

Reimagining Choral Identity: Challenging the Gender Binary of a Women’s Choir

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Abstract

Dialogue surrounding gender and identity in choral ensembles is multi-faceted and complex. Although many gendered ensembles can serve as a safe space for singers, they can essentialize the experience of gender and ignore the intersectional nature of identity, thus marginalizing trans, gender-expansive, and BIPOC singers. In this paper, we introduce an intersectional feminist framework and use it to define, address, and problematize ideas surrounding empowerment, shared experiences, and gender essentialism. Themes and discussion points from this study were explored in a project that documented the experience of one women’s choir as they examined their identity as an ensemble and the suitability of their gendered name in reflecting that perceived identity. Analysis of data from individual interviews, group discussions, and anonymous surveys revealed a desire to preserve women’s empowerment and women’s spaces while promoting gender inclusivity. Throughout, we consider implications for gendered ensembles and highlight the necessity for gender research to have an intersectional approach.

Keywords

Choral music education, choral identity, inclusion, empowerment, LGBTQIA+ students, gender

Imagine the following: an experienced university choir conductor has worked for many years to champion women's rights in the choral setting. To do so, she purposefully programs music by women and marginalized composers, mentors female conductors, and facilitates conversations about women's struggles and empowerment regularly with her students. Largely as a result, the women's ensemble has flourished. Students view the ensemble as not only a place where they will make beautiful music with their choral colleagues, but also as a safe space to have difficult conversations and learn from their community.

One day, a nonbinary student approaches the conductor and says that they are not male or female. They have a treble voice, so they can sing the repertoire typically associated with a women's choir, but they wonder if they are welcome in the ensemble. The conductor thinks to herself, "*Well, of course they are welcome!*" As someone who strives to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ community and champion marginalized voices, she wonders why this was not clear to the student. She asks herself: what are she and the ensemble doing to make sure trans and gender-expansive singers know they are welcome? How is she conveying the choir's inclusivity both within and outside of the ensemble? What implicit and explicit messages are she and the choir putting out in the world?

A scenario similar to the one above was the catalyst for the project that led to the investigation described in this article. It is likely that conductors of single-gendered ensembles have either already encountered or will someday encounter this disruption to their understanding of ensemble membership. Although women's choirs can be welcoming and empowering spaces for women and treble singers, they *can* be defined by exclusion on the basis of gender, voice part, or both. As a result, women's choirs may not be inclusive spaces for singers who are not cis-gender or those who may sing tenor or bass—two voice parts that are not typically included in women's ensembles. Throughout this article, we will define, address, and problematize the ideas surrounding empowerment, shared experiences, and gender essentialism and explore how they collide with one single-gender choral ensemble's desire to create an inclusive space for women.

Women's Chorus Project

Discussion points for this article come from a research project that we facilitated with Women's Chorus (a pseudonym) in the fall semester of 2019 and early spring of 2020. Women's Chorus is a well-established auditioned ensemble at a large state

university, known for singing historical and contemporary treble repertoire on campus quarterly, in the community, and at regional, state, and national conferences. At the time of the study, both authors were second-year members of the ensemble, which included 35 undergraduate and graduate singers. Utilizing an intrinsic case study (Stake 1995) method and with IRB approval, we sought to document the experience of Women's Chorus participants examining their collective perceived identity as a choir and exploring the effectiveness of the gendered name in portraying that identity. Through anonymous surveys (Appendix A), semi-structured face-to-face individual and small group interviews (Seidman 2013; Appendix B), and a group discussion with the full Women's Chorus, we asked these overarching questions: What did being part of a women's ensemble mean to Women's Chorus members? Who did the participants think should be included in Women's Chorus? In what ways might the gendered ensemble name lead to inclusion or exclusion?

An Intersectional Feminist Theoretical Framework

Although gender and identity in adolescence have been explored both inside and outside of musical contexts, very little research has been done regarding the relationship between gender and identity in music settings with adults. Single-gender spaces have been problematized in a variety of settings, but through this article, we seek to understand the identity of both individuals and the ensemble as a whole in relation to the ensemble's single-gender classification. In a world that is increasingly embracing gender constructionism (see *Terminology* section for discussion), we addressed policies in single-gender ensembles, particularly in relationship to membership, and how they are related to modern concepts surrounding gender identity.

Feminism is a lens for analyzing gender inequality, and it provides a framework for challenging gender binaries in choral music education and gendered spaces. The theory problematizes social behaviors and challenging gender roles defined by tradition (Nagoshi and Nagoshi 2017). Feminist thought, however, can easily conform to the gender binary, make social oppression for trans and gender expansive people secondary to presumed heteronormativity, and marginalize trans and gender expansive people. For this reason, throughout this project, we turned to an intersectional feminist framework.

The term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a Black feminist scholar who sought to broaden the scope of feminism, which traditionally centered white, middle class women. Crenshaw (1989) established her ideas of intersectionality specifically in response to the “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (139), which she argued was the norm in antidiscrimination, feminism, and antiracism approaches. By treating race and gender as two separate identities that did not inform each other, scholars ignored the multifaceted nature of Black women’s experiences with their “single-axis analysis” and that Black women, as a result, are “theoretically erased” (139) from discussions that often focus on a singular identity. Additionally, intersectional feminism does not work under the assumption that any community is a monolith, and it pushes back against the idea of universals (Misra 2018). According to Misra, common themes of intersectional feminist frameworks include:

validating alternative world views and knowledge that have historically been marginalized; understanding that varying groups of women experience diverse histories that position them differently in hierarchical social relations of power and give rise to different social identities; [and]challenging binary thinking (i.e., able/disabled; gay/straight; white/black; man/woman; West/East; North/South) as definitive (6).

Using this intersectional framework, we analyzed individual interviews and group discussions with members of the Women’s choir as they examined their identity as an ensemble and the suitability of their gendered name in reflecting that perceived identity.

