

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed scholarly journal of the



Volume 3, No. 3
December 2004

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Electronic Article

Growing Into the Role Empowerment of a Music Educator Through Application of a Symbolic Interaction Theory Patricia J. Cox

This Article is part of the Proceedings of the
Third Symposium on a Sociology of Music Education
April 10-12, 2003, at the University of North Texas
Published as a special service by ACT

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ISSN 1545-4517

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ACT Journal <http://act.maydaygroup.org>

See the MayDay Group website at: <http://www.maydaygroup.org>

Growing Into The Role

Empowerment of a Music Educator Through Application of Symbolic Interaction Theory

Patricia J. Cox, Harding University

Introduction and Background

Readers may think this paper represents a presumptuous nature on the part of the author. How could I possibly suggest that my own story can be generalized to the rest of you? I certainly admit that this is only my case, but it represents close to a fifteen-year process of integrating a theoretical framework into my character. In this paper, I weave the scholarly and theoretical components into the reality of a lived experience, a tapestry of my life, and an autobiographical study.

I was born to upper middle class parents, the older of two daughters. My parents have a college education and my dad has a masters degree. Three of my grandparents had a college education. Ours was a traditional family in that mother and father still live together. Attending church and Sunday school were important weekly activities. My father followed his family's tradition of strong male church leaders. He lead singing, preached, and taught Bible classes. They expected both daughters to marry, bear children, and become homemakers.

Singing was a very important family and church tradition. No musical instruments were used in worship. Everyone sang, congregational style, with a distinctive energy level, and in four parts (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). My father held Saturday morning singing classes for children in which he taught us to sight-sing using sol-fas. He organized church choruses to sing on radio shows, and at funerals or weddings. He trained young men to match pitches and lead singing. We rehearsed, regularly, with my Dad's choruses. He would work with each section, individually, so that, from an early age, it became easy to hear all four parts.

Mother's family had equally strong traditions. They regularly attended church and Sunday school, but they enjoyed piano and organ accompaniment to singing. Mother

dutifully studied piano and majored in music during her college career. She was often my father's accompanist at parties and sang alto in his church choruses. I can recall their arguments over systems of notation. Mother preferred oval notes while Dad insisted that shaped notes were easier to understand.

I entered college directly from high school, attending a church-related institution. My family paid all of my expenses during my undergraduate years. I married my college violin teacher and we had four children. All of this changed abruptly when we were divorced and I became the main source of income for my children and myself. At this point, my chosen career of music educator took on greater significance. Instead of considering work as ancillary to nurturing children and keeping house, I began to view it as essential to our survival.

Growing Into an Occupational Role

The concept of occupational roles as learned social behavior has been the subject of research based on symbolic interaction theory since the mid 1900s. Although the strongest influence comes from early childhood, there is evidence that professional socialization is a life-long process (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Brim, 1966; Carper, 1970a; Carper, 1970b; Carper, 1970c; Cox, 1994). The background for this paper involved a 15-year dialogue with self, knowledge of symbolic interactionist framework, and the hope that this information might instigate further investigation into the deeper meanings of professional role development as a music educator. We know that there is far more to the carving of a work role in music education (Cox, 1994; Roberts, 1990; Roberts, 1993a) than simply learning the ins and outs of music and how people learn. Important issues from childhood and adolescence about gender, family, and religion affect our perception of occupational identity.

