



**“Our Voices Enlighten, Inspire, Heal and Empower:”
A Mixed Methods Investigation of Demography, Sociology, and
Identity Acquisition in a Gay Men’s Chorus**

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Editor’s Note: This journal sought and obtained written permission from the choral ensemble whose participants are the focus of the research here reported to inform our readers of videos posted by this organization for public viewing on YouTube and the chorus web site. Readers who wish to view these videos to enhance their understandings of Dr. Latimer’s work may access the videos through the accompanying media hyperlinks. Upon careful review of the contents of this article and the public videos, all parties are confident this procedure does not compromise the anonymity of individual choristers quoted in this report.

Abstract

This study was a two-phase investigation of demography, sociology, and identity acquisition in a gay men’s chorus in the Midwest United States. Phase one of the study quantitatively analyzed participants’ (N=87) responses to a survey distributed at a regularly scheduled chorus rehearsal. Phase two of the study qualitatively investigated the experiences of participants in the same chorus through field observations during rehearsals and concerts, and through interviews with selected choristers (N=30). Demographic data indicated these choristers were predominately White, well-educated, upper-middle class gay men with a mean age of 44. Survey findings suggested that primary reasons for participating in the chorus included (a) enjoyment of performing, (b) socialization with other gay men, (c) feeling of community, (d) enhanced self-esteem, and (e) facilitation of the coming out process. Qualitative data suggested that participation in this chorus provided acquisition of a positive gay identity through participation in a constructive, affirming, and healing social and musical environment. Results were discussed in relation to a tripartite theoretical model (Troiden, 1989) where gay identity acquisition occurs in three phases: (a) self-identity when persons see themselves as

gay, (b) perceived identity when persons perceive that others view them as gay, and (c) presented identity when persons present or announce themselves as gay.

VIDEO #1: The Heartland Men’s Chorus, “Make them hear you.”



Throughout the history of the United States, community singing has remained an integral component in the social, religious, educational,

and cultural interaction of its citizens. Numerous choral music scholars have recognized that choral singing provided a unique venue whereby chorister responses to various socio-political issues and events could be explored in a way that enhanced consensus of viewpoints and promoted human cooperation (Decker, 1973; Robinson & Winold, 1976; Thompson, 1980; Garretson, 1981; Swan, 1987). Indeed, these scholars suggested that organized choral singing provided the most accessible form of amateur musical expression.

A 2004 Chorus America study revealed that nearly 28.5 million singers regularly participated in 250,000 choral groups in the United States, far more than participated in any other art form ("About Choral Singing," 2004). Chorus America's findings suggested that choruses provided an unsurpassed opportunity to take part in an activity that encouraged community, enhanced musical skills, and afforded unique intrinsic and aesthetic experiences for participants of every age, income, gender, and ethnicity.

Recent studies documented the demographic profiles and social characteristics of some community choruses. One such study of a sample population from cities in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama indicated that female choristers typically outnumbered male choristers by a ratio of 2:1 and that the choristers were predominantly White (Tipps, 1992). The majority of the choristers surveyed had completed at least a Bachelor's degree and many of the choristers reported at least some post elementary school music experience.

In a similar study, Vincent (1997) corroborated these findings, suggesting that choristers tended to be White, well educated, upper middle class men and women. Vincent's findings suggested that most community chorus participants received their music instruction from organized school music programs. Indeed, more than half (52.60%) of Vincent's respondents participated in middle school/junior high school choruses, nearly three-fourths (72.70%) participated in high school choruses, and nearly two-thirds (66.43%) of the choristers sang in college choruses.

A more recent study of community choruses compared the Chorus America survey ("About Choral Singing," 2004) with studies of community choruses spanning the last 40 years (Bell, 2004). Findings suggested that nearly 99% of the participants graduated from high school, over two-thirds completed a four-year college

education, and one-third or more completed a graduate level education. Bell revealed that over 85% of these community chorus participants were White, and over 60% reported an annual income over \$50,000. This study referenced the surge over the past 20 years in the development of gay men's choruses and suggested that further research to clarify the sociological influences of the gay chorus movement was warranted.

The gay chorus movement experienced its genesis at a time when a growing weight of empirical data combined with changing social norms and an increasingly politically active gay community prompted the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1987; Bayer, 1987). Important in this regard was a move away from the construct of gay and lesbian persons structured within life-style based contexts, where the working assumption was that identity could best be understood by an individual's own unique environment (Turner, 1996).

Nearly contemporaneous with the APA's changed position toward homosexuality, Tajfel (1978) argued that social development could be more accurately characterized as a matter of collective action rather than individual initiative. He posited that social conflict, social stratification, and impassable social barriers between groups all created the likelihood that people would seek solutions to identity acquisition considerations at the inter-group level by seeking affirming and relevant group memberships.

