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Prologue: In Search of Identity

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Prologue: In Search of Identity

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Let me tell you a story!

In 1983 I took on the editorship of the *Canadian Music Educator*. Shortly after that I received a submission for publication on the Canadian identity crisis from Angela Lannon Day (1985), an article about the implications of multiculturalism. In this paper she argues that cultural identity is, in a major way, formed through the arts and it is, therefore, the obligation of university instructors who teach in the arts to teach a pride in country. This would generally be an unproblematic proposition except that I knew at the time the majority of music instructors in Canadian universities were, in fact, Americans. I became somewhat interested in the idea because we really didn't have anything that I knew of that really demonstrated the nationality make-up of my colleagues nor was I sure that the whole thing was really all that critical. But it nagged at me and when shortly thereafter we started a music education research journal through the CMEA, the new editor asked me to write something for the inaugural issue. So I constructed a little study to actually show the nationality mix of our music professoriate by analyzing the educational background of music faculty at three major Canadian universities. It came as little surprise, at least to me, that my point was confirmed. This begged the question for me then as to what country these music instructors were going to teach a pride in, given that the majority were not even Canadian.

I wasn't actually sure if there was difference in learning to play the bassoon from an American rather than from a Canadian, but the idea that nationality could somehow impact the learning of our students was not all that farfetched to me. I had completed doctoral level studies in voice performance in Germany and I was keenly aware of the nationality issues I enjoyed there in both technique as well as repertoire.

As a result I decided to see if I could find out what sort of influence instructor nationality might actually have on our music students in Canada. Straight off I recognized that this was a social science problem and one that I was sadly under-prepared to tackle, not

having had a single sociology course in my many years of post-secondary education. I, however, developed a clever plan and went on the search for a British sociologist who may have taught in Canada or the USA during summer school. This was a quite common occurrence in those years so I was sure I'd find a suitable research partner. And, in fact, one of my private voice students put me on to a likely prospect at the University of Sterling in Scotland. After some preliminary emails, which at that point in time was not the taken-for-granted form of communication it is today, I made a journey to the Highlands to chat with one Steve Waterhouse. Steve listened to my pitch and after a couple of hours announced that he wasn't interested. Why, you might ask—because I certainly did. Well, there were two fairly compelling reasons. The first was that Steve was new to the university and his advancement there depended, at that time significantly, on getting new doctoral students—not overseas research partners. The second reason was even more daunting, because he pointed out that what I was trying to do simply could not be done. Why, you might ask again (I did too). Well, he said, you can't assign influence in a process that you know nothing about. In other words, we had no information at all as to how a music student became a musician in the university music school at all. Today we would be able to say that we had no understanding of the process of identity construction employed by the students trying to become musicians in a music institution. Of course we were well aware that one practiced a lot, but other than that there was no documentation in the research literature to show how this process worked. In addition to that, we had no sociological studies that showed how music schools worked either.

In other words, we were, so to speak, no-where.

All of this made me even more determined; and so to solve the first issue I once again became a doctoral student. This time in sociology. I was too worked up over the project at the moment to fully comprehend what I had done but I signed up and we went to work.

The first thing was then to see where to begin. We could start with music sociology, and we found that there was almost none of it except some excellent recent stuff from John Shepherd et al. (1977) and Graham Vulliamy (1977a, 1977b, 1978), with some other colleagues in the U.K. They had studied music as a social phenomenon and published a significant amount about the kind of music that ended up in classrooms (rock music vs. classical for example). This provided an excellent entry point for looking at the sociological construct of a university music school since, it may come as little surprise, they all tended to support classical rather than rock music—and certainly without exception at that time.

Another radical study in the U.S.A. was by Henry Kingsbury (1984 and later 1988) who hid away in a music school as a pretend student and studied music as a social phenomena.

The history of research in music education up to this time was largely, if not almost exclusively, quantitative studies based on psychological discipline precedents. As far as the couple of studies that looked at music students or music education students they were about “role,” a concept of people filling jobs. In other words, there is a defined job—music teacher—and your job was to prepare yourself to take on that role as effectively as possible. Kadushin (1969) studied the professional self-concept of music students. This was along the lines of “Who do you see yourself as—flute player or taxi driver, singer or waitress?” He was interested to see if the role that these students had prepared themselves for survived into the working world where they were doing other things. In other words, what role were you playing in your mind? Somewhat later, DiAnn L’Roy (1983) at the University of North Texas studied the development of occupational identity in music education majors.

Kingsbury and L’Roy provided two very important but quite different steps in the process. Kingsbury utilized a fairly new approach to music research called “participant observation.” You laugh at the thought now that this was new in music education research at one time, but it was. This led me to the discovery of a monograph by Hildegard Froehlich titled “Systematische Beobachtung als Methode musikpädagogischer Unterrichtsforschung.” That’s quite a mouthful, but I did study voice in Germany for many years. This paper describes the uses and benefits of participant observation techniques in research. Since I had decided that this would be a major part of the approach I would take with my research I decided it would be best to seek out this Froehlich. I found her at the University of North Texas where, by coincidence, she had just supervised the dissertation by L’Roy. Hildegard continues to be one of the leading scholars in the promulgation of sociological research world-wide and a founding contributor to the international symposia series on the sociology of music education.