The Authors, Positionality, and Consulting Voices

Both of the researchers at the time of the research were second-year PhD students studying music education and choral conducting. We were both also second-year members of Women’s Chorus, which allowed us access to the ensemble and to establish rapport with the participants. As cisgender white women, we enter this discussion acknowledging the privileged position we have when discussing issues related to trans and gender-expansive individuals within gendered choral ensembles. Utilizing an intersectional feminist framework was essential as we interrogated our own privilege, perspectives, and assumptions related to this project. This framework also allowed us to recognize the places in which we did not acknowledge the intersectional nature of gender in choral ensembles. For example, when we surveyed the students, we asked for their year in school and field of study, but we

did not ask about their race, gender, or sexual orientation. As such, we were not able to address gender in a way that acknowledged the nuance of gender as it intersects with other identities. At the outset of this project, we recognized the assumptions we made based on personal relationships we had with the participants. Below, we describe our individual positionalities that affected our approaches to this project.

Author 1

I have sung in mixed, women's, and treble choirs, and I was a trumpet player from 5th grade until my junior year of college. After a number of negative experiences related to gender in musical spaces, I found solace in a women's choir and felt not only safe, but also empowered. Participating in women's choirs has been central to both my individual and musical identity development. As a student, educator, and researcher, I am troubled by the ways in which gendered spaces can be invalidating, unwelcoming, and harmful for trans and gender-expansive singers. I entered this project with the desire to explore ways that musicians can create ensembles in which singers of a variety of identities feel safe, welcome, and embraced.

Author 2

An act of injustice and inequality against a dear family friend occurred while I was in middle school, planting the seed for lifelong LGBTQ+ allyship. As a straight, cisgender woman and product of religious education, I often struggled: we (many Christians) are taught to love our neighbor, and yet we perform acts of violence every day against our LGBTQ+ neighbors. Especially when it came to music, I found myself asking (perhaps idyllically) why can we not just love unconditionally, include everyone, and create beautiful communities based on our shared passions? As an educator and as a researcher, I continue to wonder how I can create the safest environments for all students. From this project, I hoped to listen, learn, and include. It is with this frame of mind that I approached this project.

Consulting Voices

Because the Woman's Chorus was made up of individuals who were perceived as cisgender women, we believed an intersectional approach called for us to consult individuals from outside the ensemble. Two participants were choir conductors at

different universities who had changed their ensembles' names. From these interviews, we hoped to gain insights into how one might approach a name change with a traditionally gendered ensemble; how students, community members, and administrators might respond; and how perceptions of the ensemble might or might not be affected. We also consulted the director of our campus LGBTQ+ resource center to gain insight into their views of single-gender spaces; thoughts on language we need to be cognizant of throughout our process; suggestions on sources of education for ourselves and our students; and ideas of inclusiveness we needed to understand in order to implement this project as thoughtfully as possible.

Our final consultant was a student from the university who was interested in being a part of the ensemble and is a trans woman. Because the choir was made up of members who presented as cisgender women, we thought it was essential to include in our study a trans woman from the music department who would be impacted by the policies and practices of the Women's Chorus. By highlighting her voice, we were able to have a more intersectional approach to gender issues surrounding the Women's Chorus. We acknowledge to the reader (and acknowledged to our participant) that theirs is only one voice, and they do not speak for the whole community. When discussing issues that impact trans individuals, however, we must prioritize centering their perspectives.

Terminology

Discourse surrounding gender, sex, sexuality, and identity is complicated not only in the variety of opinions, but also often in the varied or misunderstood definitions of terms that are essential to dialogue. In an effort to frame the discourse surrounding this project, we provide the following as working definitions for these terms and concepts.

Sex

Historically, doctors have determined sex on the basis of external sex organs (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). In recent years, however, there has been a shift among psychologists and doctors who identify the many contributing factors of sex, such as hormones, brain anatomy and function, and chromosomes, and assert that there isn't a single factor that can identify an individual's sex (Heath and Wynne 2019). The level to which each of those elements is used to define sex in

social settings varies widely depending on the context and is largely related to debates surrounding the relationship between perceived sexuality and gender (Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

Gender Essentialism

Opinions and attitudes surrounding the definition of *gender* fall into two schools of thought: gender essentialism and gender constructionism. Those who ascribe to *gender essentialism* maintain that gender is “internal, persistent, and generally separate from the ongoing experience of interaction with the daily sociopolitical contexts of one’s life” (Bohan 1993, 7). Essentialists view gender as “stable, unchanging, fixed at birth, and due to biological differences rather than environmental factors” (Smiler and Gelman 2008, 864) and hold that it exists as a binary, with male being on one end and female on the other, with no variance between the two (Gülgöz et al. 2019).

Gender Constructionism

In contrast, *gender constructionism* hinges on the idea that gender is a social construct based on the way people interact, and not necessarily related to sex (Bohan 1993). According to Palkki (2016), *gender identity* is “how one experiences their gender in their own body and in their own context” (8). Butler (1996) argued that sex was not a constant, but rather “an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time” (1) and “a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms” (2). Those individuals whose assigned sex at birth and gender identity exist in dissonance are *transgender*; when assigned sex and gender identity align, individuals are *cisgender*. For both cisgender and transgender individuals, the way people display their gender identity manifests itself through their clothing, speech, posture, and other elements of *gender expression* (Palkki 2016).

Gender Roles and Gender Attribution

Gender affects not only individuals’ sense of self, but also how others perceive them. Though not inherently linked to gender, *gender roles*¹ influence the way that society views masculinity and femininity. These roles and concepts surrounding what is considered to be feminine and masculine, especially physically, impact *gender attribution*, or how others perceive and determine other people’s gender,

especially in relation to what is physically considered to be masculine or feminine (Palkki 2016).