As the gay and lesbian community sought legitimacy in the United States, a need developed, as Tajfel (1978) suggested, for social groups that could specifically address gay and lesbian issues. As a consequence, numerous organizations with the particular charge of supporting these previously disenfranchised communities came into being. One such organization, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), was founded to provide leadership and inspiration to the gay and lesbian movement through excellence in the arts ("GALA Choruses Home," 2004). GALA provided numerous support services to its members, which in 2003 numbered over 200 choruses with more than 10,000 choristers.

Gordon (1990) published a seminal article on the history of the first eight years of GALA and posited that GALA was at that time the

fastest growing choral music movement in North America. According to Gordon, GALA chorus members joined for social and musical reasons and to make a statement of gay community pride. Following the publication of Gordon's article, *Choral Journal* received numerous letters to the editor strongly disapproving of the printing of material in support of GALA choruses (Matthews, 1990; Lord, 1990; McCourt, 1990), and other letters equally supportive of the article (Holloway, 1990; Wright, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Miller, 1990; Hejduk, 1990).

In an early study of GALA choruses, Attinello (1994) surveyed the membership of four active gay men's choruses in large urban centers. His findings suggested that demographic characteristics in these groups were similar to community choruses at large, revealing that the respondents were primarily between the ages of 26 and 50, were predominantly White and well educated, and that over 92% participated in organized school music programs at some time prior to participation in gay choruses.

Attinello (1994) suggested these choristers were primarily motivated to join gay choruses because of an interest in gay issues and to associate with other gay men; however, interest in singing in a group and being a part of a specific choral community became a subsequent focal point in continued membership. Indeed, Attinello posited that these choral groups originally began as political interest groups but continued for musical and social reasons. He argued that diverse values among the choristers represented in his study gradually developed into a corporate ideology and communal value structure.

Hilliard (2002) corroborated Attinello's conclusions in a recent descriptive study of the history and influence of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus. He argued that this chorus provided an understanding, inspiring venue where gay members were encouraged to come out rather than lead a lonely and closeted life. Hilliard suggested that further research should explore the power of music groups in building self-esteem, creating a sense of community, and educating the community at large.

Subsequent to the changed stance of the APA toward homosexuality, research investigating gay identity acquisition suggested theories consistent with the findings of Tajfel (1978) that gay identity acquisition, to a large extent, evolves through some sort of socially constructed group interaction (Cass, 1979,

1983/1984, 1984; Richardson & Hart, 1981; Troiden, 1989; Cox & Gallois, 1996). Because openly gay and lesbian individuals tended to have limited access to customary heterosexual community social organizations (e.g., churches, social recreational activities, and traditional community based music organizations) the creation of distinctly gay and lesbian community based groups for identity acquisition and affirmation became necessary.

Recent studies of non-gay choruses have suggested that organized community singing provided such a vehicle for personal identity acquisition. For example, in a study of community choruses, Willingham (2001) concluded that respondents viewed their participation as a source of community, self-identity, restoration, healing, and as a means of developing discernment and connoisseurship. Additionally, Faulkner & Davidson (2004, 2006) suggested that choristers' behaviors provided a compelling framework for articulating distinctive core identity attributes. They concluded that choral singing constituted an agency by which personal identities could be vocally constructed, performed, and celebrated.

In a recent essay, Strachan (2006) posited that the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) choral movement has been transforming for its participants on many levels. She argued that, like those choristers studied by Willingham (2001) and Faulkner and Davidson (2004, 2006), choristers in GLBT choruses were afforded an opportunity publicly to announce their identities in a safe, healing, and affirming setting.

The present study augmented such research by both quantitatively and qualitatively investigating one gay men's chorus in the Midwest United States. The purpose of the initial quantitative phase was to investigate the demography and social characteristics of this chorus and to provide information and direction for a subsequent qualitative phase of inquiry with the same ensemble. To that end, the following research questions were asked: (a) What is the demographic profile of the chorus? (b) What are the occupations and income levels of the choristers? (c) What is the level of music training of the choristers? (d) What are self-reported reasons for participating in the chorus?

QUANTITATIVE PHASE

METHOD

Questionnaire

Following several preliminary interviews with an experienced gay men's chorus director, a two-section questionnaire similar to the questionnaire utilized by Attinello (1994) was designed (see Appendix). The questionnaire elicited a demographic profile of the respondents including (a) age, (b) race, (c) education, (d) profession or vocation, (e) annual salary, and (f) musical background, as well as responses to Likert-type scale items related to respondents' musical and social interests. Participants were encouraged to indicate, in an open-ended section, any issues not addressed by the questionnaire that would help provide direction for future study.

