddy, Lidman Magnusson). During an earlier study I carried out with 'temporarily' obstructed 7-year old singers (Knight 1995), I interviewed the parents of my subjects as to their own singing background. Of these eight adults, seven had been "silenced" as singers in childhood - all in ensemble singing settings at school. These parents had all been under ten years of age when this determination had been made for them. They all expressed that this 'diagnosis' had been a moment of humiliation for them. They had great clarity and feeling around the memory of this moment of diagnosis, and all had accepted the attribution unquestioningly. Yet all longed to be able to sing and regretted that they could not. As parents, the majority of them had refrained from singing to or around their children for fear of "contaminating" their children's chance of singing, or, in two cases, the threat of ridicule. The negativity of their narrative around this non-singing state was so powerful that I began to look at non-singing adults, with a new lens. My observations seemed to reveal some common themes in the narrative of these self-attributed non-singers. The cultural and attributional aspects of the phenomenon seemed to surface as the most powerful and thought-provoking, and the whole subject begged investigation.

The available research indicates human singing ability to be subject to a developmental process, as is speech, and provides evidence of the possibilities of remediation and skill development (Welch, 1986a; Welch, 1994a; Welch, 1997; Rutkowski, 1994; Welch, Sargent & White, 1994a, 1996b). However, this positive conception of potential is at variance with the powerful, usually negative, Western cultural notion of innate ability with regard to singing (Mawhinney & Cuddy, 1984; Lidman Magnusson, 1995).

From the developmental stance of this paper then, people who are designated, or self-designate as non-singers, become stalled at an early point in their progress along this continuum of human singing skill. The available research evidence (Welch & Muraio, 1994) indicates that the degree of progress in singing development is a factor of the quality of the match between an individual's (species-shared) singing development potential and the environmental experiences affording realization of that potential (Welch, 1997). The product of this match/mismatch may serve to accelerate, promote, retard, stall or halt progress along the singing development continuum. While a mismatch can occur at any age, Welch suggests that "such a disjunction can be particularly problematic in early childhood when the bases for lifelong attitudes and values towards music and self are being formed." (Welch, 1997, p. 3). Being able to sing is an important human function. That singing is not only integral to all human cultures, but is expressive of the relationships within those cultures points out how basic to our human nature is the need to sing. It is as basic as our need to belong to our culture, which is the way we understand ourselves

(Lomax, 1968). Therefore, that people should spend their whole lives not singing because they believe they cannot, when in fact they probably could, is a very troubling issue.

Trouble is productive. It is often the primary driver of transformation. As Bruner (1997, p. 99) says in his *Culture of Education*, "It is the whiff of trouble that leads us to search out the relevant or responsible constituents in the narrative, in order to convert the raw Trouble into a manageable Problem that can be handled with procedural muscle." Through the narrative of adult non-singers, this study hopes to initiate a process whereby the gathering and analysis of such data may provide clues that will convert the raw Trouble into a manageable Problem. It is the aim of this study to see if the experience of non-singers may be a successful agent of change in beginning to challenge an embedded cultural myth, so they may reclaim their birthright to sing.

Adult Non-Singers

My observations of the adult non-singing phenomenon are in accord with the limited research literature (e.g. Mawhinney and Cuddy, *op.cit.*), indicating common threads in the narrative of adults who express their self-attribution as non-singers, specifically:

1. Non-singing adults seem to believe they do not and have never had, the ability to sing.
2. The belief that they are non-singers most often arose in the childhood of these adults, often through a negative defining ensemble experience, and often involving an authority figure as the instrument of diagnosis.
3. In social situations, they are often self-declarative about their non-singing state, and their narrative often takes the form of self-deprecating humor.
4. The marginalization/exclusion arising from their non-singing status is often a regret, and may have had a deleterious effect on other aspects of their adult lives.
5. Although non-singing adults may wish that they could sing, they seem to believe that their non-singing state is irrevocable, irreversible.