The relationship between sex and gender, as well as the ways gender is outwardly displayed and perceived, is thoroughly contested across multiple arenas, from politics to schools and sports to bathrooms. Although essentialism exists in a number of forms in American society (Bilodeau 2005), Westbrook and Schilt (2014) contend that attitudes surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality are evolving. In this article, we seek to complicate the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality in a number of social contexts, including traditionally gendered ensembles.

Empowerment

Throughout this discussion, we explore the idea of *empowerment*, specifically *women* feeling empowered through women's spaces. Through surveys and interviews, we learned that many Women's Chorus members felt empowered throughout rehearsals and performances. This theme led our large group discussion, in which we posed to the ensemble the question: "can we preserve the sense of women's empowerment in this choir while creating a space that allows for inclusion?" In previous studies of women's choirs and spaces, scholars have highlighted the experiences of singers and how women's spaces have empowered the singers through building community. For example, in Bartolome's (2013) study of the Seattle Girls Choir, "choristers were encouraged to develop as independent musicians and thinkers, leaders, and active participants in the creative process" (415). Parker (2018) discussed the stereotype of women's choirs singing music with shallow lyrics and found that music selection played a key role in singers feeling empowered in the space. The feminist softball league from Buzuvis (2017) employed the major tenets of "feminist resistance, safety, and empowerment" (156). Each of these authors highlights women's and feminist spaces as vital for the identity development and empowerment of the membership.

Within multiple studies that highlight members' sense of empowerment in women's spaces, including our own, the term itself is importantly problematized: what does it mean to be empowered? Black feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1991), Radford-Hill (2000), and Collins (2000) all wrote on the meaning of empowerment and its centrality to feminism. By recognizing gender as a social construct, feminist scholars identify the gender hierarchy in society and call on feminists to challenge those hierarchies (Crenshaw 1991). Therefore, empower-

ment provides both groups and individuals with “meaningful access to the structures that exercise power and influence” (Radford-Hill 2000, 12–13). Empowerment, however, cannot simply involve theorizing about gender politics, but rather necessitates social change (Collins 2000, Radford-Hill 2000). “True empowerment,” Radford-Hill (2000) argued, “goes beyond the group’s responsibility to protect its turf or to control decisions that affect its members” (12). At times, groups may seek power through the oppression of others, “with enemies positioned simultaneously within and outside of the subjugated group” (Radford-Hill 2000, 16). Collins (2000) argued that this form of power is not a pure form of empowerment, as empowerment “will never occur in a context characterized by oppression and social injustice” (x). In order to truly be empowered, Collins emphasized the idea of empowerment through social change and challenging injustice. To do this, a group need not be focused entirely on their own oppression but should be working with other groups centering marginalized identities to fight oppression on multiple fronts. For example, white, cisgender women can unite with Black trans and gender-expansive people against the sexist oppression that harms both groups. Empowered choristers, therefore, have the opportunity to exercise their influence within the ensemble while also challenging oppression and injustice in their communities and those of other marginalized groups.

Shared Experience

When talking about the Women’s Chorus in this study, the participants often brought up the idea that the space had power because of a *shared experience* among women. Focusing on a shared experience allowed women to organize politically as they realized “the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices” (Crenshaw 1991, 1241). The idea of a shared experience among women, however, draws on an essentialist viewpoint of what gender is and in turn can marginalize people who do not share that experience (Heyes 2003). Essentializing the identity of women and presuming their experience is shared on the basis of gender often centers the needs and experiences of white-middle class women, which in turn excludes people who are poor, BIPOC, and those who are trans and gender expansive (hooks 2000, Radford-Hill 2000). An intersectional approach, therefore, rejects the idea of a shared experience among all people within an identity group and encourages members to see both the elements that are shared among them, those that are different, and celebrate

the differences (Crenshaw 1991). Moving beyond such essentialist thought is vital in reflecting on the intersectional nature of identity and how identities such as race and sexuality inform the experiences of the individual.

The Importance of Women's Spaces

Of the 16 Women's Chorus members we interviewed, 14 highlighted the importance of the women's ensemble as an open, free, and safe space. Some members felt judged in mixed gender settings and found they were able to be more true to themselves in single-gender spaces without having to prove themselves to others. One member spoke to the reality that "many women choose to not be in a mixed ensemble because of the presence of men due to past trauma. I think it's important to have these women-only spaces" (Kayla²), with another saying, "Women's Chorus is healing others" (Olivia).

Members often related feelings to the choir's single-gender nature and the value of having shared experiences. Responses ranged from those that are symbolic ("There's a beauty and safety in the word 'woman'" [Alexis]) to ones that are more concrete ("We all share the 'female experience,' and I think that's reflected in the repertoire we sing, the conversations we have, and the community we form" [Heather]). Multiple participants cited the importance of being able to talk about women's issues in ways that otherwise didn't seem possible in mixed ensemble settings. Reading these participant quotes, it became apparent that the participants worked under the assumption that the singers had similar experiences based on their gender. Although we did not survey the participants on their race, the majority of the participants, including ourselves and the conductor, appeared to be white. An intersectional feminist approach requires problematizing the idea of a shared experience on the basis of any individual identity, as essentializing the experience of women, particularly in white-dominated spaces, centers white, middle-class women, and does not take into account those who are poor, trans or gender expansive, or Black (hooks 2000, Radford-Hill 2000, Crenshaw 1989).

In the comfort of single-gender spaces and shared experiences, 10 of the members specifically noted a sense of empowerment. One member, Taylor, felt empowered by embracing her identity as a woman, especially when women can feel there is less room for their voices to be heard in mixed settings. "I think that part of the feel of this choir is singing in such a way that we are prioritizing women's empow-

erment. We're prioritizing what it means to be a woman." Through purposeful engagement with historical and contemporary literature created by diverse individuals and addressing meaningful topics in a safe space, Women's Chorus members felt empowered to address social issues in their community and beyond through literature selection related to current events, performing music by composers with a variety of backgrounds, and singing at women-focused events. These are all examples of the ways in which intersectional feminists define empowerment not only by theory, but also by action.