Procedure

The researcher distributed and collected the questionnaire at a regularly scheduled rehearsal of the gay men's chorus. Most questionnaires were collected at this time. A volunteer chorus member distributed additional questionnaires at the next rehearsal to several participants who had been absent the previous rehearsal.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

Eighty-seven ($N=87$) of the 120 male choristers completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 72%. The participants were all active performing members above the age of eighteen. Twenty-nine participants (33%) were age 40 or under, and 58 participants (67%) were over 40. The mean age was 44 and median age range was 41–45 years. The participants were predominately White (96.5%), and evidenced a high level of education, with 82% indicating an academic level of Bachelor's degree or above.

Of the numerous occupations reported by the respondents, education (22%) and sales and marketing (20%) constituted the two largest categories. Seven participants (8%) reported an annual income of less than \$25,000, 44 participants (51%) reported an annual income of between \$25,000 and \$55,000, 21 participants (24%) reported an annual income between \$55,000 and \$75,000, and 15 participants (17%)

reported an annual income of more than \$75,000.

Sixty-eight participants (78%) reported some music training in high school and 60 participants (69%) reported music training in college. However, only 15 participants (17%) indicated any income from professional music activities.

Scale Items

Table One presents results from the Likert scale items. Ninety-two percent of the respondents joined the chorus because they enjoyed performing and 62% joined the chorus to improve their musical skills. Thirty (34%) of the respondents said they preferred repertoire that specifically focused on gay issues, but nearly half (48%) responded neutrally to this statement.

Questionnaire results indicated that 90% of the respondents joined the chorus to socialize with other gay men and 93% continued to sing in the chorus because it fostered a feeling of community. Seventy-four respondents (85%) reported that singing in the chorus had improved their self-esteem. Fifty-five (63%) of the participants disclosed that they had joined the chorus to be more politically and socially active, and 70% indicated that the chorus offered an outlet for coming out.

Twelve participants responded to the open-ended section. Their suggestions for enhanced understanding of the social and musical roles of this gay chorus could be largely encapsulated by the following questions: (a) What are the financial burdens involved in singing in the chorus? (b) Do choristers have other music interests? (c) How many choristers are gay? (d) How do religious, social, and political issues impact the chorus? (e) How do non-singing participants help with the organization?

Three participants responded to the open-ended section with the following comments: (a) "Music improved my self-esteem, not a 'gay choir.'" (b) "I sing for the joy of making music." (c) "Musicianship is highly valued in the chorus."

DISCUSSION

Survey findings, though limited to participants in this study, indicate that the chorus's demographic profile is consistent with those studied by Tipps (1992), Vincent (1997), Willingham (2001), and Attinello (1994). Specifically, the choruses represented in these studies evidence a population that is predominately White, upper middle class, and

Table 1

Survey Questions Eight through Fifteen

Statement	Responses						
	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
I joined the chorus to be politically/socially active (Q8).	6	9	17	40	15	3.56	1.11
I prefer traditional repertoire that is not connected to gay issues (Q9)	8	22	42	13	2	2.76	.90
I joined the chorus because I enjoy performing (Q10).	2	0	5	31	49	4.44	.80
I joined the chorus to meet and socialize with other gay men (Q11).	0	2	8	45	32	4.23	.71
My self-esteem has improved as a result of my experience with the chorus (Q12).	0	2	11	43	31	4.18	.74
The chorus provides an outlet for coming out (Q13).	1	2	23	35	26	3.95	.87
I continue to sing in the chorus because of a feeling of community (Q14).	0	1	5	28	53	4.53	.66
I joined the chorus to improve my musical skills (Q15).	2	10	21	42	12	3.60	.95

Note: Responses based on a five point Likert-type scale. Anchors: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neutral, A = agree, SA = strongly agree.

highly educated, with prior experience in high school or college music groups.

Findings of the quantitative phase of this study corroborate those of Attinello (1994), suggesting that the motivation for joining a gay community chorus might be different from the reasons for continuing in a gay community chorus. Indeed, scale item results in this study suggest that many of the respondents joined for political reasons, but continue to sing in the chorus because of a feeling of community. The highest mean (4.53) and the lowest standard deviation (.66) of any scale item occur in question 14 ("I continue to sing in the chorus because of a feeling of community"). As suggested by Swan (1987), choral singing for these respondents appears to provide a vigorous sense of community and social belonging.

There exists a growing body of research investigating the construct of musical activity as a source of community. Numerous studies have employed various qualitative methodologies to explore the musical and social meanings of musical organizations for their participants (e.g., Adderley, C. L., Kennedy, M. A. & Berz, W. L.,

2003; Bailey, B. A., & Davidson, J. W., 2005; Faulkner & Davidson, 2004, 2006; Hays, T., & Minichiello, V., 2005; MacDonald, R., & Wilson, G., 2005; Smith, A. M., 2005; Willingham, L., 2001). Absent in this line of research, however, is any sustained effort to qualitatively investigate choruses affiliated with the rapidly growing GALA chorus movement. Indeed, in one of the few studies of gay and lesbian choruses to date, Attinello (1994) employed a quantitative questionnaire methodology in his investigation of the demographic and social characteristics of selected GALA choruses.

