

Singing and Social Identity

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Group singing is so ordinary a practice that we tend not to notice its power in our lives. (Berger 2004) Yet singing is an ancient way that groups prepare to carry out mutual activity and soothe themselves when activity is done. Singing influences people's physiology, emotions and thoughts in an integrated activity whose roots are evolutionary deep within us. (Lamborn Wilson) This is intrinsically understood by soccer fans, field laborers, birthday celebrants, army platoons, and other groups which the reader may draw from her/his own experience.

In groups, sound reaches further than sight, defining the group boundary aurally as well as signifying its cultural identity. This is true of groups which are geographically proximate as well as of those which are dispersed and remain self-identified through singing - in which home or subgroup language merges with musical idiom, amplifying both the singer's and the listener's sense of self-in-relation to his/her social identity. (Wade 2004)

When psychohistorians today look at the implications of their research and begin to offer ideas to help societies develop better child rearing practices and more democratic group processes, I believe they can profitably include attention to phenomena of voice use to deepen understanding of how groups and societies organize and how individuals within them develop.

Singing can unite people for action of all kinds and can either soothe or revivify persons who are under duress. The following example from the years of civil rights activism in Alabama illustrates this:

The year is 1963. Walking shoulder to shoulder in Birmingham, Alabama, thousands of black Americans are singing "We Shall Overcome". By singing they form an aural boundary around themselves which helps to lessen the impact of cursing policemen, snarling dogs, and epithet-hurling hecklers who

surround them. Interviewed later, marchers reported that singing helped strengthen Through group singing, individuals' courage was amplified. And, too, the singing was something they could do together while accomplishing something else. (Lichtenberg 2001)

An example from the Rwandan genocide is also instructive:

The year is 1997. Ugandan Musician Samite Malundo is visiting a refugee camp in Rwanda whose occupants are survivors of horrific massacres. Malundo sits down next to a silent young boy and sings hi a song. The boy listens for a while and then begins to whisper a song back to Malundo. Before long, thirty children have gathered around, some as young as four years old. They take turn singing songs over a period of several hours. As they do so, their breathing and body movement become activated, beginning a process of undoing their frozen somatic state and affectlessness which were results of their traumatic shock. The songs bring back connections with their lives before the catastrophe. The children begin to cry, telling their stories to one another. Reestablishing intersubjective connection., they bring forward, what has been held in background. By the end of Malundo's week in the camp, the children's conversation has begun to refer to a future: "When I leave here...When I am big...I want to introduce you to my new friend." Through singing, these shocked and uprooted children have begun to reorganize their experiential field, self-mobilizing and forming new social connections. (NPR 1997)

How is it that we are attuned to the influence of vocal sound? And what draws us to want to vocalize? Infant developmental research offers some insights.

Prosodic Exchanges in Infancy

Our self identity is a social identity, in that self develops through interaction with other (Fogel); and prosodic exchanges between infant and caregiver are an important part of this interaction (Shore). In infancy, we engage in unlanguage vocalizing with caregivers and thus become neurologically primed to be responsive to oral stimuli throughout our lifespan, including responding to oration, chanting, individual and group singing.

In order to attract caregiving, infants vocalize. While giving care, parents respond by making a variety of sounds which soothe or stimulate the infant. Sound dialogues begin to develop from the fourth month (In fact, the baby has been hearing its mother's voice since the fourth month of gestation). These dialogues, often a form of play, are musical in nature. Research by Papousek and Papousek (1989) describe the musical forms, which include elaborate mirroring of accent, pitch range and vocal line embellishment on the part of both infant and mother. Mechtild Papousek states (1997), "It is not just the empathic mother who adopts flexibly to her infant, but the infant too is alert, sensitive and responsive to the mother's own variations of communication form."

Colin Trevarthen (1997), a psychologist, studied the rhythmic interactions of mothers and babies, the timing with which they interact, and how the babies teach the good-enough mothers to sing with them, often taking the initiative. This can be heard on tapes of infant studies in which mothers and babies of five and six months of age sing intricate duets with delight. At about nine months of age, complex cross-modal interactions begin to occur which combine singing, movement and facial expression.