Given that this hypothesized profile of the adult non-singer may be born out in evidence, it is further hypothesized that once the knowledge that all humans have the anatomical and physiological capacity to sing (exclusive of exceptional circumstances such as deafness, mental developmental delay or active pathology of the vocal apparatus) and the process of sequenced experiential singing development is made known to adult non-singers, their former beliefs and attitudes about their own capacity to develop as singers may change. Attributional theory (Weiner, 1986) would suggest that new knowledge about the developmental pan-human nature of singing ability combined with new awareness about their reality (as non-singers), and how they came to view themselves as such, may be a powerful catalyst for metamorphosis. Their ingrained ways of thinking, feeling and acting as non-singers may begin to transform, and with them, possible inhibitions,

fears, or other negative limitations that have accompanied the life-long designation as non-singer and which may have kept them (developmentally) locked in that state.

Literature review

To provide a scholarly foundation for the problem being addressed in this study, I have chosen to offer research evidence from four areas of the professional literature which seem to have direct bearing on this study: culture, attributional theory, human voice and critical ethnography. My focus in this paper is on the first two areas - culture and attributional theory.

Cultural beliefs as to the origin and nature of human singing

Singing is a universal human activity (Lomax, 1968) and is one of the most commonly observed and long established of musical behaviors in all cultures (Nettl, 1983). The literature review in this study identifies pancultural issues regarding singing, its value, its practice, its function as a communication, and its imbeddedness in culture and also explores issues around non-singingness within a culture.

While there are many socio-cultural factors that impact on singing, such as gender, social class, location (Welch, 1992), what is reviewed here is the overall cultural concept of the phenomenon of singing and the person's individual concept of singing within the cultural one. Singing is defined by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax as:

a specialized act of communication, akin to speech, but far more formally organized and redundant. Because of its heightened redundancy, singing attracts and holds the attention of groups. Whether chorally performed or not, however, the chief function of song is to express the shared feelings and mold the joint activities of some human community. (Lomax, 1968, p. 3)

The dominant belief about the nature of artistic ability in any given culture seems to play a critical role in how individuals within that culture will build not only singing skill but a singing identity. Merriam (1982) provided an example of strong contrast between the cultural viewpoint of the Anang of Nigeria, whose culture emphasizes equal musical potential at birth, and the Basongye (Republic of the Congo) outlook, which holds that music ability is definitely inherited. It can come from either the male or the female side, and if a child has a musician as a parent, the chances of him or her becoming a musician are greatly increased. For the Basongye, their concept of the 'gifted' individual is born out in cultural practice; those identified as 'gifted' are developed musically, while those who are not thus identified are not nurtured in this direction, and do not similarly develop. The opposite Anang belief of panhuman musical ability is also born out in practice. Their cultural expectation springing from this belief is that all can and will develop musically. The community prioritizes and facilitates this development from birth in all their members, and they all do appear to develop musically. Merriam went on to say that cultural belief systems about the nature of human artistic ability is a subject of importance for further

study on a global scene. The significance of uncovering factors which may determine who shall and who shall not become musicians in the world, and how this process correlates with individual ability, cannot be overlooked. This study hopes to be a small step in that direction.

Bruner argues that by virtue of participation in culture, meaning becomes public and shared. "The child does not enter the life of his or her group as a private and autistic sport of primary process, but rather as a participant in a larger public process in which public meanings are negotiated" (Bruner, 1990, 13). Quoting a colleague, Kluckhohn, Bruner suggests that human beings do not end at their own skins; they are expressions of culture. Rosaldo (1984) argued that notions like 'self' and 'affect' "grow not only from 'inner' essence, but from a world of meanings, images and social bonds, in which all persons are so inevitably involved." By participation in and communication with our culture, we develop and express our identity and our humanness.

John Blacking (1973), in asking "How musical is man?" says that this query is related more to the general questions, "What is the nature of man?" and, "What limits are there to his cultural development?" Writing 25 years ago, he said that an understanding of the physiological, cognitive and other essential processes that generate musical performance and composition may provide us with the evidence that:

men are more remarkable and capable creatures than most societies ever allow them to be. This is not a fault of culture itself, but the fault of man, who mistakes the means of culture for the end, and so lives *for* culture and not *beyond* culture. (Blacking, 1973, p. 7)

On this view, the anthropological outlook that culture is a toolkit of techniques and procedures for understanding and managing your world (Bruner, 1997), most people who experience stalled singing development in Western culture adapt to the myth that they do not have the innate talent for singing, and as one musician reported about his daughter who couldn't "hold a tune" – that she had "come to terms with it". This acceptance of one's non-singing lot in life is an example of Blacking's *living for* culture. The determined elderly non-singer who came to my "So You Always Wanted to Sing" course for adults was an example of a person *living beyond* culture. This does not mean, however, that the musician's daughter cannot decide to *live beyond* culture, and create an opportunity to surmount her singing obstacle, whatever it may be.