To add to such research and to better understand the unique socio-musical dimensions apparently experienced by these choristers, the second phase of this study employed a qualitative methodology. In that regard, the researcher utilized the choristers' own personal perspectives from the inside looking out to generate the questions to be asked and thus the data to be interpreted in seeking to understand more fully those phenomena associated with this specific gay chorus.

QUALITATIVE PHASE

I know it sounds like a cliché, but this chorus really has changed my life. It has been a huge confidence builder... to stand with...all of these dozens of gay men, and proclaim gayness just by being there. It is a life changing, earth shattering experience, more deep than it sounds like in words. It is just so enriching...to turn something that for most of your life, was a negative thing...into such a positive thing, and to feel the audience feedback, it's just huge. --A participating chorister

Research Participants and Contextual Setting

Over a time span of two years, the researcher maintained intermittent contact with the chorus, collecting material culture, participating in rehearsals, attending concerts, interacting with choristers, and communicating with the director and the executive director. In the second year of these field experiences, the researcher assembled a list of 72 choristers who volunteered to grant interviews. Participants ($N=30$) were selected from this pool by utilizing preliminary conversations with potential interviewees, and through consultation with the artistic director. The specific goal in that regard was an interview participant pool representative of a cross-section of age and experience in the chorus.

While some participants suggested that they performed regularly as soloists, as suggested in the quantitative portion of this study most choristers were predominantly amateur singers. However, in rehearsals and concerts they exhibited high levels of musical skill and regularly performed challenging choral repertoire for large and appreciative audiences. Some of these choristers suggested that they participated in other choruses including church choirs, the local symphony chorus, and other community choruses. Indeed, the choristers' musicality allowed them to express their thoughts in technical musical terminology when necessary.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The methodological framework employed in this study utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a relatively new qualitative research method that has been employed in diverse investigations including studies focusing on such issues as gender,

ethnicity, sexuality, and musical identity (Faulkner & Davidson, 2004; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is interpretive in its aim to develop the researcher's understanding of participants' experiences through the researcher's own personal interaction with, and interpretation of, various qualitative data. IPA is phenomenological in that it is primarily concerned with the personal perceptions of the individual participants rather than attempting to produce an objective statement of the entity itself – in this case, the chorus.

Because IPA is concerned with seeking an insider's perspective, the researcher's own personal musical and social understanding proved beneficial in making sense of the participants' personal worlds through the dynamic process of interpretation associated with this method. In the words of Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999), "Qualitative analysis is inevitably a personal process and the analysis itself is the interpretive work which the investigator does at each of the stages" (p. 220).

The Researcher

The researcher, although not gay, possessed various understandings of gay identity resulting from years of personal and professional associations with gay men. Indeed, a close friend of many years and a participant in this chorus provided initial impetus for this study by sharing numerous anecdotes about his membership in this chorus and by inviting the researcher to a concert. Additionally, the researcher performed as an adjunct chorister with a similar gay men's chorus in another community. Moreover, the researcher remained a personal friend of several choristers and maintained a close professional association with the musical director for the duration of the research process.

Participant Interviews

The qualitative interview methodology employed in this study followed the life story interview method as discussed by Tagg (1985), which focuses on the participant's retrospective information without the use of corroborative evidence normally associated with other interview methodologies. Interviews, conducted during weekly rehearsals, lasted from 15 minutes to 40 minutes with most lasting about 30 minutes. All of the interviews began with the

researcher asking the participants to relate something about why they joined the chorus, why they continue in the chorus, and what they feel is most important for the researcher to know about the chorus.

The interviews were casual, open discussions that centered on the meaning and importance of the chorus in the participants' lives. The respondents were cooperative, articulate, and often emotional when responding to the researcher's questions. Because IPA methodology is essentially exploratory (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999), and because the interviews occurred in six rounds over a period of eight weeks, the researcher responded to and clarified emerging themes throughout the interview process.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data utilized in the second phase of this study were 36 pages of field notes, 25 pages of transcribed anecdotal remarks by choristers, numerous items of material culture (i.e. programs, publicity and marketing information, newsletters, and web site information), and 113 pages of transcripts from tape-recorded interviews.

Analyses of such data focused on thematic discovery and were achieved through coding processes similar to the grounded theory method described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). In that regard, the researcher employed a method that involved (a) open coding, where the data were separated into discrete parts and analyzed to find differences and similarities; (b) axial coding, where the researcher attempted to make connections in new ways between categories and sub-categories; and (c) selective coding, where the researcher identified core categories to which all other sub-categories related, thereby building a conceptual framework that accounted for the findings.

