

# Understanding Social-Cultural Influences Affecting Non-Participation in Singing

Dr. COLLEEN WHIDDEN

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Alberta, Canada

4815 49 Ave NW

Calgary, AB

Canada

T3A 0R8

Phone: (403) 286-6659

Email: [cwhidden@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cwhidden@ucalgary.ca)

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## ABSTRACT

*Singing is usually an enjoyable activity but not to those who have labeled themselves as non-singers. Using narrative inquiry, this study examines the phenomenon of the adult non-singer in Canadian society through the lens of sociology, music, and education. Twelve participants, including men and women of different ethnic background and age, participated in the research. The sessions were transcribed and data for the research was drawn from the transcriptions. It was discovered that participation in singing was influenced by such ecologies as cultural perception, economic situation, familial attitude, historical context, and educational circumstance. In all cases, the participants saw these influences as having a negative impact on their individual perception of self as singer. Discussion arising centered on the immense influence of cultural attitudes, the need for assessment of instructional methods in singing development, and the multi-faceted causes and cures for the phenomenon of the non-singer.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Singing is usually viewed as an enjoyable activity in most cultures. Nevertheless, in Canadian culture, research is indicating that there are a number of individuals who will not participate in singing endeavors and who even view this activity as having a potentially negative impact on their lives. The purpose of this recent research was to uncover some of the reasons why certain individuals, when asked to describe their experience with singing, use such words as embarrassing, devastating, and humiliating. The aim of this article is to discuss the complex human ecologies surrounding the willingness (or unwillingness) of the individual to sing throughout childhood and adulthood that was discovered through the research project. It is also advocating for the assessment of instructional methods in singing development in the education system to include all singers on the musical skill spectrum.

The twelve participants in this study regarded themselves, because of the influences, as non-singers. The non-singer, for the purposes of this study, was defined as one who self-designated as one who does not have the physical capability or coordination to succeed in the simplest of musical tasks. Such tasks would include the matching of a single pitch with another singer or singing Happy Birthday utilising the correct intervals. This research project came to fruition because of the intensity of the recurrence of such individuals encountered throughout the researcher's professional teaching career combined with a personal passion for knowing more about influences affecting participation in singing. The richness of this research will be found in the narratives of the participants. Stories and quips from the participants will be intermingled throughout the prose so the voices of the participants may be heard first-hand.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to accept that such influences are instrumental for a person's participation in singing, one must decide their position on the nature or nurture issue. The question of innate musical ability has occupied the attention of some psychologists for well over half a century and considerable debate has ensued over the correct terms to employ when referring to musical ability and ultimately musical involvement. The issue that has served as the focal point for the debate is the question of how one comes to possess musical ability. Is it for the most part inherited or is it primarily developed by environmental influences? The resolution of this question has varied over the last century.

In Western society, singing and singing ability is viewed in black and white terms, leaving no room for a spectrum of development. Our society sees singing ability as a lifelong trait that is fixed and uncontrollable (Austin & Vispoel 1998, p. 42; Ruddock & Leong 2005, p. 19). Our musical culture seems to place the act of singing in the hands of a few, selected individuals who are seen to possess innate musical ability and have relegated the rest to the role of an audience or consumer (Hennessy 2000, p.190 ; Ruddock & Leong 2005, p. 44; Vispoel & Austin 1993, p. 112). Hallam and Prince (2003, p. 12) in their work on the notion of musical ability found that members of our society conceptualised the culture as one where only a minority of gifted people have real ability and this ability is an innate, natural talent. Austin and Vispoel (1998, p. 26) found this same attitude in work done with secondary students. They found that as students mature, they tend to focus on musical ability rather than effort and that these secondary students are more willing to attribute their failures in a music setting to lack of ability than in any other subject area.