Alan Lomax reported that culture imposes expectations on its members, so that if a singer should:

. . . overstep the bounds of proper vocalizing in a given cultural context, they rouse feelings of shame, amusement or anger among the hearers. This is because singing like speech is a language. Therefore, its use of tone, meter and much more must be bound by formal conventions if it is to communicate effectively. (Lomax, 1980, p. 790)

The references to proper vocalizing and formal conventions suggest the imbeddedness of cultural expectations in singing. That is why a deliberately untuneful performance, especially if delivered by someone perfectly adept at singing in tune, can provoke hilarity. Unfortunately, not all cultural contraventions of singing are experienced as harmlessly amusing, and the scenario just described would be far from amusing for a non-singer, or someone who felt they were a non-singer, who might be present at such an event. It is precisely their condition that is being ridiculed. As Lomax (1968) has so aptly described acceptable etiquette of a musical-cultural vein:

The most important thing for a person to know is just how appropriate a bit of behavior or communication is, and how to respond to it appropriately . . . Everyone in a culture responds with satisfaction or ecstasy to the apropos, and with scorn and resentment of the unseemly. (Lomax, 1968, p. 12)

The vernacular terminology that has developed to describe those who cannot match pitch (within cultures where that particular capacity is musically valued) could hardly be called culturally inclusive: "droners", "grunters", "growlers", "backward singers", "tone dumb", "tone deaf" and "monotones" (Bentley, 1968). In 1994, a cross-cultural symposium was held in Japan as a result of a flourishing interest in *onchi*, probably as a result of the popularizing of the *karaoke* culture (Murao, 1994). This international conference on singing ability was titled *Onchi and Singing Development*. *Onchi* is the Japanese word meaning "tone idiot". In the *karaoke* phenomenon, with the instrumental accompaniment being supplied on laser disc, ordinary people perform solos publically.

Before *karaoke* appeared, the traditional style of folk singing meant that good singers tended to sing at parties or festivals, and others participated by clapping hands or softly joining in (lip syncing). In this style, the *onchi* could escape from singing alone in front of audiences and therefore could conceal their *onchiness*. (Murao, 1994, p. 5)

The organizers hoped this symposium would offer a broad perspective on a musical behavior that has puzzled researchers, challenged teachers and been a source of embarrassment for many adults in Western-style societies.

Attributional theory and its relationship to the study of voice

Attributional theory is one of human motivation and as such aims to explain the apparently universal phenomenon for causal search and explanation of behavioral outcomes (Weiner, 1992). In attempting to explore issues about non-singer's individual and social self-perception and the community nature of singing, attribution theory, with its focus on *achievement* (ability and effort) and *affiliation* (social bonding) as the dominant motivators in western culture (Weiner, 1986) offers a facilitative organization through which to structure discovery. Given the notion of singing in western culture as an inherent ability/disability, and its imbeddedness as a shared social activity, *achievement* and

affiliation factor strongly in our attempts to understand the non-singer from both an individual and a social perspective.

Causality

The search for causality is the foundation of attribution theory. John Stuart Mill's conception of cause has significantly influenced the development of attribution theory via Kelley's theory (cf. 1967) [a cause] is the sum total of the conditions positive and negative taken together...which being realized, the consequent invariably follows " (Hewstone, 1989, p. 3).

A cause, then, is a construction imposed by the attributor to account for the relation between an action and an outcome. The attributor is not simply an attributor or a seeker after knowledge, according to Kelley (1971); his latent goal in attaining knowledge is that of effective management of himself and his environment. The attributor may be a teacher, family member, friend or other, or it may be self-attribution by inference (Bem, 1972). Whatever the vehicle of attribution, the individual goes through a process of causal thinking, the aim of which is to make meaning out of why they are a non-singer.