In discussions concerning gendered spaces, there are varying opinions and debates surrounding the relationship between gender and sex. Westbrook and Shilt (2014) argued that "collisions of biology-based and identity-based ideologies in the liberal moment have produced a sex/gender/sexuality system where the criteria for determining gender vary across social spaces" (49) and "suggest that the sex/gender/sexuality system is slowly changing" (50). The complex nature of gender can leave leaders and members of women's spaces wondering who feels they belong in gendered spaces, as well as who is excluded. Below, we provide examples of spaces traditionally classified by gender essentialism and consider the ways in which they have responded to the reconceptualization of women's space.

Women's Colleges

As a result of the emergence of the constructionist approach to gender, leadership at Women's colleges have questioned their structures. Past president of the prestigious historically women's Mount Holyoke College explained:

What it means to be a woman is not static ... trans women and cis women share what theorists call "positionality." And it is this relationship to the dominant culture that is relevant as women's colleges accept all those aspiring to live, learn, and thrive within a community of women. (Caplan-Bricker 2019, B7)

In a desire to be more gender-inclusive, over half of the about forty women's colleges existing in the United States have reported they are open to more than only cisgender women (B7). These colleges have troubled the definition of womanhood so that gender may be understood in a wide variety of overlapping ways. As one gender and social-justice educator at Mount Holyoke articulated, "There's no reason the college, and its students, can't be concerned with women's and trans equality at the same time" (B12).

Women's Centers

The value of having identity centers, such as women's centers, on campuses and academic departments focused on women's studies is being questioned by people within and outside the organizations (Nicolazzo and Harris 2014, 2). Nicolazzo and Harris suggested that in determining the value of gendered spaces, educators should ask questions to reflect on their purposes. In the context of this project, for example, one could ask this:

What are we, as educators, conductors, and singers, trying to express through the gender classification of the choir? Are the words we are using the best words to express our purposes for the ensemble? Is the name of the ensemble reflecting the mission of the choir? Who are we excluding in our practice? How can we enhance our educational practices to become more inclusive? (7)

Rands (2009) asserts that "the current educational system in the United States is shortchanging transgender students on a daily basis" (429). Nicolazzo and Harris (2014) maintain that "sustained dialogue across difference" can affect students and learning environment now and in the future (9).

Women's Sports

Single-gendered sports leagues have also found themselves questioning their membership policies. Buzuvis (2017) documented her feminist softball league's venture into inclusivity. Because women have not historically been included in sports, the league was formed as "an antidote to male dominance of athletic opportunities and an effort to reclaim the athletic label from the exclusive dominance of men" (155). Although league leaders worried that adopting a trans-inclusive policy might "compel some members to leave the league ... the absence of such a policy threatened the same thing" (156). Additionally, they raised concern about the legitimacy of a shared experience for women, noting that in today's social and political climate,

women are as diverse from each other as women are different from men ... today's members are diverse with respect to not only sexual orientation, but also with respect to race, national origin, class, profession, age, and athletic experience and ability. (167)

The feminist softball league chose to amend their league rules to promote maximum inclusivity. The rules read as such:

Those eligible to participate include: (a) those individuals who sincerely and consistently identify as female, regardless of their sex assigned at birth; AND (b)

Those individuals who were assigned a female sex at birth, regardless of their present gender identity so long as they feel that membership in women's community is meaningful and appropriate for them. Players will determine for themselves whether they are qualified for membership under (a) or (b). (170)

To Buzuvis's knowledge, no league members quit as a result of the policy above, and it facilitated a small increase in gender-identity diversity for league participants.

Dialogue surrounding gender identity has become a topic of global discussion, particularly in the realm of sports. For example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) introduced new guidelines in 2003 for determining if transgender athletes can compete in events that align with their gender identity. Under these regulations, transgender individuals must (1) undergo surgery to remove both external and internal primary sex organs, (2) obtain legal and official documentation acknowledging their gender identity (primarily in the form of changing sex identifiers on birth certificates, a process that varies from state to state), and (3) undergo official, documented hormone therapy to align with their gender identity. In 2012, the IOC expanded their policies to include specific hormone requirements, but only for those competing in women's sports, stating that testosterone levels needed to be within those typical of women unless testosterone does not give a "competitive advantage" (41) in that sport. This is despite research that the vast majority of cisgender and transgender women have similar testosterone levels (Handelsman et al. 2018, Scharff et al. 2019). The same requirements are not present for those competing in men's leagues under the assumption that only testosterone, and not estrogen, positively contributes to athletic performance when other factors such as hemoglobin levels and lean body mass are also major contributing factors. These policies also do not acknowledge the benefits that estrogen has on athletic performance, such as its benefits on collagen and muscle production and strength (Chidi-Ogbolu and Baar 2019), and they presume that athletic performance is hindered for cisgender women. Many of these changes have been made despite the findings of research on trans athletes (Ward 2021), which make evident that many of the claims of trans women's physical advantages in sports are unsupported, largely speculative, and based on assumptions that people labeled as male at birth have inherent athletic advantages over those labeled female.

