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Two Decades of Research on Possible Selves and the “Missing Males” Problem in Choral Music

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Abstract

TWO DECADES OF RESEARCH ON POSSIBLE SELVES AND THE 'MISSING MALES' PROBLEM IN CHORAL MUSIC

Music education researchers have a lengthy history of examining reasons why individuals seek participation in musical activities. Within that history, however, the concept of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) has received little attention until recently. In the broadest terms, possible selves are a person's impressions of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming. This view of self-concept moves beyond a simple collection of self-attributed traits to encompass the idea that individuals actively manage their choices and actions in order to promote desirable selves and inhibit less-desirable selves. The focus of this article is a systematic review of research and related literature concerning possible selves with specific attention to potential implications for the participation and persistence of adolescent boys in choral music education.

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Musical ability is, at least in part, a social construction. Self-definitions of musicality differ between cultures, between social groups within cultures, and between individuals (Hallam & Prince, 2003). The process through which adolescents construct their personal sense of musical identity is of particular interest because of the potential for self-perceptions to influence musical behavior throughout the lifespan (e.g. Bowman, 2004; Hargreaves, Purves, Welch & Marshall, 2007; MacDonald, Hargreaves & Miell, 2002). Until fairly recently, emphasis within psychological research has been on how people arrive at their self-definitions through looking backwards toward past experiences that influenced and shaped an individual's present self-view.

In 1986, Markus and Nurius responded to what they viewed as the neglect of future-oriented aspects of self-definition by proposing the construct of possible selves. The possible selves framework is based on multiple layers of extant theory and research, but its emergence as a focal point for identity research has energized discussion about what people hope to become, expect to become, or fear becoming in the future. While the possible selves construct has generated a large body of research during the past twenty years (see Packard & Conway, 2006), its influence has yet to be reflected within music education research. As of this writing, there is no readily accessible research study, dissertation, or peer-reviewed journal article focused on explication of the possible selves construct and potential implications for music education.

Purpose and Procedures

Choral music teachers who seek to increase the participation and retention of boys in choral music should first understand the reasons boys provide about why they sing, what attracts

or discourages them from participation in choral music, and what factors facilitate continued participation beyond adolescence (Freer, 2006; Harrison, 2008). The purpose of this article is to present a systematic review of literature concerning the possible selves construct and consider its potential for informing research about the participation of adolescent boys in choral music. To that end, this review summarizes theoretical antecedents of the possible selves construct, identifies central findings of possible selves research with adolescent populations, isolates related literature in music education, and offers suggestions for practice and further research. This systematic review followed the model developed by Petticrew and Roberts (2006), suggested as an appropriate review method ‘when it is known that there is a wide range of research on a subject but where key questions remain unanswered’ (p. 21).

The empirical investigations included in this review were conducted from 1986, when Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced the construct of possible selves, to the present. The published studies were located and screened according to procedures developed by Littell, Corcoran, and Pillai (2008). Database search terms included *possible selves*, *identity*, *adolescence*, *music*, and *gender* in various combinations. All peer-reviewed articles with the term *possible selves* in the abstract were read in their entirety, as were books, chapters and dissertations identified with the terms *possible selves*, *adolescence*, and *music*. Abstracts with other combinations of the search terms were scanned for relevance to the possible selves construct. The search yielded 72 research investigations, and the reference lists from those investigations were examined to identify the historical, theoretical, and empirical sources that may be considered foundational to the understanding of the possible selves construct. For this review, foundational sources were those referenced in at least 18 (25%) of the 72 investigations. Additionally included in this review were peer-reviewed articles about male participation in

choral music. These are considered representative and are not presented as exhaustive. Finally, the review included several articles, conference presentation abstracts and position papers identified through a search with the combined terms of *possible selves* and *music education*.

This review included quantitative and qualitative investigations, theoretical writings and historical texts. The sources vary substantially in design, methodological rigor, assessment, and analysis. For this reason, a narrative, synthetic approach (Boote & Beile, 2005; Hart, 1998; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) was selected as the presentation format for this systematic review.