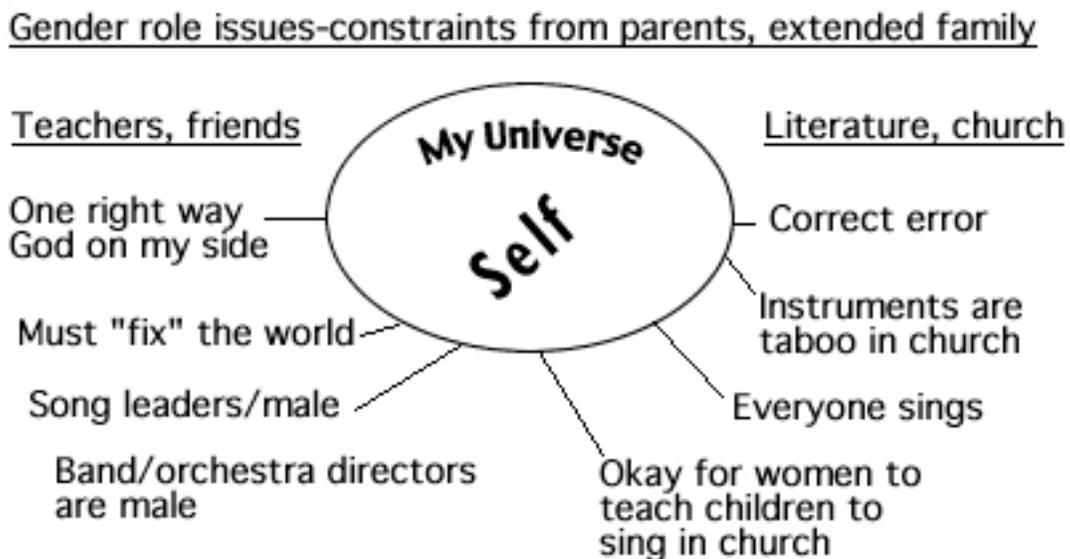
Questions surfaced during this time. For example, is there a way to use self-observation in the process of inquiry about women's work role development in music education? How can we look into our hearts and seek the truth within (Moustakas, 1990)? How did application of Symbolic Interaction Theory contribute to a music educator's respect for and understanding of the process of teaching and learning?

The purpose of this paper is to present aspects of professional development, using a narrative case-history approach. This paper represents my own case as an illustration of the kind of integrative experience that may occur as women assume professional careers.

Early Childhood Impressions

We know that our childhood experiences have the strongest impact on our social development and provide a framework for life (Brim, 1966; Cooley, 1922; Denzin, 1977; Elkin, 1960; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1967; Sullivan, 1940, 1953). My childhood was traditional in the sense that gender roles were clearly defined by parents, extended family (Berger and Luckman, 1966), church, friends, teachers, and literature like the Dick and Jane school text books (Kismaric and Heiferman, 1996). There was little need to ask questions because the answers were already given. It seemed that there was one right way to live to please God and go to heaven when we died. There was little room for deviation from the one, right, prescribed way. After all, *ours* was the best way to live. It was based upon superior knowledge and our mission was to “fix” the rest of the world, to stamp-out and correct error. It was during this post-war era that social roles for men and women seemed to be clearly delineated (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Early socialization–framework for life



The specificity regarding gender roles in the home and church extended to occupational roles. My mother and grandmother worked at home. There were virtually no visible female role models who directed musical ensembles. Women like my mother and her aunt, often taught private piano lessons in their homes. If they taught music in schools, it was commonly done in elementary grades. In church, instrumental music was taboo. There was a tradition of singing and the song leaders were all male. As a child, it seemed that my own father was the *best* leader. His voice was outstanding and people asked him to sing solos for weddings and funerals. Family reunions were similar to church in that time was spent singing sacred songs and hymns. Everyone enjoyed singing, but the leaders (usually my father) were always male and there were no instruments played while family members sang church songs. It was acceptable in my particular church for women to teach children to sing and for men or women to play instruments, anywhere, except in church. Many things were learned during early childhood through symbolic interaction regarding gender roles and music. The ones mentioned here were the sources of greatest conflict during adult years.

Adolescence and Young Adulthood Impressions

Research evidence supports the idea (Clark-Lempers, Lempers and Ho, 1991; Saltiel, 1986; Woelfel, 1972) that adolescent and young adult socialization concepts were viewed from earlier experiences, and the process continued to develop (Berger & Luckman, 1966). In my own case, well-learned, elitist concepts from my early childhood bore the fruit of intolerance during adolescent years. Now an advancing violinist, there was an equally increasing distaste for certain aspects of music such as rock-and-roll, saxophones, electric guitars, and trap drum sets.