Inclusion in the Women's Chorus Space

The singers' views on what inclusion meant for both membership and culture within the ensemble were varied. Some members saw the ensemble not so much as a women's choir, but as an ensemble focusing on treble music, that could include both cisgender and transgender men who can sing in the soprano or alto range. Others saw the choir's identity as a women's space as being essential to the mission of the ensemble. "It's not fair to sacrifice other women's realities or the history of women's suffrage for the select few people who don't want to go by 'she' or a woman" (Kayla). Kayla's essentialist view of gender is an example of Radford-Hill's (2000) warning that "empowering the unempowered is a war of resistance on multiple fronts, with enemies positioned simultaneously within and outside of the subjugated group" (16). Kayla's perspective is an example of how the Women's Chorus's focus on women's empowerment, rather than the empowerment of all marginalized gender identities, can create spaces that are harmful for trans and gender-expansive individuals.

At times, identity groups can develop as a way for individuals to surround themselves with people that maintain ideas surrounding their own lived experiences and beliefs. As a result, individuals can embrace confirmation bias and forgo experiences that challenge their beliefs and that foster growth. An intersectional feminist approach, however, requires individuals to move beyond their own identities, embrace the differences of others, and allow for a multitude of stories and experiences to be shared (Collins 2012). For example, not all white, cisgender women may have the same experiences as one another, and their experiences may differ from those of Black trans women. Regardless of their differences, working together could allow both groups to better understand the multifaceted ways in which people with marginalized gender identities experience sexism, and as a result, come up with even clearer ways of pushing back against patriarchal oppression.

For some, the desire to be inclusive and act as an ally to those who are marginalized was greater than the desire to maintain a women-only space. "I've never really had to struggle with questioning my own gender and sexuality, but I feel like if I'm not fighting to make that better for other people, then I'm part of the problem" (Hannah). Although the importance and safety of women's spaces was the most consistent theme throughout the project, many participants were quick to indicate that they were unwilling to impose exclusive policies on the grounds that women have historically been marginalized.

Heather addressed the implied fear that changing the name or makeup of the ensemble could negatively impact the experience of the choir: “If we changed the name and then we have a couple of trans students who now feel welcome to join the group, is that going to change our sense of female empowerment?” An intersectional feminist approach would argue that a choir centered on empowering marginalized gender identities must be inclusive of trans and gender-expansive singers, who are also impacted by the same sexist oppression that cisgender women experience.

A number of singers were not concerned so much about transgender singers joining the ensemble, but that cisgender men might see it as an opportunity to join a space that would otherwise not be open to them. “Especially if you are a straight white man. Your whole life you go through all this privilege, and one part of Women’s Chorus is that we feel comfortable around each other, and we’re not just surrounded by all these men” (Grace). Women’s and feminist’s groups have long existed as spaces for women to interact and find safety away from cisgender men. For example, early feminists were champions for domestic violence shelters, which centered on the needs of women escaping intimate partner violence, and they facilitated safety and healing for women as they bonded together over their shared identities and experiences (Apsani 2018). At times, those who support women’s spaces may use a desire to exclude cisgender men as a justification for excluding trans and gender-expansive individuals. Using an essentialist view of gender, women’s shelters may turn away trans and gender-expansive people seeking shelter on the basis of “biological sex” (Meyer 2020) under the presumption that cisgender women may have trauma responses as a result of including victims of domestic violence that they may perceive as male. Trans and gender expansive individuals would also benefit from domestic violence shelters, given the high rates at which they experience sexual violence (Grant et al. 2011), deaths resulting from hate crimes (Office for Victims of Crime 2014), and housing insecurity (Meyer 2020). Spaces centered on women’s empowerment must push back against such essentialist views of gender that further marginalize trans and gender-expansive individuals.

During our consultation at the university’s LGBTQ+ resource center, director Morgan talked about the importance of single-gender spaces and how special they are for the members within them. If choral musicians and conductors are to maintain single-gender spaces, though, they must recognize that the gender binary does

not work for everyone and that their concepts around gender need to be broadened. Morgan shared, “If you’re going to have a single-gender space, it needs to be an inclusive space. And when you say gender, it means anyone who identifies that way, even if it’s just on a Tuesday.”

A Fear of Loss of Space

Because of the sense of safety and empowerment Women’s Chorus provides, a number of ensemble members expressed that they would have a sense of loss if the space was no longer women-centric. In the safety of this space, these singers have been empowered to be open and become more true to themselves.

Women’s Chorus has changed me and helped me know more about myself as a singer—as alto Heather, myself as director Heather, myself as just human Heather functioning in this world. I’ve been impacted by this ensemble, and there would be a part of me that would be sad if that changed. (Heather)

A women’s space, however, cannot be empowered if it is defined by the exclusion and oppression of trans and gender-expansive individuals. An intersectional feminist approach necessitates that a group focused on addressing sexist oppression be inclusive of trans and gender-expansive people, who also face sexist oppression, and work toward the mutual empowerment and social justice of all gender identities.

One member feared loss not only in the space of the choir itself, but in spaces for women as a whole. When asked about the potential of removing the word “women” from the title of the ensemble in an effort to create more inclusive spaces, Kayla said,

I think it’s troubling to push that definition under the rug because it took a lot of work for all-women’s spaces to be established in general and especially in this choir. It’s kind of dehumanizing to throw it all away based on sexist definitions.

The identity of the choir and the importance of the name is meaningful not only for the ensemble and the way it is perceived by the public, but also for the conductor herself. Having created Women’s Chorus when she was hired at the university, Elizabeth described the concerted effort she has made in selecting repertoire that speaks to and allows space for conversations about women’s experiences, as well as building a space that is safe for women and difficult conversations. The ensemble’s name holds a symbolic and sentimental value to her in relation to her personal identity and career path as a woman. If it were to change, Elizabeth shared, “I think I will feel some sense of loss because there’s such an identity with

not just the name of the ensemble but what they've done and the history of where they've performed." A new name, however, could more accurately reflect the ensemble's mission to create a space that is gender-inclusive and centered on social action surrounding sexism in choral music and beyond.