Such coding strategies were consistent with the methods of data analyses recommended by Smith, Jarman, & Osborn (1999), and allowed the researcher to identify relevant themes by ongoing examination and cross checking of individual participants' transcripts and by continuous examination of the dynamic collective data set.

FINDINGS

Assuming that one goal of any individual is to become a fully integrated human being, it

is clear that the developmental road for heterosexuals is normatively defined, while members of a sexual minority must overcome certain social obstacles to achieve a fully integrated identity (Johns & Probst, 2004, p. 82).

Exploring Personal Identities as Gay Men

Data indicate that the gay men represented in this study often struggle with an identity that is in transition. Many of these individuals guarded their gay identity from parents, family, friends, professional associates, clergy, and others for many years. One interview respondent, for example, remarked:

I self identified as gay when I was 21 and went to graduate school, but went back into the closet when I was 24 and got married and was married for 31 years. Toward the end of my marriage, life just became intolerable, and unsupportable for me, and so I came out again to my wife. So, I sort of went through separation and moving out from my wife of 31 years, and coming out to my daughter, and retiring, and then coming out again as a gay man, so it was a period of intense transition.

These men suggest that they are striving, like most human beings, to become fully integrated members of society. Their challenge, however, is punctuated by a marked, perceived lack of access to traditional social institutions, not as persons, but as gay persons. As one respondent suggested:

I am not out in my other community, it's really quite complicated, I'm still married, my wife and my daughter live in Alabama, I have been out to my wife forever, and more recently to my daughter. It was just the necessity of employment that brought me here. In the small community, I kind of lead a closeted life. So, this (chorus) allows me an opportunity to kind of sing, and be out at the same time.

Personal and Social Dimensions. The coming out process appears to be central to the dynamic transition of self-identity experienced by these gay choristers. Some are not ready to commit fully to their gay identity, others have recently accepted this identity, and still others have been out as gay men for many years. For nearly all, however, open acceptance of a gay identity appears to be far more complicated than the simplistic euphemism, "coming out of the closet" might suggest. As one chorister

remarked, "It's something that happens over and over and over again as you tell more and more people." This process, as suggested by these choristers, is frequently complicated, often painful, and consistently influenced by stigma. One straight respondent said:

When they tell me just almost nonchalantly about for instance, where they are going to spend their holiday because of their parents not asking them to come home for birthdays or Christmas, it seems like everyone that I have talked to has paid a price of some sort that I haven't paid.

Participation in this chorus apparently allows these choristers an opportunity to work through the pain associated with such alienation. In so doing, it facilitates the coming out process by affording these choristers a safe environment where they are free to explore their identity, in a positive and affirming way, through a kinship with other like-minded people. A chorister suggested:

Two months before, my wife and I had separated, so even though I was out, we lived together for three years, and tried to make things work, she was very accepting of it, we have a great relationship. Still, I saw that I could not really be who I needed to be . . . who I was with this group of men and the support that I could get from them.

Interview responses suggest that the choristers represented in this study tend to be spiritual men, albeit men with limited access to traditional religious practices. Respondents often related their frustration with organized religion's failure to welcome and affirm gay and lesbian persons. One interview respondent said:

I was raised Southern Baptist, and I am a very spiritual person, but organized religion bothers me ...when I used to go to church every Sunday, my spiritual healing in church was always through singing...I see this (chorus) as a very spiritual, healing organization.

Singing in the chorus as a proxy for traditional religious experiences appears to allow these choristers alternative access to a vehicle for formation of the spiritual self. One chorister remarked, "This (chorus) is where I worship." Two straight choristers, both clergy, expressed concern regarding the institutionalized disconnect between organized religion and the gay community. Indeed, one suggested, "As a straight, but not narrow clergy person, I believe I make a statement that the God and Church I know welcomes and affirms all people."

Respondents' frequent references to this chorus as a source of personal and spiritual kinship suggest that it provides an agency for access to stability in the choristers' dynamic identities as gay men. In that regard, the chorus appears to be similar to traditional community support groups that can address a wide range of issues including alcohol addiction, personal crises, and chronic illness conditions, to reference only a few.

As the interviews progressed, the researcher attempted to clarify whether this chorus simply provided access to a support group or whether the music constituted a necessary element for identity acquisition for these choristers. Thus, respondents were also asked to reflect on the musical dimensions of their chorus.

Musical Dimensions. Chorister responses in the open-ended section of the quantitative portion of this study suggested that music was central to these choristers community experience. One chorister wrote, "Music improved my self-esteem, not a 'gay choir.'" Another chorister suggested, "I sing for the joy of making music." When asked in the qualitative portion of this investigation, "why music," respondents generally reported that singing in this chorus provides a transformative experience that ameliorates the negative image of gay men held by society at large. Indeed, in reference to societal discrimination often endured by these men, one straight chorister suggested, "I realized that I had never understood (until joining this chorus) what it was like to be a wrong person." A gay chorister commented:

Having struggled with my sexuality most of my life, having spent many years deeply in the closet, and having come out only very recently, singing in this chorus gives me a chance to show society at large a realistic and positive image of gay men.

