

2003

Cultural Contexts of Exclusion: Women College Band Directors

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Recommended Citation

Gould, Elizabeth S. (2003) "Cultural Contexts of Exclusion: Women College Band Directors," *Research & Issues in Music Education*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://ir.stthomas.edu/rime/vol1/iss1/3>

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Abstract

Despite gender affirmative employment practices, women constitute little more than 5% of all U.S. college band directors. Researchers have investigated this situation in terms of historical precedent, traditional socialization, discrimination, segregation, professional identity, and lack of role models. They have not, however, addressed the culture of conducting college bands. Cultural analysis is essential because the percentage of women conducting college bands in the U.S. has remained virtually static during the past thirty years. It is appropriate because it provides a multi-layered, broader view of the problem which make possible explanations that may be more appropriately generalized and less subject to essentialism. This project analyzes the paucity of women college band directors in terms of the cultural contexts in which they inhabit: the cultures of music, performance, and college bands. Reviewing and interpreting the literature related to these cultures, I use a perspective that takes into account the positionalities of individuals while also locating them in cultural and by implication, historical, contexts. Analysis (reading) creates a narrative in which I foreground what challenges dominant discourse in these cultures, and describe how they function in terms of women college band directors.

Introduction

Despite gender affirmative employment practices, women constitute little more than 5% of all U.S. college band directors (Block, 1988; McElroy, 1996; McLain, 2000; Neuls-Bates, 1976). In addition, the salaries and faculty ranks of these women lag behind their male counterparts even as their qualifications meet or exceed those of the men (McElroy, 1996). This occupational gender segregation disrupts individuals' careers as well as the profession's development, and continues to resist efforts to remedy it.

Review of Literature

Several explanations for this situation have been investigated. Positing that historical precedent, traditional socialization, discrimination, segregation, and lack of role models contribute to this persistently low percentage, researchers have investigated the employment trends of women college band directors (McElroy, 1996), their personal and occupational characteristics (Feather, 1980; Hartley, 1995; Jackson, 1996), occupational role models, and professional identity (Gould, 1996; Grant, 2000). As high school band directors, however, women fare little better (Delzell, 1994; Gould, 1988; Greaves-Spurgeon, 1998). This also contributes to their small representation at the college level, in part because successful experience as a high school band director is often considered to be a necessary qualification for a band position in postsecondary education. Factors such as gender and the primary instrument played by the applicant, though, have been found to be most important in the selection of candidates for high school instrumental music positions (Kopetz, 1988). Both of these factors are unrelated to job requirements, and discriminate against women. Inasmuch as they have been found to be most influential among non-family members who advise high school students about studying music in college, high school band directors play an important role in the educational development of their band students (Davis, 1990; Ploumis-Devick, 1983). Similarly, college instrumental music education faculty members influence the career development of women music education students as they

traditionally advise them to prepare and apply for general music positions (Beier, 1983; Gould, 1988; Greaves-Spurgeon, 1998).

While this research was typically situated in a cultural context, the researchers did not study the culture itself. The impact of this weakness in the literature is demonstrated by a study (Allmendinger & Hackman, 1995) exploring the effects of engaging women to play in selected symphony orchestras of four countries. Constructed in multi-layers, the study investigated individual, organizational, and contextual variables contributing to the acceptance of women in the ensembles. The researchers concluded that, “it is in the interactions among personal, organizational, and contextual factors that the patterns of gender dynamics . . . come to life and play out their consequences” (p. 455; emphasis in original). Although they noted the importance of the context of the symphony orchestra, which they described as a “strong situation” (p. 452) that influenced the work attitudes of all members more than did gender, they did not investigate the culture of the symphony orchestra.