Hennessey states that the,

*' . . . main problem with music is you regard it as being something you can't do unless you're really good at it' (Hennessey 2000, p. 188). O'Toole (2005, p. 6) found that there is a constant self-evaluation process happening and she says that even when an individual hums a pleasant melody, that person is evaluating whether he/she is a good enough musician to be humming. People have become critical of themselves because they feel they lack the requisite talent. The result is they stop humming or singing. They end up feeling humiliated and embarrassed that they had even attempted such a musical endeavor. (Vispoel & Austin 1993, p. 112).*

The idea that singing ability is in flux and may be developed throughout one's lifetime is in contrast to the idea that musical talent is possessed only by a chosen few (Ruddock & Leong 2005, p. 10). Some researchers are proposing that singing ability can be developed throughout one's lifetime and that singing ability is not only an innate gift apparent in a small percentage of people. There has been a shift away from the single entity conception of musical talent to a multi-faceted developmental conception. (Dweck 1975, p. 675 ; Goetze et al. 1990, p. 18 ; Hallam 1998, p. 118; Hallam & Prince 2003, p. 10 ; Kazez 1985, p. 46 ; O'Neill 1999, p. ; Relich et al. 1986, p. 422; Schunk 1983, p. 850; Sergeant & Thatcher 1974, p. 40; Sloboda 1990, p. 40; Topp 1987, p. 49; Welch 1979, p. 52; Welch 1985, p. 240; Welch 1986, p. 297; Welch 1994, p. 5). Within this circle of researchers, it is generally reckoned that all humans have the physical capacity and innate musical ability for musical competence. What is needed in collaboration with this concept is an acceptance of the theory of a musical spectrum.

Welch (1986, p. 297) defined musical spectrum as a continuum of development. He claimed that a change in societal perception was needed in relation to the acceptance of a musical spectrum. Innate ability needs to be thought of as one of the influential attributes on this continuum but not the only attribute. Social-cultural influences need to be viewed with the same importance.

If one aspires to the concept of musical skill as a developmental process, then one must permit and accept individuals at different musical stages. Welch (1986, p. 298) states that different types of singers need to be allowed and encouraged to be at different points along a developmental spectrum of singing ability. He sees that progress along the continuum is possible if the singer is encouraged, challenged and supported. In his work with children he found that *' . . . a child who shows evidence of being at one of the less skilled stages should be regarded as a client for development, rather than necessarily revealing an irretrievable lack of ability in music'* (Welch 1986, p. 300).

The phenomenon of the creation of non-singers may be unique to our particular Western culture. The idea that innate ability is restricted to a small percentage of the population is not a viewpoint that is held worldwide (Hallam & Prince 2003, p. 18). The very act of declaring someone musical and nonmusical itself is culture specific to Western society. Numerous non-Western cultures do not have a specific term for music or singing because it is impossible to separate the concept of music from the society's broader cultural practices (Cross & Morley 2002, p. 417). The implications of such an ideal challenges Western thought and allows a new conception of singer to emerge.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

An experience, even though it is individual, is always in relation to surrounding influences. (Dewey 1922, p. 10). With this thought as a guiding principle, the participants' stories were looked at through the lens of narrative inquiry methodology. It was through each individual story that insight was gained into the participants' lived experience. Clandinin and Connelly state, 'For us, narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it' (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 18). Narrative thinking draws the reader away from the notion that there is a single, correct, and one true view of the world, to the notion that experience is multifaceted. The central contribution of narrative inquiry is ' . . . more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 42).

Inquiry for this new sense of meaning went in four directions; inward, outward, backward and forward. Looking inward gave both the researcher and the participant the opportunity to explore their emotional state surrounding their unwillingness to sing in adolescence and adulthood. Looking outward entailed a critical look at the participant's environmental situation and influence. Acknowledging that environmental influences impacted their perception allowed the participants to view their story as part of a larger phenomenon instead of an isolated case. Looking backward into past temporal state opened up avenues to explore how historical views of singing continue to affect today's society. Many of the participants discovered that the perception that they held of themselves had its foundation in past cultural attitudes and events. Finally, looking forward to possible future sequences allowed the participants to envision a future that included singing.

## **METHOD**

To find participants for this study, advertisements were placed at the university, and emails were sent to colleagues and acquaintances. Twelve participants (9 women and 3 men) between the ages of 27 and 74 were chosen based on their answers to a questionnaire about their own self-identity as a nonsinger. The participants came from different ethnic backgrounds but all were educated in the Canadian school system.