Apparently, the act of singing together varied repertoire with texts that often focus on the personal challenges of accepting a gay identity allows these choristers a venue to explore complex meanings that relate to their core self as gay men. For example, one chorister said, "For me it was a way of not only expressing something that I already loved, music, but also exploring my gay identity, which was relatively new to me at that point." Another chorister suggested, "The songs describe how I am feeling," and still another remarked, "These songs make me so proud to be gay." Such responses clearly suggest that the singing

experience itself affords these choristers an opportunity to begin to confront and even embrace a core identity that is often misunderstood, sometimes feared, tainted by stigma, and frequently avoided for many years.

Socializing With Other Gay Men in the Local Community. Interview respondents often shared experiences of being ostracized by friends and family. One chorister suggested:

When I came out to my mom at 19, I got a nasty hateful, hurtful letter from her the week after I got back to school. The letter was telling me that this was what she had worked and slaved for 19 years for, and now, I was a son that she could no longer be proud of.

Respondents often suggested that this chorus provides a venue whereby these men can be themselves as gay men and be affirmed and celebrated by one another. In that regard, the chorus appears to provide not only a safe social environment for these men, but a ready-made surrogate family. One chorister suggested, "It's not always easy to be a gay person in this world, and the chorus is like a safe place to be who you are." Another chorister remarked, "I think that certainly for many people, including myself, the chorus is a big part of my family."

Such data suggest that these choristers are actively seeking a place where they are free to disclose the self that they are becoming with those who share experiential similarity. One chorister remarked during a break at one of the rehearsals: "[The chorus is]...an organization providing me opportunities for creative expression and positive social interaction within a group of talented and fun guys who have similar interests as I do within the gay community."

Respondents often suggested they experienced difficulty finding social outlets where they could openly interact with other gay men. Indeed, many related that the traditional "gay bar scene" was not an accessible social venue for various reasons, including the unwholesome environment and persistent smoke filled air. In this regard, one of the interview respondents said: "My partner and I have been together almost 28 years so it was nice to have some social contact, because we don't really go to the bars and do other things to have any other contact with the gay community."

This chorus appears to offer a uniquely inclusive musical and social environment. As one of the straight choristers observed:

This is what first made me very sensitive about being here...this is their sanctuary for a couple of hours every week...It (is) almost (as if) they (are) free. Free to be (whom) they are, and not hide anything. Most of the places where these people go in their work life or in their regular life, they have got to be to some degree in the closet, when they come here, they don't have to be in the closet.

The researcher often recorded in his field notes the physically demonstrative nature of these choristers. There exists palpable warmth, affirmation, and acceptance among these men both in rehearsal and concert venues. Indeed, their "gayness" is celebrated and encouraged from the time of arrival at rehearsals where hugging and kissing are frequent forms of greetings, through the rehearsal process where gay themes are often acknowledged (sometimes humorously), to the break where birthdays and other occasions are celebrated, and finally the closing where physicality is again evident as these choristers go their separate ways. Clearly, this environment is one in which these choristers feel affirmed by other like-minded individuals who recognize and celebrate that they are gay men.

Socializing With Other Gay Men in the International Community. GALA Festivals appear to provide another important venue to these choristers for affirmation and acceptance. Interview respondents offered numerous anecdotes suggesting the importance of these quadrennial festivals. Referring to a recent GALA Festival one respondent remarked:

There is an instant kinship with people that you have never met before, where strangers from different countries, certainly from different cities and states, got the same jokes – the same dinner jokes, the same accompanist jokes – you have an instant kinship with them, and an instant shorthand, or a vocabulary with them, because you shared something in common, because it goes beyond being a musician, and goes to being a musician in a gay men's or gay women's chorus.

In sum, such findings suggest that gay identity, for members of this chorus, is often not embraced immediately, but is strengthened over time by the bonds experienced by these choristers in their musical and social contact with other gay men, both locally and nationally. Regular association with other gay men in this positive and affirming social environment

appears to lead to heightened identity tolerance. Indeed, through their common experience with other gay choristers these individuals are afforded an opportunity to overcome social stigma and successfully assimilate an identity that is widely viewed as negative by society at large.

Coming Out: As an Individual and as A Chorus

The concert experience as a vigorous and multi faceted medium for communication constitutes a theme consistently present in material culture, field notes, and interview responses. These concerts appear to be directly connected to the coming out process at several levels. For example, some respondents suggested that the performance itself can be a way of sharing an emerging gay identity with others in a safe and affirming venue. One respondent said:

I absolutely think that for some people, joining the chorus is part of the coming out process. I have heard stories from guys that have joined the chorus that say, my parents are coming to this concert, and that's how I am going to tell them that I am coming out.' That was the beginning of what was to become an ongoing dialogue.