The goal of this project, then, is to analyze the paucity of women college band directors in terms of the cultural contexts in which they inhabit: the cultures of music, performance, and college bands. Traditional explanations regarding the small number of women college band directors are inadequate because they have not taken into account interactions within these cultures. The project uses a cultural perspective that takes into account the positionalities of individual women while also locating them in cultural and by implication, historical, contexts. The focus, then, is on the cultural and historical contexts in which women college band directors are embodied, not on the women themselves. This analysis is essential because “music [like bands and performance] operates within the context of culture,” (Herdon & McLeod, 1981, p. 70), and “exists as culture” (p. 203, emphasis in original). Understood to be “fluid and relational, . . . performed variously depending on situational contexts and contingencies,” (Diamond & Moisala, 2000, p. 1), culture is experienced dynamically. Cultural analysis provides a multi-layered, broader view of the problem, making possible explanations that may be more appropriately generalized and less subject to essentialism.[\[1\]](#)

Theoretical Framework

The epistemological grounding of this research suggests that knowledge is socially constructed. As a product of a group or society, it is embedded with their values. Further, its structure and content are wholly dependent on the positionality[\[2\]](#) of the group or society responsible for its development.

Positionality

In terms of individuals and social groups, positionality describes “a position in society from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured” (Jaggard, 1983, p. 382). It is used in the context of social relations that both structure society oppositionally between groups and are characterized by power that is asymmetrically distributed. Because they structure and control social relations that affect everyone (Hartsock,

1985), and consequently are not required to respond to the interests and concerns of others, dominant groups have access to knowledge that is necessarily fragmented and distorted, as it emanates only from those segments of society in which they exist. Subordinate groups, as a matter of survival, “become familiar with the language and manners of the [dominant group], even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (Lorde, 1984, p. 114). This positionality gives subordinate groups access to knowledge that “is not just different from that of the [dominant group]; it is also epistemologically advantageous” (Jaggar, 1983, p. 370) because it includes knowledge of the positionalities of dominant groups as well as their own. As a function of their power, though, dominant groups occupy a valued, or subject position in society, while subordinate groups are devalued, or situated as Other.^[3]

Gender

As a group,^[4] women—like men—are “constituted essentially by the social relations they inhabit” (Jaggar, 1983, p. 130). Like knowledge, these relations are socially constructed. Certainly the most central social relation in a study concerning the positionalities of women college band directors is gender.

In addition to a collection of attributes, the concept of gender has been described as an interior social construct (Chodorow, 1989), a social relation (Flax, 1990), and a performative act (Butler, 1990). Indeed, Senelick (1992) declares, “Gender is performance” (p. ix; emphasis in original), and Moisala (2000) argues further that, “gender performance is situational” (p. 185). In U.S. society, it is also compulsory (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1986) as “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 1990, p. 140). Gender, then, is socially constructed, and is both manifested in human behavior, and dependent on how that behavior is perceived (Senelick, 1992). Although a fundamentally internal process, it is nevertheless based on interaction with others. Through this social interaction (performance), gender is inscribed on the body (Butler, 1990). In specific situations, social groups, or professions, one may be embodied as the “wrong gender” (Moisala, 2000, p. 175). Gender, or gender performance, then, is not static, but may be described as a “self-organizing dynamic [system]” (Herndon, 2000, p. 352) that is “constantly negotiated in new sociomusical contexts and situations” (Moisala, 2000, p. 166). For purposes of analysis, gender may be conceived as an “asymmetrical category of human thought, social organization, and individual identity and behavior” (Harding, 1986, p. 55; emphasis in original).

Methodology

I collected data by reviewing the research literature concerning the cultures of music, performance, and college bands. Using critical inquiry, I based my data collection on the assumption that the underlying power structures determining social relations in these cultures are revealed only from marginalized positionalities (Cherryholmes, 1988; Lather, 1991). Knowledge that is constructed from the data is understood in an objective context that systematically examines cultural biases and social values related to the project (Harding, 1991). Analysis (reading) creates a “critical tale,”^[5] (Lather, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988) in which I foreground that which challenges dominant discourse and specifically focuses on that which is

Other in the cultures relevant to the study (Lather, 1991). The goal of the analysis is to create a narrative that describes how the cultural structures of music, performance, and college bands function in terms of the situation of women college band directors.