Gender roles continued to be related to occupational issues during adolescent and young adult years. It was understood that college degrees were desirable goals, but also, that child bearing and family should occupy our greatest challenge. Instructors of undergraduate music education courses were “preparing” students to teach all educational

levels while making informal comments about girls taking jobs on the elementary level. There was the explicit understanding that our career choice of music educator was a second option to marriage and family. L'Roy (1983) found that music education was often a second-choice major field to an applied area or, for women, homemaking and child bearing. Research evidence implies that socialization for males is different from the process for females (Clark-Lempers et al., 1991; Denzin, 1966; Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, and Coleman, 1992; Saltiel, 1986). Other assumptions of the "me" during adolescence and young adulthood included believing that stringed instruments were too difficult for most people to play, concerts were aesthetic experiences for all the listeners and the performers, good music was an art form, music was a universal language, and students generally lacked dedication to music.

Conflicts and Dissonance

From this childhood background, and the developing social role of music educator, conflicts and questions abounded. Most of the dissonant areas were generated from resolving childhood socialization processes with lived experiences. For example, why was it acceptable to play in an oratorio orchestra and not okay to play violins during church? With the sacred text of Handel's *Messiah* or Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and instrument in hand, there was no resolution to this unanswered question.

Figure 2: Conflicts



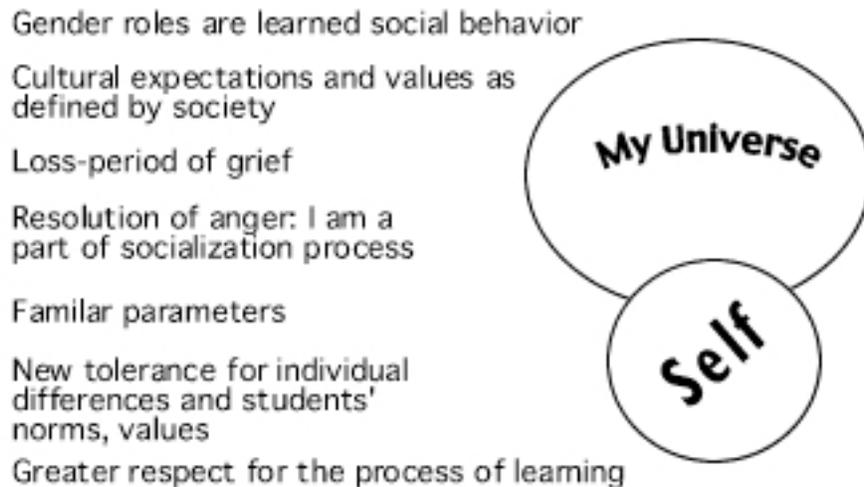
While working as an elementary music teacher or as a junior high orchestra and choir director, or a private piano and violin teacher, there was relatively little internal conflict. These roles were acceptable parts of the social framework from childhood. Becoming the primary source of income for one's family created pressing new conflicts and questions. Childhood socialization and gender roles were at the heart of many issues. Could a woman be an effective orchestra director and university faculty member? Could a woman be a leader, college professor, an expert and still be loved and accepted? Would old friends and family understand new goals for living? To whom could a woman turn for validation and role models?

With education and experience opportunities for advancement as a music educator becoming available, there were again questions and conflicts. One example involved the very existence of an orchestra on the university campus. Would it fit into the social scenario? If administrators really valued orchestra, would they have chosen a woman to do the job? Bands, with a male director, could play at ball games. Choirs, with male directors, could sing inside church buildings during congregational events. Other than homecoming musical productions, orchestras lacked social function.

Changes and Empowerment

New information was crucial for empowerment to do the work. My professional world enlarged during a doctoral residency. Class lectures, reading books and journal articles on sociological subjects, corresponding with other scholars on the Internet, and applying this information to social scenarios was enlightening and empowering. Interacting with other graduate students and faculty was encouraging because the female faculty members were experts who had defied my myth that only men should be scholarly. In the paragraphs that follow are some of the concepts that I found were most helpful.