Others intimated that their conversations about the chorus could communicate their gay identity. In this regard, one chorister commented:

The chorus helps me come out personally, because if people know that I sing, they know I sing in this chorus and they know it's a gay chorus. So whenever I answer the question about what chorus I sing in I have to come out again.

Still other respondents suggested that singing in the chorus afforded an opportunity to change the mind of a loved one or associate regarding a particular gay issue. One chorister spoke passionately about a pivotal experience he experienced with his mother. He related, "It was my music that made (my Mom) realize that I am still the same person." Another chorister commented:

Coming from a staunchly Republican staunchly Catholic family, it is amazing to see what a song concerning gay marriage did to my father, his mind was changed with that, and it wasn't a particularly powerful piece.

Finally, some respondents suggested that audience members might themselves come out

as a response to the music heard in a concert. One said:

I don't know how often, but I have friends in the chorus now who came out through one of our concerts. They have shared with me that one of the songs that we sang just described to them precisely what they were feeling.

Another respondent relates the following about his experience at a concert before coming out:

I sat up in the top of the balcony frightened as hell that someone would notice me there. I was just overpowered. I sat there and cried...I was completely taken back by what these men do. I hoped that someday I would be in a position to sing with them and five years later, here I am.

Interview data suggest that in order for these men to have access to the coming out process through concerts, the chorus itself must be out. Some respondents, several of them founding members, suggest that this issue constituted a flash point in early discussions of the founding members. In that regard, some members wanted the chorus to be an openly gay chorus while others were concerned about the level of support that they might receive from a relatively conservative community at large.

Responses also indicate that one of the more contentious historical issues in this chorus was the debate over whether or not the word gay should be included in the chorus' name. However, at this juncture it is apparent through these interviews and through perusal of material culture that the mission of this chorus is driven by its identity as a gay and gay affirming chorus. One respondent summarized this obligation as follows:

I think whether the chorus likes to think of themselves as this or not, they are role models to people out there who are coming to grips with being gay, or who need some validation, or would like to see what it looks like in practice. We have had parents of gay people who have come to our concerts because they don't know of any other gay people, and they're astounded at how many of us there are, and at how positive and creative we can be. I think we provide a kind of a shining star for these people who are not quite sure what gay is.

Such data appear to support the notion that music, or more specifically singing, provides an apt vehicle for sharing complex personal meanings with a diverse audience. These men, both individually and corporately, perceive a

musical commonality with the audience that allows a dynamic interchange of ideas. In that regard, these choristers are afforded, through the concert experience, a powerful medium through which they can share their uniqueness openly and confidently with a growing corpus of affirming human beings.

The Chorus as a Means of Activism and Social Change

Most people can relate to music, music is a part of a lot of people's lives. So it's not as threatening. It's a way to present ideas in a format that they're familiar with. –A chorister

Civic responsibility and activism appear as dominant themes throughout the course of this study. Active support of gay issues remains a primary focus in published materials, the chorus web page, concert programming, and the style of presentation of the concerts. Indeed, at concerts attended by the researcher, prominent community leaders and political officials are acknowledged and celebrated by standing and receiving generous applause.

Interview data, too, support the notion that community outreach is a key factor in many of these singers choosing to participate in the chorus. One respondent remarked: "As a gay man I think, what can I do to add to the gay fabric of this city? And this makes the best use of my talent. Growing up where my grandparents grew up, I feel a sort of civic responsibility."

Due to choristers' apparent desire to reshape the perceptions of their audience, the quality of their musical product constitutes a recurrent theme in all of the data generated during this investigation. However, respondents' references to musical quality rarely suggest an aesthetic mentality. They more often share anecdotes rich with references to the quality of the relationship between performer and listener. One chorister remarked, "Because we are in the Midwest, we can't just be out, we have to be out and be impeccable, we have to be out and unassailable." Another suggested, "this chorus gives me the opportunity to show society at large a realistic and positive image of gay men." A third chorister said, "I enjoy singing and being a member of a fine, respected, gay organization that helps to change and touch our audience." These and other comments suggest that musical quality for these choristers is not aesthetically motivated, but is driven by their need to

communicate a positive personal and corporate identity as gay men.