The time commitment for participants was eight sessions over a five-month period. The first session was a 60-minute group introduction explaining the background and rationale behind the research. The second session was a 60-minute private session in which the participants talked about their own musical experience both in childhood and adulthood. Fifteen questions, developed by the researcher, were asked in this session with the participant being free to elaborate at any time. The guiding questions centred on childhood experience with singing and its affect on singing as an adult, adult experiences with singing, and views of the role of innate ability and musical development. Sessions three through eight were individual private singing sessions. During these six sessions, the participants were introduced to breathing and relaxation exercises; pitch-discrimination exercises; listening exercises; tonal analysis; self-analysis of own voice; analysis of kinesthetic response to singing; and rhythm exercises. Discussion during these sessions was informal and not prepared by the researcher. The purpose of having the participants sing for these sessions was to see if an encounter with singing could change their perspective of self as nonsinger and to gain insight into why they held the identity of nonsinger. Each of these sessions was videotaped. Text from the videotapes was transcribed at a later date and sent to the participants by email for validation. Questions that were asked in person in the final session were also emailed to each

participant. This was to allow the participants to further ponder their responses outside of the session. The participants were also encouraged to email any insights to the researcher in the time between the sessions. Stories and themes from the sessions were drawn from the transcribed data solely by the researcher.

## RESULTS

In current narrative research, it was discovered that participation in singing was influenced by such ecologies as cultural perception, economic situation, familial attitude, historical context, and educational circumstance. The participants listed the above factors as influencing their personal involvement with singing. In all cases, the participants saw these influences as having a negative impact on their individual perception of self as singer and their participation in singing throughout their lifetime.

### CULTURAL PERCEPTION

When living in a particular culture, one accepts the assumptions of that culture. This is in order that one may function within that particular society. During the sessions with the participants, we discovered that there were several cultural perceptions that had become engrained in their thinking about singing because of their engagement with their society.

The first cultural perception that came to the forefront was the idea that in order to be called a singer, one must be able to perform to a high standard in front of an audience. This embedded idea is echoed in Ameeta's definition of singing. 'I think singing is also performance. Singing in front of an audience. . . . Yes, to me that's a singer. I like to sing but I'm not a singer. Delivering songs as a trained professional – yah . . . . I see a singer as one who is able to sing on their own. . . '

The idea of reaching an acceptable standard before engaging in singing can be seen in Gilbert's account of singing. According to Gilbert, 'My definition [of singing] is to be able to sing to the extent that the person next to you will say, "Well that person has a reasonable, decent melodic kind of voice and isn't butchering the song." ' There was an unconscious submission to the idea that one should curb singing activity if one's own vocal sound did not emulate that of a professional singer. My participants held the view that unless one could sing like a professional, then one should curb singing activities. They were reluctant to sing for fear of failure and fear that they were not capable of singing to this standard.

This fear of not reaching the cultural standard was apparent throughout the sessions with most of the participants. For example, Helen, when singing *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, lamented, 'It sounds awful. Oh, it just sounds so horrible.' Sydney made several remarks about the fact that she was definitely not a star student. Cheryl would make comments such as, 'I can do it. But not too well.' When I asked them to delve into the reasons for making such statements about their voices, I received responses that centered upon the concept of perfection. For example, when asked why she was creating tension in her upper body while singing on notes that were within her range in the piece, *Early One Morning*, Ameeta responded, 'You want to know what is happening in my head? Whenever I am doing it [singing the line], I am so conscious of hitting the right note that it holds me back. Am I getting it? Am I doing it right? We like to be right. We like to do it correctly.' When I inquired of Sara

why she does not sing during her private instrumental lessons when asked by her teacher, she responded, ' . . . I wouldn't want to take the chance of not being able to sing what I hear in my head. The fear factor of failure.'

Gilbert and Cathie also perpetuated this concept of perfection. Gilbert claimed:

*I don't want to make a mistake. So I am scared. I don't want to make a mistake. So because of that nervousness, then that is where the tension builds. Oh, she's [Colleen] wanting me to do this and I don't want to have her have an unfavorable impression of me by not being able to hit the notes. So again, it gets to . . . I've got to do this. It kind of boils down to an approval. I needed a high approval rating from my piano teacher. I need a high approval rating from you.*

Cathie was so aware that she needed to reach a certain cultural standard to sing that even though she would sing privately in her car, she would place her cellular headset over her ear when singing. This way it would look to the other drivers like she was simply talking on the phone when she was actually singing. She was so conscious of her singing that even to a stranger in the car next to her, she had to send a culturally appropriate message. Cathie, in a subsequent session, made a poignant summary of this idea of cultural perfection in stating:

*Who should really care if you should sing out of tune all the time? What does it matter? I don't know why. I guess it must be a society norm. We have singers and non-singers and for some reason we can never have the two performing. It really comes down to advertising a norm of our society . . . All the should, should, should. It's [the concept of being able to sing perfectly or not singing at all] at the top of the list and it's not good. I don't know who has the rule book, but boy, we follow the rules.*

When they did sing during the sessions, not only were they seeking a certain standard, but they were also expecting progress towards that goal with every session. This expectation of improvement is the second cultural assumption that the participants brought to the sessions. There was an underlying expectation that each individual would improve his/her musical skill during our time together. As the researcher, I had not articulated such expectations, but had inadvertently perpetuated such a view by continually adding on new musical concepts at each session. The desire to improve, eliminate mistakes, and reach perfection was strong in the participants.

This is demonstrated in Sara's words.

When I asked Sara in the final session if her anxiety about singing had diminished over the duration of the sessions, her reply was:

*It lessened overall but I think that at some point it was greater anxiety than at the beginning because I felt like I should be improving. I don't know what she [Colleen] is looking for. So I felt like I had better be better at the end of the sessions than I was at the beginning.*

When I looked beyond my own research and tried to ascertain if their views about the concept of singer were held by others, I found numerous affirmative circumstances. For instance, according to the [Canadian Oxford Dictionary](#), a singer 'delivers songs as a trained or professional singer' (Barber 2004, p. 848). This idea of a standard of excellence is seen in most credible dictionaries and online dictionary sources. Other information sources (especially that of the internet) show a similar view. In searching for an image of singer on the internet, pictures of professional singers were retrieved. This lack of images of common citizens engaging in singing perpetuates the idea that singing is restricted to those who can perform at a certain level. Candid comments made on radio and reality television broadcasts about an individual's ability to sing are common and accepted as

normal. For example, on an episode of Fear Factor, a young woman volunteered to do anything required to avoid having to sing on national television. Many of my participants echoed this sentiment toward singing. For example, Cathie stated, 'I don't know what it is [in our society] but unless you think you are Celine Dion, you're not going to sing.'

The third cultural assumption centered on the importance of innate ability. The participants focused on the concept that the potential to participate in singing was predominantly controlled by innate ability. They were skeptical, but not unreceptive, about the role of development and if it could really affect singing ability. Nevertheless, the concept of development and practice were put forth by the participants with the stipulation that one can only develop within the limitations of their innate ability. Sara commented, 'Everyone has a base ability . . . But I think it has limitations.' The participants were in agreement that most people, unless there was a physical impediment of the vocal apparatus, could sing at a basic level. They were also in agreement that one could not progress beyond producing an adequate vocal sound without possessing an innate musical gift for such a sound. When I asked Helen if she thought Celine Dion's success in the music industry was due to her innate singing ability or her commitment to developing her vocal sound, Helen said, 'I think she probably has an innate ability . . . When you hear of Celine Dion or famous opera singers, like Pavorotti, that must be innate to have those beautiful voices.' Tony summarized the beliefs held by the participants by saying, ' . . . you can learn to be an average singer but you need a god-given ability to be a great singer . . . '

Since the participants came from different cultural backgrounds, I was curious to discover how their experiences with Canadian culture as well as other cultures could illuminate our societal view on singing. Sara's family emigrated from Guatemala during her early childhood. I asked her to describe the singing experience as seen through the eyes of Guatemalan culture. 'It's kind of different in Guatemala. There is music everywhere. There is no generational gap. The music I listen to is the music that my grandma listens to. There is no gap. Everyone shares the same kind of music. When I moved here, I guess it did change because there is more of a kids listen to this kind and adults listen to this kind.' I asked her if she thought she would be a non-singer if her family had remained in this Latin American culture. She laughed and said:

*No. Because there is so much, you don't even call it music performance. It is part of the culture. Everyone sings or plays something and you practice outside. You have people dancing and playing outside. They haven't yet isolated the performer from day to day life . . . Even going to a concert, it doesn't feel the same way as here. There isn't a gap like the performer, the sole proprietor of the music and we can't do it. It is just like someone is showing us something, sharing something that they can do and is really good. You can take part and enjoy. Rather than a showing.*

I pursued this cultural view by asking Sara if she felt there was an acceptance of a spectrum of musical ability in Guatemalan society. She responded affirmatively:

*Yah, even if you are singing with your family or if you want to strum the guitar, or clap your hands in a family situation. There is something for everybody. It is more inclusive. You are encouraged at whatever level you are at. They are not limited to, 'Okay you have to sing the first part of this chorale.' You just contribute on whatever part you can. So if you can only contribute the humming every now and then, then that is what you contribute. It is more inclusive that way.*

Tony, being of Italian descent, grew up in a very musical home. He asserted definite views on how Canadian culture affected not only his participation in singing, but the participation of societal members at large. Tony commented:

*Western culture decides immediately that you have it or you don't. At Italian soccer games, they sing. Everyone is joining in. No one is thinking I can't sing. It is understood that you have to be part of this thing. You can walk down the street in Italy and someone is singing from a balcony.*

However, when I asked him about the potential of singing on a balcony in a Western Canadian city, he responded, 'I don't think you could do that here. If you ever see anyone walking down the hall singing or whistling, you would think it strange or why is he so happy? Our culture keeps everyone in check.'

## **ECONOMIC SITUATION**

Cheryl, as a child, was very interested in taking private singing lessons. She had the desire and interest to pursue this activity but unfortunately her family did not have the financial resources to make this activity come to fruition. Cheryl feels that she was thwarted in her pursuit of including singing in her childhood routine because of lack of money in the home for such luxuries as singing lessons or enrolment in a choir. The participants agreed that there were formal singing opportunities available to them throughout their childhood but involvement in such activities was often costly. It was surmised that those coming from homes where funds were not available for such activities did not develop the same skills as those who were privileged enough to partake in lessons or ensembles. This lack of skill development, because of financial issues in the family, was influential in the creation of the perception of non-singer and the avoidance of future singing opportunities.

On a broader economic scope, numerous participants in this research cited the lack of consistent funding for music education throughout their elementary and secondary schooling as having an impact on their participation in singing. They felt this lack of financial support for music limited essential schooling experiences with singing. Music education in the school system has been continuously plagued by financial constraint. Green and Vogan (1991, p. 25) in, Music Education in Canada: A Historical Account, state that music has been considered an important subject in educational rhetoric but it was rarely given the financial backing that was needed to make it a continuous, viable course in the public education system. Music instruction has been at the mercy of financial constraints of school districts. When one looks back on music instruction in the past, it has been viewed as a frill that could be sacrificed in time of need. This is illustrated in the following observation: 'In fact, when the [local school] board found themselves in financial difficulties in the early 1880s, they decided to abolish the position of teacher of music . . . ' (Green & Vogan 1991, p. 27). In 1888, David Allison, chief superintendent of education in Nova Scotia stated, 'The important subject of music cannot be said to be on a satisfactory footing in our schools nor indeed to have ever been so' (Green & Vogan 1991, p. 28). The rise and fall of the amount of music instruction in the schools directly followed the rise and fall of the economic status of the area in which the school was located. For example, in Calgary, the school board dispensed with music teachers in 1914 in response to the economic hardships brought upon Albertans by Canadian involvement with World War One. Music instruction, however, was resumed in 1918 with the return to economic viability. The public was willing to support music instruction in the school setting in times of prosperity but was unwilling to support music as a worthwhile subject during depressed times (Green & Vogan 1991, p. 32). Certainly, cultural attitudes change at a glacial pace and we can observe that historical cultural assumptions from Canada's past are still a part of Canada's present.

## FAMILIAL ATTITUDE

Childhood singing experiences at home, for many of the participants, were remembered in a negative light. The experiences fell into five different themes: 1) receiving little encouragement from parents for singing endeavors; 2) encountering an overbearing parental figure; 3) encountering a critical parental figure; 4) enduring feelings of trauma in the home; 5) being humiliated by a family member when attempting to sing in a public forum.

Discouraging or non-existent familial attitude toward singing impacted the participants' future involvement with singing. For the majority of the participants, singing was not encouraged in the home. Sydney, Sara, Tony and Helen recalled being encouraged by their parents to pursue instrumental interests such as piano, flute or accordion but not singing interests. Helen commented, 'I don't really remember my parents encouraging me to sing formally. I played the piano, so I think it was enough for them to keep me focused on practicing piano.' Sydney talked about how her mother, who held a music degree, encouraged her to play the piano but did not encourage her to sing. She thinks that, ' . . . we were living with my grandparents at that point and she was taking care of a baby. She probably just didn't think about it.'