Redefining a Choral Identity

Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in Music Education

Gender impacts student engagement with music education and performance, from instrument choice (Harrison and O'Neill 2003, Payne 2014, Tarnowski 1993) to the case of the "missing male" in choral ensembles (Freer 2010, Harrison 2004, Koza 1993), all of which are largely related to the perceived masculinity and femininity of various activities through which students can engage in music. Bartolome (2013) explored single-gender spaces in her study of the Seattle Girls' Choir, with perceived benefits related to things that are personal, social, and musical in relation to gender.

In the past thirty years, music education scholars have highlighted issues related to gender, sexuality, and identity in music education. Topics have covered the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in music education (Bergonzi 2009), the lack of LGBTQ+ related content in arts education publications (Freer 2013), and centering the needs and perspectives of trans and gender-expansive musicians (Nichols 2013, Bartolome 2016, Palkki 2016, Sauerland 2018). Although Silveira and Goff (2016) found teacher attitudes toward transgender students to be largely positive, Palkki and Caldwell (2018) shared that many students did not feel they could share their gender identity or sexuality within their ensemble classes, even if their teacher made efforts to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ community. Gender influences not only students, but also LGBTQ+ preservice teachers (Bartolome 2016, Silveira 2019) and in-service teachers (Taylor 2011, Paparo and Sweet 2014, McBride 2016) as they navigate their own gender and sexual identities in professional settings.

Identity development through music education occurs in a variety of ways. For example, outside of gender, Parker (2010, 2014) sought to understand the way high school students in a variety of choral ensemble settings develop their identity and sense of belonging through musical, social, and emotional inter- and intrapersonal interactions. In Parker's studies, students see choir as a safe place where they are able to have shared experiences with their peers.

The influence of gender is pervasive throughout music education, yet many studies center white, cisgender, and heterosexual participants. Thomas-Durrell's (2019) study of Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual music educators in the "Bible Belt" is an example of the ways in which music education research must move forward to not only acknowledge gender, but also the many identities that intersect with it. Thomas-Durrell's call for more professional development related to identity issues in music education highlights the need for educators to center a variety of identities throughout their curriculum while ensuring that students feel represented, safe, and valued.

Searching for an Answer

During our consultation at the LGBTQ+ center at the university, director Morgan reminded us that although some would like to think there is one correct basis for ensemble membership, conductors must be nuanced and take into consideration the purpose, goals, and contexts of the organization. Morgan sympathized with the sensitive and complex nature of the issue: "I don't think there are clean answers in this because what this is predicated upon is a binary system which doesn't work for everybody." Some choir members went as far as to say that they didn't know how to address the issue because they were not experts, while others hoped creating an open dialogue would help them and other members of the choir sort through their thoughts and come up with a solution surrounding inclusivity. As Grace pointed out, "It's kind of hard to find a middle ground." Finding a solution that works for all parties is likely unfeasible, but theorizing about inclusion is largely meaningless without action, which is central to an intersectional feminist approach. In order for the members and future members to be empowered, theory must be accompanied by action.

Participants trying to balance the safety and empowerment of single-gender spaces with the needs for inclusivity transparently shared their mixed feelings about the topic.

Where I personally fall is 50-50. Some days I think, "It needs to remain a women's ensemble." Other days I'm like, "No, there's so much room for growth and inclusion and now is the time to do it." And sometimes I fall somewhere in between. (Heather)

Because of the multifaceted nature of inclusivity in the choir, many Women's Chorus ensemble members sought to balance their own opinions with those of others so they could learn from each other and be open to new possibilities.

I really want to keep an open mind. I do not feel in any way like an authority on this. I feel like I'm learning so much. And some of it is forced learning. And so I want to keep an open mind. I don't want to assume that I understand. (Mary)

The Importance of the Issue

Although the conversation surrounding single-gender spaces is complex, seven members expressed their gratitude in having a space to discuss these issues. Music education and conducting students highlighted the relevancy to their field and reflected on how they approach these issues in their own programs and ensembles. Others were grateful to not only have a day where we contextualized the study itself in both society and our ensemble, but also to have space to see the opinions of others in the ensemble, whether in a public or anonymous forum.

For a number of years, the appropriateness of the gendered ensemble name has been on the mind of the conductor, but she was unsure of how to go about the discussion.

I haven't wanted to do it by sitting around in a circle and just having a vote. I really wanted to do this intentionally because I'm not sure what the answer is going to be. I'm really glad you're taking this on. (Elizabeth)

Although she found discomfort in going about the project without a model to follow, she found comfort in the discussion strategies and guidelines used throughout the project, as well as the space we provided for a variety of opinions to be heard by all members of the ensemble.

Can We Have Both?

Participants hoped to frame continuing conversation about the ensemble identity in a way that would allow the choir to preserve what is special about the space while opening it to as many people as possible. Many of the participants who felt empowered by women's spaces wanted to prioritize inclusive practices for a variety of gender identities.

Is there a duality between having a place for women and women's lived experiences and also being sensitive to anybody who might identify as wanting to sing in the ensemble? That's the crux of the question. I would like to think that we can find a way to do both. (Elizabeth)

For some, the name of the ensemble holds the power to empower *and* include. Olivia, a trans woman, shared her perspective as someone who was not a member of the ensemble.

The name for me makes me think of empowerment and validation, and if that's the mission statement that we want to go for with Women's Chorus, why don't we change the name to something that embodies empowerment and validation with room for being fluid in gender?

Addressing policies and procedures for creating inclusivity, Lauren said,

If the point of a women's group is to create a safe space, how can we do that without excluding? I think as long as we check our privilege and keep that in mind, I think that's the most we can really do. And give people the opportunity to speak that would identify in realms other than cis female.