Background and Theoretical Perspectives

The 'Missing Males' in Choral Music

There is a long history of empirical research and practitioner-based literature noting a decline in the number of adolescent males who participate in choral music as they progress through middle school (generally grades 6-8 in the United States) and into high school (see Freer, 2006). Studies indicate that boys withdraw from choral singing during secondary school because of a lack of male role models, the changing voice, choral music's relevance to career goals, and issues surrounding male identity (Demorest, 2000; Phillips, 1988). Current research in the fields of medicine and education additionally points toward differences in how boys and girls learn during adolescence, and the traditional, conductor-focused instructional methods prominent in choral music education are often at odds with this emerging knowledge base (Freer, 2007). These factors may be reflected in the disproportionate attrition of boys from middle school choral programs, not only in the United States but as reported in research throughout the western hemisphere (e.g. Harrison, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008; Quinn, 2004). The topic of these 'missing males' in choral music has featured prominently within the profession's journals during

the past century (Freer, 2008a; Gates, 1989; Koza, 1993), with discussions centering on peripheral issues such as the allure of sports programs, problems with academic schedules, lack of financial resources, and the negative influences of popular culture. Research supporting the construct of possible selves may provide a complementary avenue toward understanding this problem.

Possible Selves and Identity Development

Narrative-based research techniques have begun to point toward the importance of understanding the experience of music-makers on their own terms, understanding their individual perspectives and perceptions. When adolescent students perceive themselves as failures in music, that self-perception may become their expectation for all future experiences in music (Ruddock & Leong, 2005). The construct of possible selves allows glimpses into the self-views of individuals, including their self-identities within social contexts (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The collaborative nature of ensemble music making provides one such social context, with the choral music experience requiring a complex interaction of self-awareness and social awareness.

The possible selves framework is consistent with a social constructivist view of identity development (Dunkel & Anthsis, 2001; Grotevant, 1987), the current prevailing view within adolescent education (Moshman, 2005; Roseth, Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Within this view, people actively create their personal realities as they interact with others, and these realities are more than just filters for perceiving experiences – these realities can influence what experiences are engaged in, reshaping and reinforcing that reality in a continuous cycle. These realities and their related experiences become our self-stories, narratives that define who we are, who we have been, and who we may be in the future. These self-stories are, collectively, our possible selves.

The notion of possible selves offers a unique way to help adolescents identify and work toward attainable self-goals. Some goals and self-conceptions are tentative and fleeting. Those that persist become enduring interpretive structures that help form self-identity.¹ However transitory or lasting, these goals and self-conceptions reflect what an individual cares about, thinks about, and spends time and energy on (Oyserman, 2007).

The relationship between identity and future-oriented conceptions of the self has historical origins in William James' (1910) references to the 'Me of the Past,' the 'Immediate Present Me,' and the 'Potential Social Me.' James proposed that we narrow possibilities for the selves we might become, eventually dropping desired selves when it becomes evident they will never be attained. James (1890) argued that past experiences become part of our self-identity only when they continue to evoke the same emotions as they did originally. James' work influenced a line of research that extended through the twentieth century (Bandura, 1982; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Freud, 1925; Rogers, 1951; Sullivan, 1953) and is reflected in present understandings of adolescent psychological development (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005).

Possible Selves and Adolescence

Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (1990) similarly holds that we seek to repeat optimal experiences in which we have enjoyed success, and this motivation causes us to create opportunities that match our growing levels of skill with appropriate levels of challenge. We do not seek to repeat experiences in which we have not enjoyed success unless something about the experience motivates us to persist and continue striving incrementally for that success (Dweck, 2000). Optimal experiences help to organize thoughts and behaviors as we construct our self-definitions (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Sharp, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsille

& Ranieri, 2007), and characteristics of optimal experiences for adolescents include the provision for autonomy, relatedness to others, and a sense of competency and control (Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed & McGregor, 2006).

In their studies on adolescence, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have identified the importance for young people to focus on their futures and decide upon life tasks and futures that are self-satisfying (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001). This builds on Erikson's earlier model of psychosocial development (1968), positing that adolescence is the life phase focused on identity development during which young people try on possible selves without commitment or self-definition (see Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

Research does indicate that adolescents in middle school and early high school try on – or hypothesize about – more possible selves than do people at other ages (Cross & Markus, 1991). It is important to note that while these adolescents may be trying on possible selves, they do not necessarily have the strategies to achieve those possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). However, the large number of possible selves envisioned by adolescents occurs with an increase in the number of feared possible selves – the selves they don't wish to become but see as possibilities (see Aikins, Bierman & Parker, 2005). This parallels the large body of research indicating that adolescence is a time of anxiety and self-doubt.

One implication is that if we wish adolescents to try on the possible self of choral musician, we need to provide them with the tools to do it successfully. Research does show that the exploration process alone does not move adolescents toward identifying with a possible self. This is only achieved when behavioral action is directed toward the goal of realizing a possible self (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001; see Leondari, Syngollitou & Kiosseoglou, 1998). Choral music

educators must design instruction that supports adolescent singers as they identify future musical goals, envision routes toward achieving those goals, and acquire the musical knowledge and skills required of those goals.