For Ameeta, Ed, Cheri, and Cathie, their home environment neither encouraged nor discouraged musical participation; musical participation was simply not a part of the family makeup. These participants equate this disinterest for musical participation to their own perception of being a non-musical family. Ameeta stated in a session, 'No, no one ever encouraged me to sing. Singing wasn't part of our family at all.' Cathie commented, 'I wouldn't have called us a musical family!' Ed concluded the discussion on childhood experience with singing in the home, by saying, 'Well, it was pretty much non-existent.'

The overbearing parental figure tried to use their position of authority to coerce their child into singing situations. Harmful feelings of resentment towards the parent because of their actions then became projected onto future singing situations. For example, Gilbert's mother contributed to his unwillingness to participate in singing. She tried to entice Gilbert to do the things that she wanted through coercion or guilt. 'Just do it for me. Do it for Mom.' These were often words Gilbert heard while growing up. Gilbert resisted this coercion and often did the opposite of what was asked by his mother. This was the case in singing. He was encouraged by his mother to sing in both school and church but he found her overbearing in this desire. This made Gilbert retract his involvement with singing all together. 'I didn't want to encourage her so I just didn't sing at all.' I asked him if he thought if his mother's overbearing desire was part of the reason why he does not sing as an adult. He responded, 'That started it. I don't sing. I haven't sung as a young boy and it just carried on.' Gilbert currently takes a yoga class once a week. The yoga instructor often chants during this class and encourages the participants to chant as well. Gilbert describes his experience with chanting: 'It is an embarrassment. I'm tight and tense. I'm not enjoying this. In my mind, deep down, I am waiting for my instructor to say, 'Oh come on Gil, you can sing louder,' and then right away I equate her with my mother who is trying to push me . . . .'

The critical parental figure would pass judgment on vocal attempts. Such comments were directed at the child about their inability to sing. These comments were then internalised and manifested in a negative fashion throughout the life of the participant. Tony believes his perception of himself as a non-singer is related to his childhood experiences with a critical parental figure. He feels his singing career may have been stunted because of comments made by his father:

*... I'd be whistling and my Dad would say 'You're out.' He says the way you whistle is the way you sing. So there has always been this thing that I am out of key... I was kind of shut down so I never really [pause]. So in my childhood experience, I have been very musical and pushed to be musical but it was in the singing, I was led to believe by my Dad early on that I had a pitching issue.*

In a later discussion about the impact of negative encounters with family members, Tony suggested:

*... That [negative encounter with his father] is what sparked me into thinking I don't have the goods. I had all the ambition. Even had long hair at one time... I do believe that the biggest downfall is when you are criticised at a young age. If you are shut down in your elementary school years, that can affect your life. It hurts down to the bone. If you are shut down, you may never do that again, which is a big loss.*

A different, yet equally devastating negative encounter with a parent, was the memory of feelings of trauma in the home, specifically about singing. Negative feelings about the family became negative feelings about singing. It was often very difficult for these people as adults to overcome such traumatic feelings. The negative attitudes brought on by parental influence became projected onto any singing event for the participants in their adult life. For example, Nancy's father had played the violin before marrying her mother. However, he did not play after they were married because Nancy's mother viewed it as a frivolous activity in a household that suffered financial hardship. Nancy remembers tension in the home because of the lack of money and this became associated with the lack of support for musical endeavors. Now, having had the chance to assess childhood influences on adult musical practices, she mused: 'This is why I am here [as part of this research]. I think this thing about my Dad is part of it. I don't know how much more is there. If I really identify with my Dad? All these things you wish you could get past.' In an email response to the question of how much as a child did she really want to sing, she responded, 'Even though I didn't know it then, it was probably the most important thing to me. Even now I remember songs learned in elementary school... That experience may have included not just singing, but acceptance by others of me as a singer.'