Steve and I discovered that there were really two parts to my study. The first was to examine the sociological make-up of the music school itself (the *Locus in quo*) and then secondly, find out how the students became musicians in that environment. As a complicating factor, as if our work were not difficult enough already, we decided to be interested only in music education students in this whole thing.

As an aside here, I might point out that the research study was planned for more than 100 hour long interviews with music students and faculty. Most large scale studies of institutions had been undertaken by large teams of researchers (see for example Becker et al. 1961). For a single researcher this was a daunting task. Once completed, these interviews were all transcribed, generating around 7000 pages of transcripts. There were no computer programs like Nud*ist, Atlas, or Ethnograph back then so a system needed to be developed to analyze the data. Before computers arrived on desktops, the method that was employed was to take a large number of shoe boxes and label them with the analytical categories and then cut the pages of the transcripts up with scissors and place the little bits of paper into the appropriate boxes. Then, when you set out to further study the category, you took all these little cuts of paper and organized them and then wrote from these materials. I therefore developed a system to do that very thing on the rather primitive desktop computer that I had available at the time. In order to do the job, I made a series of files to represent my shoe boxes and then I wrote a large macro for WordPerfect that allowed me to read through a transcript and when I found a passage that appeared relevant to one of my analytical categories, allowed me to block the text section and then run the macro which let me identify the “shoe box file” by a letter code, and the macro copied the blocked text to the file and added the name of the file and page number from the source and then dropped the cursor back at the end of the material previously selected. When the next step of the analysis took place, each “shoe box file” could be retrieved and the contents then sorted and copied, as needed, into the final document. So the coding of the source documents became a process of slicing into pre-established files. Since the categories were not totally predetermined, these files were just labeled “a” through “z” and eventually “aa” through “zz” and a coding sheet beside the computer identified the actual contents of the categories. As new categories came to light, they could be named and assigned to one of the previously created shoe box files. (Roberts 1988)

L’Roy’s study provided a strong first step because, underpinning her work, was the notion that symbolic interactionism could be used as a sociological model on which to build a grounded theory.

There were also some similar studies in other academic areas, particularly medicine. The most important turned out to be the study “The Boys in White” (Becker et al. 1961). This was the type of study that looked at how medical students became doctors. Not quite an

identity study yet but the seeds were all planted. Howard Becker became a pivotal influence altogether in the end. His theory of jazz musicians as “outsiders” (Becker 1964, 1973) provided the essential building blocks on which my ultimate identity construction theory was based.

In the end my study was reported in three monographs. The first, *A Place to Play* (Roberts 1991a), is a sociological analysis of the university school of music. The title works on several levels but is intended to demonstrate that this “place” is where students “play” both at music and at “acting out” their identities, and the book tries to expose the identity-constructing environment. The second, *I, Musician* (Roberts 1993), is an analysis of the process of becoming a musician in this school of music environment. The third, *Musician: A Process of Labelling* (Roberts 1991c), is a short theoretical work on how an identity is formed, and the grounded theory of that process that grew out of the research. These are all available now online at <http://DrBrianRoberts.com/Publications.html>. A summary of the entire research can be found in Roberts 1991b.

As the flow of journal articles appeared, other researchers picked up on this momentum and went on to construct other research agendas that fell back on my work as precedent. The first and most important was the work undertaken by Swedish researcher, Christer Bouij. Bouij’s research extended the time frame of encounter with his subjects and as a result was able to witness both the construction of this musician identity I had identified but also was able to see it transform as the students went into their first teaching positions. He added a dynamic to my rather linear model to account for what happened when students had to move from one of four identity sectors into any of the others. These sectors were (a) all-round musician, (b) pupil-centered teacher, (c) performer, and (d) content-centered teacher. His work can be seen in Bouij 1998.

The outgrowth of this research led to a number of other studies relating to the central theme of the preparation of teacher or performer (e.g.: White 1996; Mark 1998; Bouij 1998; Ralph 1999). It also led to some interesting side discussions that are still appearing in the literature. One that seems relevant to this discussion is that in former times, sociologists held to a notion of validity and reliability in their research on a principle of “disinterested scientific onlooker” (Schutz 1964). Validity tends to be a discussion of whether the results are “valid” in a way that argues that the report is a thorough and true representation of the stated claim of the research. Reliability tends to be a statistical concept where the researcher either splits

responses and compares one half to the other or a repeated protocol used to compare results. If the numbers say the answers are close enough then the researcher claims the research is “reliable.” Qualitative researchers have been skeptical of this for a couple of reasons. Firstly, as on-lookers into a world that we study, we must make sense and derive patterns out of the chaos of everyday life. One cannot re-stage an interaction for the benefit of checking a statistical reliability. Secondly, in real life there are truths that are relevant only in the abstract. I’ll offer a case in point if you please. Where I teach on campus the earth may well be flat. In the confines of my world, there is no place that a round earth has relevance. I can place a ball in the centre of my classroom and it will just stay put—it will not roll off the edge of the room or the world. So I can talk about a world where the earth is flat and mean it. In other words, the fact that the earth is round is not *meaningfully significant*. Whether there are numbers that can disprove my interpretation doesn’t matter because in my little world it simply doesn’t matter.