Daniel Stern (1985) writes, "The mother is constantly introducing modifying imitations or a theme and variations." Singing these vocal duets is one of the ways babies develop their sense of self in relation to a significant other. Thus, who we are as adults is in part founded upon how we sang with our caregivers. These very earliest singing experiences make us neurally primed and ready to be affected by voice sounds in adult life.

Where oral/aural stimulation is absent, there is failure to thrive, sometimes ending in death. A dramatic historic example of this is Frederick II's experiment with infants in the 13th Century. Frederick was interested in the origin of language and wanted to test his belief that babies have an inborn ability to speak. He gathered babies from households in his kingdom and had them raised in his palace with every need attended to, save one. The nurses were forbidden to speak with the babies or with each other in the babies' presence.. Every single child died. (Abalafia)

Some researcher-practitioners, including S. Porges, P. Levine and B. van der Kolk have been looking at how both childrearing and therapeutic practices can be improved in the light of infant research regarding prosodic exchange:

Neurobiologist Stephen Porges (2002) has pioneered a method for improving autistic individuals' ability for social connection through listening to acoustically enhanced recorded singing to stimulate the individual's vagus nerve. Researchers have noticed that his extensive lab research on this work seems to support the clinical anecdotes offered by Alfred Tomatis (1969).

The neurobiologist Peter A. Levine (2002), who works with trauma victims, reports how utilizing singing and movement with groups of Bosnian and Serbian mothers and their infants promoted communication among them and a relaxation of tensions in the community. Bessel van der Kolk (2003) a psychiatrist specializing in trauma work, has spoken of his clinical experience in working with singing to help heal trauma. He has expressed a wish for more research on the matter, since, as adults, the way we take up membership in groups, including the way we participate as family members and as members of society, is in part founded upon our early experiences of vocal exchange.

Group Cohesion

Singing in groups directs peoples' emotions and prepares them for joint action in the following ways:

1. People singing together are breathing, moving, intoning in matching patterns. This is called entrainment. They may become available for a light trance in which their experiences are somatically aligned. Campbell (1997) reports that group members singing together have been measured to have similar pulse rates, blood pressure, and pupil dilation. This somatic confluence underlies heightened experiences in singing which are sometimes labeled spiritual.

Similar trance induction may occur when we listen to a powerful actor or orator, since the same neurologic pathways, primed since infancy, are activated. Daniel Stern (1985) describes a process called "automatic

induction", whereby heightened auditory experience, spoken or sung, may move people to respond on a preverbal level to the prosodic elements of oratory, including vocal timbre and melodic line, pitch patterns, pace, volume, and the relationship of phrasing to breath patterns. Based on developmental patterns of sound exchange, humans are deeply susceptible to qualities of vocalization and may be moved toward an orator's ends as much by the sounds of voice as by the meaning of the words.

2. The act of singing or listening stimulates senses and arouses emotions which, if prolonged in intensity, can bring participants to a state in which the boundary between self and environment seems temporarily to dissolve, leading to a feeling of expansion or floating, and to a condition of availability to suggestion (Newham).

3. Singers or chanters are saying the same words at the same time and are thereby reinforcing the impression of truth in the texts. For some of us, group singing may encourage heightened awareness of self-as-individual through an experience of aural group support. For others of us, the experience is one of diminished individual awareness because of a feeling of aural group domination. (Gregory 2002) A chilling example of this from Germany during the Nazi era is the Horst Wessel Song. A folk tune with new words provided by the eponymous Nazi thug, this song was raised to the status of a national hymn after Wessel was murdered in 1930 by a resister to Nazism.

By contrast, for the victims of Nazism, singing became, in some cases, a tool for survival. In her book "Singing for Survival", (1992) Gila Flam writes about her experiences in the ghetto of Lodz, Poland during WWII.

She describes how ghetto inmates created a musical culture shaped by their needs. These were never sung again afterwards, except into the tape recorders of researchers long after the war. Other songs were part of a prewar repertoire. These continued to be sung after the war as commemoratives.

In the ghetto, there was regular group singing at meetings of the youth organization and by workers' groups accompanying their labor. Ghetto survivor Miriam Harel : The song is not important. What is important is that

we fight by singing it. Songs allowed singers to express emotions and make topical references that were denied them in speech. Harel states: The Nazis could take everything away from us. This remained our only human expression. (Flam) Or, as my colleague Isaac Zieman put it, when speaking to me about his experiences during that era, "Songs were my only friends."