Causal thinking

The organization of causal thinking has three main characteristics: *locus of causality*, *stability* and *controllability* (Weiner, 1986). While these characteristics may well exist on a bipolar continuum, Weiner says that because humans tend to think in dichotomous constructs rather than continua (Kelly, 1955), he chooses to categorize dichotomously. To illustrate how causal thinking works in establishing attribution, I will apply it to the situation of my elderly mother, who was a non-singer most of her life, having been thus attributed at age seven.

Emerging from a conversation we were having about regrets in life two months prior to her death (at the time, she was 78 and in the final stages of terminal cancer), my mother told me that she had precious few regrets in life, except that she had been a musical mute in a "house full of birds". (My father and all five of her children sang well) She would dearly have loved to sing, but was told she couldn't. In fact, she was told at school in the presence of all her classmates that she was not allowed to sing, but should mouth the words, remaining in the ensemble. This situation persisted throughout her school life.

Locus of causality may be external or internal to the actor. She perceived her *locus of causality* to be internal; she believed, as she was told, that she didn't have the *ability* to sing. Not only did an expert (her teacher) tell her this, and expect her to abide by it, but her whole society believed in the notion that some people can sing and some can't. She "figured out" that she was unfortunately and fatefully cast in the latter camp. My mother also reported that she was not the sole "muted bird" in this setting, which further re-enforced in her the accepted cultural phenomenon of the natural non-singer.

The dimension of *stability* in causal thinking refers to whether an outcome is stable or unstable over time. As no amount of *effort* would change the sad fact of my mother's condition, therefore the *stability* of her condition as non-singer was static, not subject to change. She had no reason to expect that her singing state would ever be any different from what it was at the moment of revelation. This "fact" was re-enforced by her teacher

underscoring the futility of any effort on my mother's part to improve the situation when she ordered the child to maintain silence concurrent with her lip-syncing participation amongst her fellow singing classmates.

Controllability refers to whether the cause is controllable by the actor or not, or is subject to volitional change. In terms of the *controllability* dimension of her causal attribution, her non-singing condition was a situation she could not change by any amount of trying or wishing. Therefore, she concluded that this situation was not within her control. This *uncontrollable* aspect, taken together with the internal *locus of causality* and *stable* state required her to find a way of thinking, feeling and being that made sense of her situation and allowed her to adapt. She did this by accepting the attribution of non-singer. In one way, this was a maladaptation, in that she did indeed have the potential to develop as a singer. She learned to match pitch and sing successfully with others after just a few lessons with me, even though she was in an advanced state of metastatic cancer, and elderly. However, at the time of her attribution in 1917, neither she, nor the "experts" around her at the time, nor her culture, supported this concept of her singing potential. So given those circumstances, her adaptation through self-attribution as "non-singer" made contextual sense to her.

Affective consequences of causal thinking

These three causal dimensions have all been shown to have affective consequences (not to be confused with the affective outcome of the event itself which precipitated a causal search, and which in the narrative of most non-singers whose diagnosis is attributed by another, is a shocking and traumatic event).

Locus of causality relates to self-esteem and pride in accomplishment following success or failure. If the locus is internal, there will be a corresponding increase in positive and negative self-esteem respectively following success or failure. Likewise, an external locus may raise or maintain self-esteem among the stigmatized, higher if they ascribe negative outcomes to the prejudice of others, or lower it if they blame themselves. In my mother's case, her *locus of causality* was internal, therefore her failure to sing caused her self-esteem to be lowered. This was a continuing factor throughout her life, particularly so because her home community and wider culture was a singing society. She loved people and get-togethers, but was always afraid singing would "break out" and she would be embarrassed yet again.

Because there is a direct relationship between the *stability* dimension and expectancy, the affective consequences of this causal dimension are either hopefulness or hopelessness. In her case, it was hopelessness, and while she did come to terms with it, she still had this nagging regret and active sadness about her non-singing state as she imminently approached death after a long life. She did not initiate the discussion about her regrets over lost singing in her life, but rather identified and expressed this particular sadness when given an opportunity to voice her regret.