On the other hand, on the other side of campus we have a cold water testing tank used to show what various ship hulls will do in various kinds of ice. It is very, very long. In fact, it is so long that the researchers over there have to account for the curvature of the earth in their experimental designs. For them, there is meaningful significance.

We therefore tend to take a more practical view toward reliability and ask whether the events or interactions have any significance or are impacting in any meaningful way on the actors. This is not a statistical test but part of the interpretive posture. On the other hand, during the last quarter century of computer development, social scientists using qualitatively designed research models have made substantial advances in their abilities to use much more sophisticated analytical techniques that these new programs make possible.

The other issue is one of rapport with the subjects of our investigations. Schutz (1964) claimed reliability arose in sociological research because the researcher was disinterested. By that he meant that we were not invested with any agenda to prove or disprove. We came to a study with an open mind and said what we saw. Now, however, we have large numbers of music and music education researchers doing a lot of navel gazing, and we need to ask ourselves whether this can actually work. I spent some time with this earlier, in a published piece in the *CRME Bulletin* (Roberts 1994/95; see also Roberts 1994). Sociologists spent a great deal of time trying to prove that they had gained a substantially thorough entry into a community to ensure adequate results. Because they were from outside the community under

investigation, they had to prove to their peers that they were integrated thoroughly enough to get to the real world in the day-to-day action. As members of the community under study, when music researchers investigate musical things, we need to demonstrate that we are not so blinded by our previous insider knowledge that we miss what is really going on. This dialogue continues.

Many researchers have contributed over the last quarter century to this identity debate. It has become one of the largest areas of study in education generally over this period. As a result, the research today has sprung from various scholarly histories. The ethnomusicologists played an important part as they broke ground from their own scholarly traditions. Women's Studies have also entered the fray. The single largest research agenda in this area to emerge from its own distinct scholarly tradition is the TIME (Teacher Identity in Music Education) study from England. Here is a study that was launched without a single reference to several decades of sociological research, building its substance entirely on the psychological traditions. I found reading the results of the TIME study interesting because its reports fully supported all the things previously published in the sociological traditions. This is important for several reasons, the first being that factual results so similar from both sides of the social science fence suggest we may well be on to something. Secondly, the TIME project is thorough: a large, multi-researcher undertaking, well-supported by financial and human resources. The convergence of its findings with what has been written before in sister disciplines strengthens confidence that we are on the right track in such lines of research. I have asked Graham Welch to offer some insights into the TIME project for this special issue.

Peter de Vries and I came into contact with each other when I served as the external examiner to his PhD thesis. It was a brilliant analysis of identity construction based on an autobiographical account of his life as a music student through the early years of his teaching. Peter continues to lead an interesting life and he reports here on the latest manifestations of his ever-changing identity.

Gina Ryan has witnessed an identity crisis of sorts and I asked her to write about the changes in her life. It is a brave and open account of becoming a music educator.

Will Dabback has been a long time supporter and scholar in the sociological traditions of identity research. In his contribution he offers some thoughts on the impact of identity construction in older adults. Often people construct identities around their workplace and their occupational roles. When they retire, these roles do not need filling in their lives and older

adults may experience identity crises. Will looks at how music can play a role in this stage of one's life.

Jo Saunders offers an account of her research with adolescents and their identity in music. When I read Jo's paper, I am reminded of the critique of music education made by Witkin (1974) and wonder what progress we may have made since those days. There is clearly discord between music and "school music" in the minds of these adolescents. It would be interesting to have a response to this paper by an English language teacher who continues to teach Shakespeare and Shaw, Milton and Keats. There are still many issues to discuss about the literature that makes its way into the classroom.

The paper by Gillian Stunell grapples with yet another continuing challenge: the abilities of general classroom teachers to teach music effectively in the school. Can classroom teachers construct identities that include "teacher of music"? Can we expect someone with little background in the music discipline to become effective? How will the music curriculum be built if educational leaders accept the musical limitations of the musically unexperienced teacher? This issue is not limited to England where Stunell's research was done: the implications generally are serious and very far reaching.

Today, identity research has blossomed into a cornucopia of research agendas. Some of the names of the authors in this special issue will be well known to you, others less so. All have important voices and together show the expansiveness of the research in this field. I hope you enjoy reading these contributions to our literature as much as I have enjoyed presenting them to you.

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