Possible Selves in Music

Research in Music and Music Education

Research on possible selves has grown to include over 200 published articles and over 50 dissertations (Packard & Conway, 2006). Of those focused on adolescent concerns, topics include academic achievement, school persistence, career expectations, self-esteem, delinquency, identity development, school-connectedness, and altruistic behaviors (Kerpelman & Dunkel, 2006). The research framed by possible selves has primarily been psychological, with other studies examining a diversity of topics from physical health to marketing.

In music, the construct of possible selves has entered into only a few research reports. These musical studies have primarily focused on the identity development of professional musicians, often embedded within the broader contexts of motivation and achievement (e.g. Burland, 2006). One consistent finding within this limited group is that there is a strong positive relationship between active involvement with music making and self-identity as a musician (Hallam & Prince, 2003). Additional evidence from this research set suggests that musicians need to have mental images of their potential musical achievements if they are to sustain the energy necessary for prolonged practice over great periods of time (Papageorgi, Hallam & Welch, 2007). These possible selves often are embodied in role models such as music teachers, musical adults, or professional musicians. Strong role models can help maintain a musician's

possible self even when dealing with negative experiences and setbacks along the developmental journey.

Conceptually linked to the possible selves framework is Monks' (2003) finding that adolescents are acutely aware of their changing voices and do not readily distinguish between this limited phase of physical development and their broader sense of musical identity. In a related review of motivation research in music education, Hallam (2002) notes that 'the role of peers, the school environment and the wider community in sustaining motivation have been relatively little explored . . . there has been even less research examining the way that these interact together to generate or reduce enthusiasm for and commitment to music.' Several recent studies have begun to explore these interactions with a specific focus on the influence that choral conductors have on motivation, persistence, and the developing musical identities of their students (Arasi, 2007; Durrant, 2005; Stickford, 2004; XXX, in press).

Possible Selves and the Musical Classroom

Theory and empirical evidence support the importance of learning environments that meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Similar to the research on environments that facilitate flow experiences, research about the match between the developmental stage of adolescents and the environmental 'fit' highlight the need for autonomy, support, relatedness, and competence (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman & Flanagan, 1993). Related research in middle school choral music rehearsals underscores these points (Freer, 2008b). When there is a better 'fit' between the adolescent and the learning environment, then engagement, motivation, and performance can be expected to improve.²

One of the theorized cognitive developments during adolescence is the ability to envision hypothetical conceptions of the self (Harter, 1990; see Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002). While adolescents are generally capable of hypothesizing about their possible selves, they do not yet have complete mastery of the skills necessary for achieving those possible selves – particularly in music. Music educators must provide strategies for individual students to practice and master these skills within the context of large-ensemble rehearsals. Key to this is a growing body of research indicating that both young and older adolescents need these strategies to be authentic and connected with their developing social identities (Freer, 2009; Arasi, 2007; Stickford, 2004). Young people need repertoire that matches their developmental needs as musicians, learning environments that match their developmental needs as adolescents, and role models for their possible future role as a musician within a complex web of social connections.

The imagining of possible selves provides for a sense that change is possible, fueling both optimism and effort (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) have noted, the imagining of future possibilities based on perceived competencies becomes increasingly central for positive self-esteem during adolescence. Research indicates that adolescents who believe that *positive* possible selves *are likely* to be attained have higher self-esteem than those who do not (Knox, Funk, Elliott & Bush, 1998; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson, 2004). It can be inferred that adolescents who believe that positive musical possible selves are likely to be attained will have a higher musical self-concept than those who do not (Vispoel, 1995).

Implications for the 'Missing Males' Problem in Choral Music

Choral Music as Social Experience

Research indicates that perceptions of self-esteem are domain-specific rather than global (Anderman & Anderman, 1998; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Self-esteem, therefore, can vary from domain to domain. Self-esteem and related feelings of self-efficacy are critical to the development of positive possible selves within any of those domains (Bandura, 2001; Oyserman, 2007). The social context of adolescent music ensembles is an important contributor to the development of a positive possible self in music – especially when ensembles are the dominant vehicles for music education in a school. As Anthony Viggiano wrote in a 1941 *Music Educators Journal* article,

Any experienced teacher of adolescence knows that too large a percentage of boys are banded together in their aversion to singing, and not without reason. We should first try to understand boys themselves and look at the problem from their point of view. We are as much educators as musicians, and we must know adolescence and all its thoughts, ambitions and social interpretations. (p. 62)

When Markus and Nurius developed the construct of possible selves, they aimed for a framework for understanding aspirations of individuals in relation to society and history as uniquely understood by those individuals (Markus, 2006). The interaction between personal values and social context is nearly indistinguishable for adolescents. Adolescents examine their valued social contexts for images of future selves that appear to be possible for 'people like me.' When those images are missing in choral music, for example, it is difficult or impossible to

develop a positive possible self that involves choral music experiences (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Adolescents search for evidence that they can become the kind of person that others in their social network can become or have become.

