Uncovering the Process of Social Identity Development in High School Adolescent Women's Choral Singers: A Grounded Theory

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Abstract

An integral piece of identity development is social identity, which is defined as viewing oneself as a valued member of a social group (Tajfel, 1978). Through consistent group rehearsals and performances, high school mixed choirs have been identified as spaces fostering positive social identity (Parker, 2014). The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the process of social identity development in adolescent high school women's choir participants. Research questions included: (a) how participants describe the development of social identity within the context of the women's choir, (b) what actions-interactions influence social identity, (c) what strategies participants use to develop social identity, (d) what intervening conditions impede social identity, and (e) what consequences result from social identity development in women's choir.

In this study, grounded theory procedures articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Corbin and Strauss (2008, 2015) were used to systematically collect, analyze, and generate theory regarding women's choir participants' development. Fifty semi-structured interviews were collected with 40 different participants in three public high school settings. School sites and singing groups were chosen by heterogeneous sampling and included varying school sizes and population densities, student diversity and SES demographics, and offerings of choral programs. Consenting participants represented beginning, intermediate, and advanced women's choir members. Three waves of data collection and analysis occurred over a five-month period. Open coding, constant comparison, and axial coding were used to develop categories, dimensionalize participant experiences on a continuum, and compose a temporal matrix.

The grounded theory of women's choir participants revealed a seven-step process. Actions-interactions were identified as *coming in singing*, *becoming a group*, and *learning musically*. Participants articulated a range of prior singing experiences, and began to integrate together within the choral setting, advancing their musical understanding and performing at a higher level. Intervening conditions included competition between singing groups, budget cuts, and the absence of choral programs at the middle school level. The central phenomenon was identified as *opening up ME and my voice*. Participants articulated a deeper understanding of the self and described the desire to share themselves with others. Consequences included *experiencing confidence*, *stronger group*, and *envisioning myself*. Contextual conditions strengthened social identity, including the amount of time spent together, the number of groups participants held membership within, and recognition from the larger school community.

Applications of Social Identity Development Research in Women's Choir:

- Adolescent women's choir members experience personal growth as a result of their consistent work together in a single-gender atmosphere.
- Participants' experience of togetherness is enhanced and strengthened by an all-women environment.
- Participants' increased confidence from women's choir influences other areas of their lives.
- Adolescent women's choir members articulated a broadening of views on musical styles and listening practices because of their choral music experiences.
- Choir members' social identities are strengthened by the number of groups, length of participation, and recognition from important others.
- As ensembles become more selective, competition between groups disrupted participants' experiences of positive social identity. Inter-group and interpersonal competition between singers improved, however, through length of membership, and opportunities to acquaint singers with one another.
- Financial constraints and lack of understanding among school communities act as barriers toward social identity development for adolescent women's choir members.
- In contrast with previous research with mixed choirs (Parker, 2014), women's choir participants focused on self-growth rather than growth of the full ensemble. Young women described they were able to attend to themselves within a single-gendered space, thereby gaining greater self-confidence.
- This study suggests that women's choirs not only provide important musical functions, but also fortify emerging social identities in distinctive and impactful ways.

References

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