Figure 3: Empowerment--application of SIT



Hanslick (1957), who was not a symbolic interactionist, described music as either “symbol” or “signal.” From his description, music could symbolize almost anything until a society, collectively, agree that a musical example has more definite meaning. This more definite meaning becomes a “signal.” We might say that tunes like “Jingle Bells” can “signal” the holiday season. Other musical examples like Haydn string quartets can stand-for or “symbolize” almost anything. These ideas made sense to me and partially satisfied my amazement and wonder as to how humankind seems to be enchanted by

music. Considering musical examples as “symbols” was a non-threatening experience and helped pave the way for later study.

Mead (1934), one of the early writers of symbolic interactionist literature, said that everything has symbolic meaning. The question becomes one of whether we understand the meaning. Mead presented 3 ideas of meaning, act, and symbol. These ideas are constantly changing. Mead defined self in 2 aspects, the “I” and the “me.” The “I” is known only to oneself. The “me” is the actor who does what the individual thinks the others want to see. This “act” or “gesture” is defined as any means by which an individual communicates a message. Thus, words, facial expressions, or body movement become symbols of communication.

The *thing* symbol refers to is termed referent (Cardwell, 1973). Referents may be a part of the experienced environment (empirical) or may be abstract (non-empirical). Symbols may or may not be available to the 5 senses. There may be no inherent relationship between the symbol and its referent. A symbol may stand for anything. Meaning becomes a consensus, and; knowledge of this agreed-upon meaning comes *via* socialization.

Mead (1934) spoke of others in the social environment. He said that children learn what others expect and play games where they act-out social roles. He used the term “generalized-other” to describe the concept of learning to objectify self by stepping out of the center of one’s universe and looking back, so to speak.

Cooley’s (1922) famous concept of the *looking-glass self* was important in the writer’s learning process. This aspect of symbolic interaction has 3 important elements: (1) we develop images of how we may appear to others; (2) we imagine how others judge our behavior, and; (3) we either feel good or bad about the interaction and modify our behavior or planned actions based upon the positive or negative feelings that are stimulated during symbolic interaction.

Referents take on collective value to groups of individuals. Shared values enable reference groups (Hyman, 1942) to act alike. Value is communicated by the symbol, and is attached by symbolic interaction (Cardwell, 1973). People may share the values of

individuals who are important to them in reference groups and with whom they have had satisfying relationships.

Norms may be defined as expected behaviors of a society (Cardwell, 1973). They are related to values and involve plans of action based upon what others expect.

Individuals who choose to remain connected to reference groups do so by planning actions that will conform to the others' expectations.

Vernon (1978) made an impact with these words. "Humans do not live by bread alone, but by words or symbols. 'In the beginning was the Word' . . .the beginning of basic humanness." Vernon (1978) stated that the individual exists in response to symbols, and that the response is relative to the audience and to the situation. Speaking is in response to symbols. Words are symbols that may stand for abstract ideas. The word, God, is a symbol for an abstract concept. Vernon (1978) said that symbols are "food for the soul" of humankind. By using symbols, people are able to make decisions.

My conclusion, then, was that words are just as symbolic as music. Although words have more definite meaning than music, they are no less symbols. Words and their meaning must be collectively agreed upon if they serve the situation and the audience. Cultural context has everything to do with meaning. The interaction between cultures and symbolic meaning is a continual process. Thus, meaning continues to change.

According to Symbolic Interaction Theory, symbols may be body language and gestures, facial expressions, and even dress. Groups of people choose symbols based upon situations. These reference groups collectively define symbol significance or expected behavior of members. The continual social interaction of individual members of groups creates constant behavior modification to maintain acceptance. This complex process of interaction could be applied to occupational roles.