The final theme of the impact of familial attitude centers on a specific negative encounter with a family member in which the participant was humiliated when attempting to sing in a public forum. Being disgraced in a public manner by a family member deeply etched negative feelings about singing into the participant. Ameeta's negative experience in the home setting involved an encounter with her brother. Ameeta was in grade four and it was Christmastime. Neighbours had gathered in the community centre for a Christmas celebration. A general invitation went out to all the children to sing a solo in front of the group so Ameeta decided she would stand up and sing. She recalled this incident by stating:

So I remember singing and he [her brother] is laughing at me. He is laughing and he is younger than me. He is two or three years younger than me. So from that point... I was so embarrassed I started crying. At eight years old or seven years old... I don't know if that was what caused me not to sing. It may have been subconsciously. It probably did I am thinking now... I was very embarrassed and I still remember my brother's reaction to this day. Forty odd years later!

These negative encounters in home were dominant factors in why singing had not been a part of their adult life. There was an agreement among the participants that trying to overcome the idea that family members did not want to hear them sing was insurmountable. Once the participant self-designated as non-singer, then the family supported this label. Consequently, the participants became reluctant to have their voice heard because it would

mean taking a risk and pushing themselves outside this imposed box. Being discouraged to sing, to this extent as a child, created real feelings of hurt and betrayal in the participants. They succumbed to this persona and accepted their lack of participation to sing in the family as their reality.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Societies exist within the essence of temporality: perceptions and assumptions come from the past, live in the present, and imply a future (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 32). The assumption about the concept of singer that my participants brought to this study came from this sense of temporality. A brief look at the historical view of singing in Canadian society will illustrate its impact on present day practices and possibilities for the future.

Singing settled into its role in Canadian culture as a result of views and practices held by the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in the 1700s. Even though singing was encouraged within these denominations, its main purpose was to enhance the worship service. Restrictions were placed on who could sing, choice of repertoire, and performance style, because of the limited nature of the purpose of singing. Since Canadian culture was dominated at that time by Western religious ideals, singing was imbued with a sense of dutifulness, worthiness, and seriousness that was seen in the church ideology of the time (Green & Vogan 1991, p. 57; Mark 2007, p.45). From such Western ideals grew a multitude of assumptions and beliefs surrounding the concept of singing, the essence of singing, and who should engage in singing. Pascale describes such assumptions as:

*... subtle nuances, such as valuing the high, lilting soprano voice over the alto. It is connected to various philosophies and strongly held convictions, such as improving vocal performance through the mastery of musical literacy, and even exclusionary practices, such as selecting out the 'better singers' and suggesting that others refrain from singing at all (Pascale 2005, p. 167).*

One of the most profound consequences of such cultural assumptions in present day has been the subsequent development of a limited perception of singing. Such assumptions, '... effectively narrow the scope of our perceptions, our language, our philosophy, and our teaching practices in the domain of singing...' (Pascale 2005, p. 168). In Canada, the cultural assumption of a restricted and daunting standard lays the foundation for the current application of the term non-singer to a large number of societal members.

During the sessions with the research participants, the religious and cultural assumptions of Canada's founding people were discussed. Most of the participants were unaware that such cultural practices continued to hold influence. When I asked what affect assumptions from Canada's past had on her, Sydney said, 'I think it is restrictive. I think some of those early Protestant groups, you pretty much had to tow the line and couldn't have any fun. Couldn't dance, couldn't sing. That is what I was brought up in.'

## **EDUCATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCE**

The interaction between teacher and student in a school setting proved to be a detrimental reason why the participants were unwilling to participate in singing. This negative childhood experience with singing in school was remembered by most participants as an incident in which they experienced public humiliation. This public

humiliation usually occurred when the participant's attempt to sing was criticised by a teacher. Before this incident occurred, there was no inkling that they could not sing; they had participated as willingly in singing activities as they had in any other school endeavor. There was a complete belief in the verdict that they did not meet the requirements to be called a singer. This belief was internalised as truth because it came from one in authority. This negative encounter superseded all positive influences at school, home, or in the community. The participants for whom this occurred, grew to believe that they did not have the physical capability to sing, and thus did not partake in singing activities. As they did not partake in such activities, they did not develop singing skills. They became unmotivated and lacked the confidence to partake in musical events.

