

# MALES IN CHOIRS

## Stereotype threat and adolescent males in choirs: a reflection of gender beliefs?

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I have had a huge amount of fun in my career as a secondary school music teacher and choral director, making music with young people in New Zealand and overseas. However I could not help but notice that for boys, life in choirs could be problematic. It was often a challenge to motivate young males to join the choir, and those who did were often subject to ridicule from their peers or worse, bullying. Reluctance seemed to be based on the fear that in some way one would be judged weak or un-masculine for participating in a choir.

Having read international studies on different aspects of this scenario, I was keen to find out the extent to which it might be present in New Zealand. So, with the help of 737 Auckland secondary school choristers (both male and female) and their choral directors, I conducted three studies as the basis for my PhD thesis.

### **Study 1. Performance quality**

The first study centred around 'stereotype threat' (ST): the risk of confirming, by one's actions, a negative stereotype levelled at a group to which one belongs. In this context, performance is often impaired, serving to reinforce the stereotype.

The participating choirs were measured for performance quality in two conditions – 1. in front of an assembly of general peers (where performance quality deteriorated for the males) and 2. in front of their musical peers (where there was no drop in performance quality for males or females).

The choristers also reported their feelings and thoughts about the performances. No particular pattern was found – except in the case of two choirs for whom the audiences had expressed overt disdain. 'Awareness of threat' was acknowledged by these choristers who were also the most anxious about what the audience had thought of them.

These findings indicated that ST negatively influenced performance quality for the males, but they were unaware of threat until it was made blatantly obvious.

Interestingly, the females in a predominantly Pasifika choir exhibited the drop in performance quality in the assembly condition expected from males. This observation indicated that the effects of ST are context-related and may reflect the influence of varying cultures.

### **Study 2. Empowering attributes**

Male choristers were interviewed in the second study, revealing common attributes that empowered endurance in a domain traditionally stigmatised for young men.

With the exception of the Pasifika group, the boys described singing in choirs as a feminine activity. They also reported being 'mocked' and feeling apprehensive when singing in front of

peers. Surprisingly, they denied adamantly that these factors would affect their performance quality.

The boys were motivated and bound by an intrinsic passion for singing and a determination to belong to the choir, despite the negative out-group opinion, resulting in a strong sense of camaraderie and in-group strength. They also possessed a good sense of humour and valued the idea of a high-quality performance as a tool with which to enhance their reputations among their peers.

These common attributes may have engendered a resilience that helped sustain the boys' engagement in the face of stigma, but did not protect them from the effects of ST.

### **Study 3. Gender conformity**

With a new sample of 1215 secondary school students, the third study aimed to identify beliefs about gender identity, gender role, and expectations of gender-role conformity. The findings indicated that adolescents felt a greater degree of comfort with their gender identity if it was closely aligned to stereotypical ideas of gender.

This relationship was stronger for males (particularly Pasifika males) and weaker for females (but not Pasifika and Māori females). It diminished with age and was weakest in rural females. Views on the gendering of activities were also revealed, with some activities gendered exclusively male (e.g. rugby) or female (e.g. netball). Choirs were perceived to be largely a feminine domain, although participation of both sexes was acknowledged.

All-male choirs had the most gender-equitable view toward activity choice, while female choirs were the strongest supporters of gender-role conformity in activity choice. Males in mixed choirs registered the sharpest awareness of the stereotypical views of 'others'.

Overall, the studies have contributed to ST research by utilising a real world context, a range of cultural settings and a substantial sample. Importantly, they have led to the exposure of a far-reaching and deep-seated problem that deserves further research.

*Penelope Watson completed a PhD in Education in 2011, after 32 years in secondary school teaching. A focus of her career as Head of Music at a large Auckland secondary school was to encourage choral singing, particularly in young men. She is currently a Lecturer in Educational Psychology at The University of Auckland.*

**This article has been abridged for NZCF. For a link to the complete thesis, please contact Penny at [p.watson@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:p.watson@auckland.ac.nz)**