The affective outcomes of the *controllability* principle of causality with regard to achievement (ability to sing) depend on the variables that constitute them: internal controllable causes of failure generate feelings of guilt (I could have done something about

it, but I didn't), whereas internal, uncontrollable causes of failure generate feelings of shame. This applied to my mother's situation (I haven't got the ability, there is nothing I can do about it, and I feel ashamed and embarrassed at my non-singing state). External causes also create affective outcomes; external, uncontrollable causes may elicit anger and external, controllable causes may elicit pity.

Attribution therapy

A good deal of research supporting the hypothesized linkage between causal attributions and achievement related behavior has been conducted in applied contexts. These applications-oriented investigations have been aimed at personal adjustment and improving the lives of others. Therapeutic programs have been developed that attempt to replace dysfunctional or maladaptive causal ascriptions with other attributions that better motivate, aid coping, and help to increase the likelihood of attaining desired goals. These intervention attempts are guided by the underlying principle that if causal ascriptions do influence achievement, then a change in attributions should produce a change in behavior (Foersterling, 1980b, 1985; Weiner, 1985).

I have applied attribution therapy in conjunction with vocal exploration to stimulate arrested singing development in over twenty adult "non-singers" to date. My observations have been that once "non-singers" believe that singing is a developmental capacity in all people, and not a fixed, designated "gift" to a chosen few, they seem to experience a major shift in motivation, willingness to risk, task engagement, and goal achievement with regard to singing success. It seems that the change in self-attribution may have a major contribution to make in a person resuming the journey of singing progress in later life, after years of arrested development. This is an area that seems to warrant further investigation.

Conclusion

There are myriad different skills required for each cultural style of singing. Whether there are people in every culture who do not develop those skills requisite to their own cultural style(s) of vocal expression, and are therefore deemed incompetent or non-singers within their own culture (where non-singing is a concept within the culture), has not been studied to my knowledge. We do have evidence that there are many cultures where that is the case (Welch, 1994; Murao, 1994; Magnusson, 1988, 1995, 1997; Mawhinney and Cuddy, 1984). As previously cited in this study, there is also evidence of musical cultures where most people are both believed to be musical and do fully develop musically (Messenger, 1958; Romet, 1992; Blacking, 1967). These divergent reports are not incompatible if one accepts the developmental theory of singing as a panhuman phenomenon. It means that the Anang Ibibio of Nigeria and the West Javanese and Venda cultures expect and support singing development in all their citizens from birth, thereby enabling full participation and success by all, whereas other cultures do not expect and/or do not

support singing development in all members of their societies, so all their members do not develop.

Welch (1994) suggests that what is needed is a "broad working definition of out-of-tune singing" which would express the idea by stating that in all cultures there may be some who are not yet competent in the dominant musical idioms. Kelley (1955), a pioneer in attribution theory, suggests that humans tend to think in dichotomous constructs rather than continua, and certainly in Western culture that is the case. However, given the mounting research evidence that singing, in whatever cultural form it takes expression, is a human capacity capable of development, part of a "human biogrammar" (Blacking, 1995, p. 238), then John Blacking's question becomes very pertinent, "What happens to people when societies do not allow for or encourage the development of latent 'musical' capabilities?" (Blacking, 1995, p. 238)

In an attempt to begin to find some answers to Blacking's question, I will close with a few quotes from some of my singing students who enrolled in a community extension course for adults at Memorial University entitled "So You Always Wanted To Sing?" They had spent their lives since the age of 6 or 7 believing and feeling that they couldn't sing.

"Thursday nights have to be the high point of the week I love singing class. Never thought I'd say that. In fact, if anyone had told me last spring, I'd say that I'd seriously considered having them committed." (Diana, age 35)

"In singing class, I can be overcome by emotion so easily. Just facing the years of hurt and the amazing belief that I can sing after all." (Elizabeth, age 62)

"Singing in public when you've always thought you couldn't must be more like undressing after you've some mutilating surgery, like a mastectomy or an amputation. You know you won't measure up, you'll be a disappointment to yourself and your audience, and, worst of all, you fear you'll be the object of malicious humour. The miracle of singing classes is the discovery that I am not disfigured, that my voice can be a source of pleasure, and amazingly, the "limb" can regrow." (Brenda, age 44)

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