In retrospect, the empowering process in my life began with the consideration of the concept of music as "symbol" (Hanslick, 1957). Later, the idea that words are symbols that are agreed upon by society became relevant. Heretofore, words had been considered too definite to "symbolize" meaning. Similarly, other things previously thought of as absolutes like facial expressions, body gestures, and social roles, could also be analyzed

as symbols. Individuals in the social environment of graduate school, especially female faculty members, became symbols or role models.

The idea that gender roles could be viewed as learned social behavior began to develop in my thinking. This was empowering because it provided a new framework from which to analyze values. Rather than a matter of “right” and “wrong,” it became acceptable, from a personal perspective, to question expected behavior. The analysis extended from family and church to occupation and work roles. Values could be viewed as having been defined by society.

This application of Symbolic Interaction Theory, welcomed and refreshing as it was, initiated a period of grief. There was a profound sense of loss that gradually passed with new understanding of the process of socialization and resolution of anger. This statement is an oversimplification, because the period of grief could not be rushed. The learning process brought me to the conclusion that I was a part of socialization and playing a role that was chosen. The decision to stay connected to familiar institutions of church and school was based upon perceived family needs and personal knowledge of the parameters. Learning to integrate the new information with the old framework and maintain acceptance in established circles took years of study and thought.

Maturing as a Changed Person and Music Educator

Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT) became the “key” to developing my thoughts, allowing me to analyze social processes from a less egocentric perspective. Rather than viewing social processes from a seemingly powerless stance of black and white reasoning, SIT enabled a more objective approach and opened new doors for higher learning, a door that has since *never closed*. New tolerance for others developed. Based upon the framework to analyze social interaction, there was no longer the drive to “fix” things. Exciting and challenging, there was the realization that many processes are at work in social scenarios. These applications were everywhere, family, work, and church. For me, personal thinking and beliefs were not the only ideas present in social environments.

A new appreciation for the idea of different *musics* began at home. My son's taste for heavy metal rock music had been intolerable to me. All of my efforts to "fix" it had failed and affected our relationship. By applying SIT, I became aware of how his choice of music functioned in his social environment. With a less egocentric approach and a more objective view, we were able to share videos and examples from his collection. I was able to admit that my mind had been closed regarding "rock" styles of popular music. Similarly, new understanding enabled me to communicate with my college-age students regarding their listening habits and choices of music to study and perform. Realizing that the social role of student has its own set of norms and values provided insight that has helped me avoid alienating students by dictating what literature they will study based totally upon norms and values of my reference groups.

Many surprises followed this enlightenment. One was a new respect for women who had chosen other traditionally male-dominated professional careers, such as medicine or law, and for women who had chosen not to bear children. As new ways of thinking opened, the old attitude that physicians and other figures of authority had to be male if they were to be trusted, vanished. Oddly enough, this less egocentric view and grief resolution brought new self-confidence and appreciation for my own work. Less self-judgment extended to all aspects of my life.

It was especially significant that a new awareness developed for the social role of students. With norms and values of their own, it was reassuring to be able to analyze this phenomenon and come to appreciate the resulting behavior. Realizing that teaching and learning involves far more than a recitation of knowledge and encompasses the life span made a difference in our relationships. The less egocentric analysis brought new tolerance for what, before, had been judged as undesirable character traits.

Similarly, new tolerance for religious icons and traditions resulted from SIT application to my experiences. The greater understanding and patience was most helpful when situations emerged, involving instrumental music and sacred text associated with traditions of church. This patience and tolerance continues to be important in my work as a music educator. Validation for the role comes from successful experiences. It is a

component part of the process that continues on a daily basis. Family, friends, colleagues, and students provide the social framework of support. The process of applying symbolic interaction not only involves analysis, but also validation from others in the social scenario. From this complex and massive resource comes my empowerment.

This paper represents a partial view into how SIT enabled me, one music educator, to integrate new learning processes into the dialogue with self. Reading books and articles, and observing others in social environments led to a reassessment of self. Although SIT was the “vehicle” used in this case, the writer realizes that other paradigms could be used to analyze life-long socialization processes.

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