Both Olivia and Lauren spoke directly to empowerment through an intersectional feminist lens. Because gender intersects with multiple identities and experiences, perhaps the only shared experience among people of marginalized identities is the experience of being marginalized on the basis of gender. Even then, the specific nature of those oppressions will inevitably not be shared by every member of the group, especially as membership changes from year to year. By focusing the policies and procedures on addressing sexism in choral music and beyond, the conductor and the choir can create spaces that embrace, celebrate, and empower singers of a variety of gender identities.

Can Gendered Choirs be Gender-Inclusive?

Many of the participants felt that the ensemble's gendered classification was meaningful and contributed positively to the overall culture of the choir. Their reasoning largely fell into one of two categories: 1) women's empowerment by discussing topics related to a presumed "shared experience" among women, and 2) safety in a space that excluded cisgender men. Some singers went as far as seeing it unfair to remove the gendered classification of the ensemble because they saw it as erasing the work and experiences of women that had come before them. Each of these rationales centered the experiences of cisgender women and did not explicitly account for the needs and experiences of trans and gender-expansive individuals.

The first rationale must be problematized in two parts. Like Buzuvis (2017), we must acknowledge that the very idea of a shared experience among women does not acknowledge the intersectional nature of identity and the varying factors that influence gender, such as race, religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic status (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Using a similar rationale, if the singers in the ensemble valued having a space to have their perspectives reflected through music and discussion, then trans and gender-expansive singers in the ensemble would also benefit from

having their identities reflected in the curriculum. Like intersectional feminists, we argue that representing other identities in the music, in addition to the experiences of cisgender women, would not detract from the inclusive nature of the ensemble, but rather positively contribute to it.

Some singers feared that if the choir became classified by voice type—such as a treble choir rather than a women’s choir—that cisgender men would join the ensemble and take away from the safety provided within Women’s Chorus, particularly for those who feel they cannot speak freely in front of cisgender men or who have experienced abuse from cisgender men. The question must then be asked: how would ensembles determine who is a cisgender man versus a trans man who does not feel he can reveal that he is trans? Organizations such as the International Olympic Committee currently require trans athletes to certify that they have undergone hormone treatment and surgery to align with their gender identity, as well as provide legal and official documentation certifying their gender identity such as a birth certificate (Westbrook and Schilt 2014).³ This raises ethical concerns in relation to the complex nature of gender disclosure and access to gender-affirming procedures and documentation. In an effort to affirm cisgender women, educators may inadvertently be creating barriers for trans and gender-expansive singers to feel welcome, accepted, and safe within their ensembles. Examples include gender-specific names, uniforms that do not allow variation for gender expression, and requirements that singers have a certain voice type to participate in a gendered ensemble (e.g., being a soprano or alto in an ensemble focused on women being members).

Morgan, the head of the university’s LGBTQ+ resource center, highlighted the value of gendered spaces and recommended that groups that continue to have a gender classification do so in the broadest way possible. Buzuvis (2017) provided an example of how one feminist softball league defined their membership guidelines:

The [softball league] is an inclusive women’s league. Those eligible to participate include: (a) Those individuals who sincerely and consistently identify as female, regardless of their sex assigned at birth; AND (b) Those individuals who were assigned a female sex at birth, regardless of their present gender identity, so long as they feel that membership in a women’s community is meaningful and appropriate for them. Players will determine for themselves whether they are qualified for membership under either (a) or (b). Players’ self-determination will not be second-guessed. (170)

Guidelines similar to the ones above recognize the complex nature of gender identity and the need to broaden the definitions of what women's spaces can be.

We began this project thinking it would center on the name of the ensemble, and yet it is evident that it is not so much the name of the choir or the course description that impacted this ensemble's policy, but the attitudes and viewpoints of those within the ensemble. Words are symbolic in their meaning; the words we use to construct the reality in which we live are thus of the utmost importance. This is especially important for marginalized communities who do not neatly fit into the prescribed boxes to which society has assigned them. Although language is meaningful, actions and policy are at the heart of this issue. Because ensemble membership is largely advertised by word of mouth, it has become evident that policies and the explicit language supporting those policies regarding ensemble membership need to be directly addressed to the members of the ensemble so they can be informed stewards of their choir.

Many of the participants within this study voiced that they didn't know how to talk about issues of sexuality, gender, and inclusion because they were "non-experts" in the field of gender research and that there is no prescribed answer. Being an expert on any given topic, however, is not a necessary prerequisite for meaningful dialogue. Individuals are experts of their own experiences. Shying away from difficult conversations can create barriers to meaningful and actionable change, and without action, empowerment is not possible (Collins 2000, Radford-Hill 2000). This hesitancy has a broader implication in education and society: how do we talk about things that are difficult when our understanding is, and will likely always be, incomplete? This study illuminates the need for a dialogic model informed by intersectional feminist thought that focuses on seeing differences within a community not as weakness, but as an opportunity to expand one's understanding of identity and to grow and learn from each other.

We were forced to conclude data collection for this project prematurely in March of 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the weeks prior to the initial lock-down, we had surveyed participants' interest in creating a task force that would meet outside of rehearsals to discuss the ensemble mission statement, choir description, course catalog language, and ensemble name. Several students expressed interest, but as the ensemble did not meet again until after our departure from the school, we were unable to officially conclude this project.

The choral music education field would benefit from further investigations of choral identity in gendered ensembles, taking a more intersectional approach that

centers marginalized individuals (Thomas-Durrell 2019). As choirs and educators continue to explore and consider gender inclusivity, more research is needed to highlight the ways in which choirs are being inclusive of a variety of identities, including gender. Because of the nuanced nature of gender identity, there is also power in highlighting the areas in which educators struggle to be inclusive. Both of these approaches will contribute to the important work that is gender inclusivity in choral ensembles. A similar project could be conducted with a men's choir and could reveal factors unique to male singers and men's ensembles. Although mixed ensembles are not explicitly classified by gender, elements such as voice parts, recruitment, literature selection, and uniforms are gendered aspects relevant to all choirs, and mixed choirs must also be a part of conversations surrounding gender inclusion. Other characteristics such as age may also be contributing factors, as the response of a middle school choir teacher may be different than that of a community choir director. Gender research on choral ensembles of various ages, classifications, and structures could be instrumental in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the ways gender inclusivity must be addressed depending on region, age of singers, and ensemble structure.