Cheri experienced this negative interaction with a teacher early in her singing career. Cheri's negative encounter happened in grade four in a school outside of Winnipeg. All students were given the opportunity to audition for a recess choir that would practice from January to May. The culmination was a bus trip to Winnipeg to perform. She went eagerly to the audition with all the other girls. When the list was posted with the names of the choir members, she was the only grade four girl not to be accepted into the choir. She remembers:

*I was devastated. They didn't even say, well you can hand out music. I was out. I was completely ostracized. So I was out at recess by myself in the freezing cold with no one to play with but all the boys. All the girls went to the choir. There was no one to play with at nine years old. It was humiliating – being the only one. You really have an awareness of acceptance or rejection at that age. You aren't egocentric anymore where you don't notice what everyone else is doing. It was absolutely devastating. And they practiced and practiced and practiced all through the winter months. It was a huge social event in the spring that I wasn't a part of. It was just devastating for me. Up until that point I didn't realize that I actually couldn't sing.*

I asked her if she had participated in the singing before this incident and she responded, 'Always a good student, energetic, vivacious.' When asked if her willingness to participate in singing endeavors as an adult was affected by this incident, she replied:

*Of course, I have associated this all with singing... Your impact [as a teacher] can be huge, without you even knowing it. Positively or negatively. The one little thing you say could be the turning point either positively or negatively. It is a huge responsibility to be holding in a young person's life.*

Even though Cathie's school experience began positively, the end result was negative. In grade three, Cathie's classroom teacher encouraged her to sing and worked one-on-one with her. Cathie enjoyed this individual attention and was keen to sing and impress her teacher. Nevertheless, she did not realise that the culmination of this training would be to sing in the small town music festival. She ended up performing a piece in front of her family, peers, and adjudicators. Cathie remembers this performance experience as a very negative one. She felt humiliated because she felt she did not perform at the same level as the other singers. After that performance experience, she concluded, 'I'm never going to do that again. That was it. I just felt like such a disappointment to my teacher, to myself.' When I asked if she had performed since then, she responded, 'Never. That did it for me. That experience made me say, "I'm not doing that again." It was uncomfortable, I'm not good at singing and so I just never put myself in that situation where I had to do that.' I asked if her mother talked to her at the time about this incident. Cathie indicated that the singing incident was never discussed. This negative performance experience, combined with an introverted personality, is one of the reasons Cathie believes she has not sung in 40 years. She commented, 'For me singing was very personal, so criticism was hard to take.'

## CONCLUSION

Through the inward, outward, backward, and forward inquiry into the participants' stories, the themes of social-cultural influences emerged. These themes emerged in all of the participants' stories, some to greater degrees for particular individuals. Through their own narratives the participants expressed that their unwillingness to participate in singing endeavors was multi-faceted. The influence of cultural perception, economic situation, familial attitude, historical context, and educational circumstance was heard consistently in the dialogue with the participants.

The participants felt if these influences had been positive, then they would have confidence in their singing voice. Since their influences were negative, they avoided singing activities and internalised the concept of non-singer. This negative view of oneself as a non-singer was detrimental to their concept of development as it limited involvement in singing and perpetuated the cultural idea that singing is restricted to those who display innate singing ability and can sing in a performance situation to a high standard.

In correlation to this concept that an unwillingness to participate in singing is multi-faceted, one would naturally extrapolate that a remedy for the non-singer would also be multi-faceted. Based on the narratives of the twelve participants, practical change in these social and cultural influences is not multi-faceted. They saw the major source of practical change originating in the public school system. For most, there was the feeling that if their school experience had been more diverse and inclusive, then the other perceptions may not have been so influential. The participants bemoaned the fact that they did not graduate from grade school with a basic understanding of notation, rhythm, and the process of vocal production. For example, Ed felt there was a gap in his own music education in his schooling career. He stated, 'You can learn about finance or carpentry as a an adult if you want. But it seems like this [musical skill] is one of the hardest things to get access to.' (As an aside, if one thinks a change in the education system's dealing with singing is an unrealistic goal, one only needs to look at the current success of the 'Sing Up' program in Britain. The aim of the program is to have every elementary child singing in school before 2011 and they appear on the way to fulfilling this mandate. Even though this demands resources, the success of this venture is changing the attitudes of the children and the society positively towards singing) (Sing Up, 2010).

Those directly involved with singers must be aware of social and cultural influences in order to either work through the issues with a proclaimed non-singer or avoid creating one in the first place. Working alongside the singers, one should be sensitive to the complexity of the singing process in Canadian society. There needs to be an assessment of perception about the role of each of these influences in order for the phenomenon to change from an unwillingness to sing to an unwillingness to stop singing.

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