Related Research Findings

Recent additional research has yielded several key points that highlight or address components of the ‘missing males’ problem in choral music. A list of these key points is presented below, followed by implications from possible selves research that might assist in guiding responses to these findings:

- a. A sense of belonging is critical for the formation of a healthy self-concept during late childhood and adolescence (see Daniels & Leaper, 2006). Recent analyses indicate this to be as important for males as for females (Knox, 2006).
- b. Societal expectations for boys and girls are different, leading to the encouragement or discouragement of certain choices based on gender or biological sex (Lips, 2004). Possibly related is the finding that adolescent females tend to hold more well defined possible selves for themselves than do their male peers, perhaps owing to the earlier psychological maturity of female adolescents (Honora, 2002).
- c. A variety of research findings indicate that the self-esteem of adolescent females is generally oriented toward interpersonal relations, whereas male self-esteem is more oriented toward the self, with energies directed toward uniqueness, competence and possible superiority in a given domain (Block & Robins, 1993; Curry, Trew, Turner & Hunter, 1994; Knox, et al., 1998; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Many adolescent

- males create feared selves that relate to the stereotypically female domains of emotion and expression (Knox, 2006).
- d. Though research in music education indicates that adolescents attribute their musical success to ability rather than to effort (e.g., Schmidt, 1995; Legette, 1998; Ruddock & Leong, 2005), research beyond music education suggests that adolescent girls perceive effort to be more important than ability while adolescent boys perceive ability to be more important than effort (see Knox, 2006; Eccles, Barber, Jozefowicz, Malenchuck & Vida, 1999; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sax, 2007). The emphasis for adolescent males is related to feelings of competence (Bowker, 2006).
 - e. International studies of adolescents indicate that females tend to participate in a much wider range of school and extra-curricular activities than do males (Feldman & Matjasko, 2007; Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2003). This is related to research suggesting that adolescent males tend to strongly identify with a single possible self that highlights one of their abilities while other possible selves are excluded or discarded (see Sharp, 2007).
 - f. Adolescent boys spend significantly more time thinking about their negative possible selves than do females. This includes strategizing about how to avoid the realization of these negative possible selves (Dunkel, 2000).
 - g. The possible selves of boys related to being a 'good student' decline during the middle school years (Anderman, Maehr & Hicks, 1994; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

A strong finding from the research literature is that boys seek experiences where they can be successful (see Knox, 2006). For example, their developing physique leads many boys toward athletics, just as the same physical development results in the changing adolescent male

voice (Bowker, 2006; Messner, 1989). When boys can use their developing bodies to achieve success in athletics while simultaneously experiencing failure in choral music, the quote by the American adventure author Zane Grey (1909) becomes more and more of a reality: ‘All boys love baseball. If they don’t they’re not real boys’ (p. 1).

Following these points, it may be logical to think of the following generalization:

- a. Boys desire skill and competence (Bowker, 2006; Sadker & Sadker, 1994);
- b. For various reasons, choral music educators do not emphasize the vocal skills necessary for adjusting to newly-changing male voices (Freer, 2006, 2007);
- c. Adolescent boys become frustrated at the lack of success and withdraw from choral music, moving toward possible selves in other domains because of the need for competence (Bowker, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001; Daniels & Leaper, 2006);
- d. The boys that remain in choral music see an increased ratio of girls to boys, and see the possible self of ‘choral musician’ as predominantly feminine (Harrison, 2008; Lips, 2004);
- e. Many remaining adolescent boys withdraw from choral music, perhaps because of a lack of peers (Freer, 2009; Harrison, 2008). However, research suggests that there may be a feared possible self that emerges in these circumstances (e.g. Dunkel, 2002).

Implications from Possible Selves Research

There are some implications arising from the possible selves research that suggest how we might begin to address this ‘missing males’ problem in choral music in a more

comprehensive and systematic manner than has been previously discussed in the related literature. Two of these implications involve the elaboration and proximity of possible selves.