In discussions surrounding gender inclusion in choral ensembles, a number of studies have focused on the specific contexts of trans musicians (Bartolome 2016, Nichols 2013, Palkki 2016). Because studies of trans and gender-expansive musicians are still relatively new to music education research, there is a need to also center the identities of musicians who identify as genderqueer, non-binary, agender, and other gender identities. Additionally, although LGBTQIA+ is often used as an acronym to be inclusive of a variety of genders and sexualities, we are unaware of any music education studies that represent intersex, asexual, and agender individuals. Additionally, more studies are needed akin to Thomas-Durrell's (2019) intersectional approach to Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual educators in the Bible Belt to provide a more nuanced perspective on the ways in which gender is influenced by a variety of identities.

Conclusion

We initially set out to explore the name of an ensemble, but we unearthed a larger intersection of several systemic issues within choral ensembles. Choral music educators must interrogate practices in gendered ensembles to determine if their ensembles are inclusive to singers of a variety of gender identities. There is no single

way in which conductors can approach gender in choral ensembles. However, traditional binary ensemble classifications, as well as many practices surrounding gender in choral ensembles, can be limiting and exclusive to trans and gender expansive singers. Additionally, if choral ensembles focus on the idea of a shared experience on the basis of gender, they will likely ignore the intersectional nature of identity and center white, cisgender perspectives, thus leaving trans, gender-expansive, and BIPOC singers at the margins of the ensemble. This inquiry is a call for choir conductors to consider what they and their singers are doing to ensure that trans and gender-expansive singers feel welcome, to examine how inclusivity is displayed both within and outside the ensemble, and to explore ways in which gender binary systems may be reflected in name and policy within gendered choral ensembles.

About the Authors

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

First Anonymous Survey:

1. Demographics: Major, Year in School, How many years in any women's ensemble.
2. What does Women's Chorus mean to you?
3. What does being in a specifically *women's* ensemble mean to you? Is that different than being in a mixed ensemble?
4. Who do you think should be included in Women's Chorus?
5. Is our current gender-specific name inclusive? Why or why not?

Second Anonymous Survey:

1. Was there anything today that particularly resonated with you?
2. Was there anything you disagree with?
3. When you saw the codes today, was there anything that you hadn't considered before?
4. Is there anything from our discussion that feels unsettled or that we should revisit before our next large group discussion?
5. What topic(s) would you like to address in the group discussion?

Final Survey:

1. Is there anything you wish to express after our conversation on Tuesday?
2. We're looking to share this process with other choirs who may wish to address these issues. Is there anything from this research process which you have particularly enjoyed or disliked? Please explain.
3. If we were to create task forces to investigate the name, mission statement, course handbook, and concert program, would you be interested in participating?

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Choir Member Interviews:

1. Tell us a little bit about your musical background. How long have you been singing? What sorts of ensembles have you been in? Do you do any musical activities outside of Women's Chorus?
2. How did you become involved in Women's Chorus?
3. What does being in this choir mean to you?
4. What does being in a *women's* ensemble mean to you? Is that different than being in a mixed ensemble?
5. Do you see the music having a role in reflecting the purpose of the ensemble?
6. What were your thoughts after our first presentation? Did anything resonate with you? Was there anything you hadn't considered?
7. Is there anything you're still processing or thinking over?
8. Is there anything that you weren't able to say that you want to share?
9. We will use pseudonyms for participants in our research write-up. Is there a name you would like us to use?

Non-Choir Member Interviews:

1. Tell us a little bit about your musical background. How long have you been singing? What sorts of ensembles have you been in? What sort of musical activities do you participate in?
2. What does Women's Chorus mean to you?
3. What would being in a specifically *women's* ensemble mean to you? Is that different than being in a mixed ensemble?
4. Who do you think should be included in Women's Chorus?
5. Is our current gender-specific name inclusive? Why or why not?
6. After hearing a bit about our project (we'll brief you tomorrow), what do you want us (or even Women's Chorus) to make sure we know or understand as we try to create the most inclusive environment possible?

Choir Conductor Consult Interviews:

1. Tell us who you are.
2. What is your history being in and directing single-gender ensembles?
3. Tell us how a little bit about the project around your choir's name change?
How it came to be and why?
4. What did a name change mean to you as the director?
5. What kinds of responses did you receive from your members? From the public?
6. Has the name change affected literature selection? The dynamic of the group? Inclusivity?
7. You mentioned your community women's choir last time we met. Could you tell us about that group?
8. How do you and the group perceive the ensemble's name?
9. Has the ensemble name become a discussion topic on the individual or group level?
10. Why is this important for music education and the choral profession?

Resource Center Consult Interview:

1. Tell us a bit about who you are and what you do.
2. What are your thoughts on single-gender spaces?
3. After hearing a bit about our project (we'll brief you), what do you want us (as researchers or choir members) to make sure we know or understand as we try to create the most inclusive environment possible?
4. What sorts of language do we need to be cognizant of when it comes to promoting inclusive spaces?
5. What/who do we need to be reading and including in our research?

Notes

¹ Palkki (2016) defines gender roles as “culturally contextual attributes pursuant to masculinity or femininity understood as ‘normal’ in a given context” (8).

² All names are pseudonyms.

³ As of May 2021, trans and gender-expansive individuals in the U.S. can have the sex marker on their birth certificate changed to reflect their gender identity in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico (Khan-Williamson 2021, Lambda Legal 2018).