Identity Acquisition

Musicking is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those that we desire to exist and long to experience: relationships among people, as well as those between people and the rest of the cosmos, and also perhaps with ourselves and with our bodies and even with the supernatural....(Small, 1998, p.183)

Open acceptance of these choristers' core identities as gay men takes place in an environment tainted by stigma. Various results of such social stigma can result in homophobia, stereotypes, victimization, and even violence (Herek, 1998). This stigma likely affects initial formation of their identity by requiring them to assume an identity that they have previously perceived, some for many years, as negative. Furthermore, social stigma apparently militates against expression of these gay men's core selves to others by inhibiting their access as gay men to traditional supportive social groups. The chorus represented in this study, to a marked extent, provides musical channels through which its members can overcome the barriers presented by families, acquaintances, and society at large, and accept their gay identity as positive.

When discussing their experiences in this chorus, choristers spoke often of four coalescent themes: (a) exploring personal identities as gay men, (b) socializing with a community of gay and gay affirming men, (c) coming out as an individual and as a chorus, and (d) the chorus as a means of activism and social change. As theories emerged from the data it appeared likely that the thematic schemata centered on the concept of identity acquisition. To understand better these observed patterns the researcher simultaneously investigated theories of identity acquisition as contained in extant psychology literature.

Several theories useful in such interpretation included Tajfel's (1978) theory of social identity and various stage theory models of identity acquisition (Cass, 1979; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Troiden, 1979, 1984/1985, 1989). In particular, Troiden (1984/1985) presented a theoretical model where identity can best be characterized as a self-defined label that becomes activated in

an interactive social setting. Troiden (1989) described his theoretical model of gay identity acquisition as a three-part structure: (a) self-identity when persons see themselves as gay, (b) perceived identity when gay persons realize that others view them as gay, and (c) presented identity when they present or announce themselves as gay to the community at large.

Consistent with Troiden's (1989) tripartite theoretical model of identity acquisition, and with Faulkner's and Davidson's (2004, 2006) conclusions that personal identities can be vocally constructed, themes contained in this study support the notion that choral singing provides an agency whereby singing and social contact coalesce to facilitate the following in this gay men's chorus: (a) initial self-identity assumption by these gay men in an affirming and supportive musical and social environment, (b) identity tolerance through regular association with other gay persons that share a common love of singing, and (c) identity disclosure to heterosexual friends, family, coworkers, and to the public at large through personal disclosure of membership in the chorus and through performances and concerts.

Although Troiden's stage theory is perhaps not the only stage theory applicable to these findings, the researcher concluded that stage theories in general provide a robust structure to explain identity acquisition in this chorus. Furthermore, the gay choristers represented in this study appear successfully to negotiate these stages of identity acquisition through two kinds of relationships, musical and interpersonal, the latter of which remains under-investigated, particularly within the framework of gay men singing music as a particular context based method of communication.

CONCLUSION

"[This] is a professional organization, I mean, I know that we are not paid, but it has that kind of quality to it. [But] it is not just the quality, it is the message that we sing, and the things that we do. These concerts touch people, you know, they make a statement... that this is who I am, and this is who I was supposed to be, and I am proud of it." –A chorister

Overall findings of this study suggest that future research of GALA choruses, and perhaps of choral organizations at large, could profitably

continue to explore the dynamic musical and interpersonal relationships between choristers, their expanding audiences, the music community, and society as a whole. These findings also suggest that various qualitative methodologies might provide vigorous means for such investigations. The goal of such research should be to continue to develop further understanding of the value of choral singing as a robust universal vehicle for acquisition and communication of our core identities as human beings.

VIDEO #2: An introduction to the Heartland Men's Chorus:



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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Please mark an X in the appropriate box.

1. Age:

Under 25 [] 26-30 [] 31-35 [] 36-40 [] 41-45 [] 46-50 []

51-55 [] 56-60 [] Above 60 []

2. Race:

White [] Asian [] Hispanic [] African American [] Other []

3. Education:

High School [] Technical Degree [] Bachelor's [] Master's [] Doctorate []

4. Profession or vocation: _____

5. Annual salary:

Under 15,000 [] 15,000-25,000 [] 25,000-35,000 [] 35,000-45,000 []

45,000-55,000 [] 55,000-65,000 [] 65,000-75,000 [] Above 75,000 []

6. Do you earn money as a musician? Yes [] No []

7. Did/do you participate in choir in any of the following?

High school [] College [] Church []

Please respond to these statements by marking an X in the box that best describes your opinion.

8. I joined the chorus to be politically/socially active.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

9. I prefer traditional repertoire that is not connected to gay issues.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

10. I joined the chorus because I enjoy performing.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

11. I joined the chorus to meet and socialize with other gay men.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

12. My self-esteem has improved as a result of my experience with CHORUS.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

13. The chorus provides an outlet for coming out.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

14. I continue to sing in the chorus because of a feeling of community.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

15. I joined the chorus to improve my musical skills.

Strongly disagree [] Disagree [] Neutral [] Agree [] Strongly agree []

Please indicate any issues not addressed by this questionnaire that you feel would enhance the understanding of the socio/musical role of the chorus.