First, the literature suggests that well-elaborated possible selves are particularly motivating (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Schouten, 1991). Research with adolescents indicates that those who demonstrate both academic success and persistence possess two distinct qualities: they attribute success to effort, and they envision possible selves that are specific and well elaborated with strategies for achieving them (Oyserman, Dybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Since it has been established that adolescent boys tend to attribute their success to ability rather than effort, choral music educators might purposefully shift their pedagogical approach to reflect the view that singing involves a specific skill set that can be developed across time. This approach is consistent with current understandings of identity development, constructivist learning theory, the anatomy and physiology of singing, and the development of musical skill. This approach is inconsistent with conductor-dominated choral rehearsals of repertoire far removed from student experience. Instead, adolescent boys need skill-based instruction and information about their changing voices. Choral teachers need to engage these boys as ‘co-musicians’ rather than teachers and students (Custodero, 2003; Freer, 2007) in classrooms where *making* music is the focus and *learning about* music supports that focus. Boys need to be taught how to read in the bass clef before they get to middle school and encounter bass clef notation in their octavos. They need role models of other successful boys in choral music. In one recent study of adolescent male choristers, each boy who persisted in choral music noted that the inspiration of an older male singer was the strongest influence on his success (Freer, 2009).

A second finding from the possible selves literature that might address the ‘missing males’ problem is related to the issue of male role models. Research indicates that when a possible self feels close, individuals are more motivated to take action toward the realization of that possible self than when the possible self feels distant (Strahan & Wilson, 2006). In other words, people take specific steps toward the realization of positive possible selves, but only when those possible selves can be realistically imagined. Addressing this issue of proximity within choral music education might mean the active promotion of older males as peer role models for potential possible selves. It might also mean that teachers should focus on longer-term goals than learning repertoire for the next concert, with focus shifting toward the incremental steps and successes of musical development that move adolescent boys closer to their possible selves. As choirs of adolescents retain more boys, the supply of male role models will become self-sustaining.

Implications for Research

When establishing potential directions for possible selves research within music education, it will be necessary to clearly articulate ‘possible selves’ and how the construct is employed within research methodology and analyses. A recent review of possible selves research during the past two decades revealed distinct differences in how researchers have approached and interpreted the construct (Packard & Conway, 2006).

The possible selves construct was originally assessed through a structured survey called the Possible Selves Questionnaire (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and this remains the dominant research method in the field. Use of structured surveys and questionnaires is indicated by theoretical views wherein personal identity is conceived of as a set of schemas (Markus & Wurf,

1987) and wherein the researcher's role on the 'emic-etic' continuum is that of an outsider who seeks information (Packard & Conway, 2006). Increasingly common are narrative techniques where personal identity is viewed as an unfinished account that can be co-constructed with the researcher (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin, 2006; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Whitty, 2002). Reports by possible selves researchers indicate that adolescents seem to respond most favorably through structured surveys that are delivered during face-to-face sessions with researchers rather than completing surveys or writing stories without verbal interaction (Hooker, 1992; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Researchers of possible selves within music education will need to be clear about how their view of identity both guides and is guided by theory and methodology.

Hazel Markus, an originator of the possible selves construct, has called for more attention to how social environments and school communities are structured to support positive possible selves (Markus, 2006). There is some literature related to this topic that has emerged from the growing body of narrative research in music education. In this regard, it has been suggested that research about adolescent male choral singers needs to focus on three groups: those who have sung consistently and successfully, those who once sang in chorus but who have withdrawn, and those who never sang at all (Freer, 2006). Future research might include carefully constructed longitudinal studies of how possible selves develop in music generally and in choral music specifically. Also needed are longitudinal studies of adolescent male singers that reveal issues surrounding transition and persistence from elementary to middle school to high school and beyond.

As the music education profession moves to more substantively understand the issues and challenges related to the 'missing males' problem in choral music, researchers may see

opportunities provided by the construct of possible selves as a framework for both research and practice.

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Footnotes

¹Though it is beyond the scope of this article's discussion, it should be noted that there are theoretical distinctions between the conceptions of 'self-concept,' 'self-efficacy,' and 'self-esteem.' Usher and Pajares (2008) have critically reviewed the literature about these conceptions. Brinthaupt, Lipka & Wallace (2007) additionally note the disagreement about interactions between self-esteem and self-concept in young adolescents.

²See Brinthaupt, Lipka and Wallace (2007) for an overview of current conceptions regarding the interaction between adolescent identity development and appropriate instructional practice.