4. Singers are all singing the same language, reinforcing a sense of unquestioned commonality. (Slobin)

5. In everyone's knowing the song, they are bonding around their common social symbols and are signifying their collective identity. (Berger). A dramatic example of this exists in the prison system of the Texas Department of Correction where African-American prisoners have created a body of work songs whose roots stretch back to the field songs of slavery, and further, to the traditions of group singing in Africa. The songs are sung only outdoors, and vary with the phrasing needs of the work being done. The texts of these songs are never about work. Song leaders are men who are able to improvise new songs which authentically reflect the inmates' feelings, and whose voices and personal endurance allow them to go on singing for hours on end. Singing is a way that the men join together where no overt resistance is permitted. If an inmate is released, he never sings these songs on the outside. (Jackson)

Groups bond through singing, as the reader may have experienced at camp, in church, on the street corner, in family gatherings, on road trips. I experienced this in New York City, on the nights following the events of September 11, 2001, neighbors gathered in streets and parks to light candles and spontaneously sing songs of solace and, in some places, peace. This went on for several weeks. During this time, on several occasions, I heard people say to one another that singing allowed them to express intensity and complexity of feelings and thoughts which conversation alone could not carry.

Anthropologist David Attenborough (2002) has explored social uses of singing in preliterate cultures where he identifies singing's rhythmicity as a powerful coordinator of large group undertakings. Taking his research farther afield, Attenborough has studied other species that sing; and he posits, in tandem with related research going on at the MIT department of biomusicology, that

human beings may be evolutionary "hard-wired" to sing.

Group songs structure strong emotions so that they may be manageably experienced through containment which the musical form provides. For example, among the native peoples of British Columbia, songs have traditionally been used to relieve interpersonal tensions. Without naming names, gossip songs are sung in a call and response fashion, telling the story of the conflict and suggesting ways of resolution. The songs often chide the arguers for not resolving their differences. This gentle group shaming is used as a form of social regulation. (May)

The ability to hold emotion makes the cognitive messages of the texts more powerful when absorbed. Group singing thus regulates energy levels, conveys history, defines geographic and social boundaries, reinforces group norms, provides socially sanctioned release, promotes solidarity, sustains courage, and sometimes pushes people to override personal hesitations.

Group cohesion through singing may have either a conservative or destructive outcome for individuals. Using the formulation of Philip Lichtenberg (1990), group singing may create either community or confluence. Singing is a conservator when it acts as an aural holding environment to sustain individuals in times of stress or social emergency, as described in the examples above. Group singing may also be destructive of individual choicefulness when, through the somatic and emotional overwhelm of group sound, individual members are induced to identify unquestioningly with leaders' projections which may be reinforced by song texts, rhythmic repetition, loudness, and trancelike aspects of repeated harmony or melodic rise and fall. This is exemplified by the mesmerizing experiences of Koranic chanting undertaken by groups of young boys in some madrasas of Saudi Arabia and northeastern Pakistan.

Conclusion

Vocalizing is a primary avenue through which human beings interact and form groups. Vocal sound has profound neurological effects, for which we were primed in infancy. These effects are In addition to, and possibly perceptually

preceding, the linguistic meaning of what we say or sing (Methin 2006),

Singing can be a way to express one's individuality and group membership at the same time. In the best of circumstances, singing provides an empathic conduit and shortcut for understanding others' thoughts and emotions and relating them to one's own. Singing provides a way to safely release held energy, including the opportunity to feel oneself supported by a social field, as experienced aurally.

Singing facilitates energetic renewal through stimulation and balancing of both the autonomic and voluntary nervous systems. Voice use is one of the ways people sense who they are. And voice use assumes a hearer, provokes a response. It is thus an avenue of intersubjectivity, and so is an important tool in peoples' building groups and societies.

I invite the reader to think of a song that has been important in her or his life and to ponder the ways it has signified group membership, with all the emotional import that carries. Then, think of everyone having at least one such song in their personal history. Thought of this way, vocalizing can be understood to be a powerful form of social glue which influences individuals' behaviors. I believe that by attending to this deep background connective process and powerful leadership tool, psychohistorians can gain additional understanding of how people are influenced or inspired to behave as they do with one another.

I close with a quote from contemporary poet Li-Young Lee, "You must sing to be found, when found, you must sing."