Music

Music is understood as a political economy (Tong, 1989); an economy of public exchange between producers and consumers. Given this perspective, music is not conceived of as a thing, although it is often manifested in objects, but rather, as a process, an activity in which individuals engage (Elliott, 1995; Small, 1998). This activity (economy), then, is comprised of the “production, circulation, and currency” (Bell, 1995, p. 101) of musical performances, recordings, scores, discourse, and education. In addition, musical roles within this economy are regularly assigned by gender (Koskoff, 1991).

In terms of its economy, the culture of music in the U.S. may be described at best as unimportant—except, perhaps, in the case of all types of musics associated with adolescents and young adults—and at worst as deviant (Becker, 1966; Brett, 1994; Shepherd, 1991; Shepherd, 1993). Historically, music has been associated with emotion, non-cognitive understanding, and the body (McClary, 1994), consequently aligning it with the feminine. This was reinforced in the U.S. during the 19th century as the ideology of separate spheres for women (private) and men (public) approached “the level of an obsession” (Eaklor, 1994, p. 40). Coupled with the rise of the middle class and increased industrialization, music was cultivated in the home—the parlor—by women, conflating in a general sense the social functions of women and music. Concurrently, bands, long associated with men, the military, and providing support for—public—civic events, became both prominent and popular in towns throughout the country.

By the beginning of the 20th century, music had become “one of the ‘feminized’ professions, . . . associated in circular fashion with both culturally defined feminine qualities and with women as practitioners” (Eaklor, 1994, p. 40-41). It was literally “given the ‘female’ role in American society . . . to contribute to the nation’s survival and growth” (p. 43). Increased professionalization of music at this time, however, also created an “inherent conflict between the ‘masculine’ public role of the expert and inherited ‘feminine’ role of the activity” (p. 43). As the popularity of professional bands, meanwhile, diminished throughout the 20th century, interest and participation in school bands steadily increased.

Currently, music remains “socially peripheral” (Shepherd, 1991, p. 70), or Other (Shepherd, 1993), because it does not contribute to economic production, or conform to so-called rational discourse given preference in industrial and post-industrial societies. The primary consequence of music’s positionality in society is that it has been both “trivialized and marginalized” (Shepherd, 1993, p. 59) as either cultural capital of the rich and powerful, or entertainment for everyone else. While still very popular in schools at all levels, bands in the U.S. have struggled to move beyond providing entertainment or music at various civic and athletic functions to being recognized in the music and music education professions as legitimate musical ensembles.

In Western art music traditions, instrumental music is valued over vocal music (Brett, 1994; Green, 1997). Instrumental music uses no lyrics or language referents of any kind, and is, therefore, abstract and presumably focused only on patterns and form, which rescue it from the irrationality typically associated with music (Brett, 1994). Similarly, because it is not embedded in the body, instrumental music uses technology, which renders it both rational and cognitive (Green, 1997). Bands use only wind and percussion instruments, most of which are considered to be appropriate for men but not for women to play.^[6] Conductors manipulate the output of instrumentalists, and thereby gain ultimate control of the technology of music.

The deviant nature of music is related to its “moral ambiguity” (Brett, 1994, p. 11), the types of people who become musicians, and the behaviors by which they are commonly known. Jazz and rock musicians are stereotyped by drug use. Conservatory educated musicians are often regarded as an exceptionally gifted, eccentric and strange minority (Shepherd, 1991). Indeed, musicians in general in U.S. society are usually depicted as powerless or homosexual, and most certainly poor prospects for marriage (Koskoff, 1991; Stokes, 1994). In addition, music is historically believed to cause men to become effeminate, which ideologically conflates with homosexual (Green, 1997). Indeed, Brett (1994) contends that “full participation in the constructed role of musician in our society can only be accomplished by recognizing its deviance All musicians . . . are faggots” (p. 17-18; emphasis in the original). Phrases such as, “Is he “musical” do you think?” (Brett, 1994; p. 11) long have been insider code for identifying gay men. Clearly, this creates cultural tension for male musicians, among whom fear of the stigma of homosexuality is particularly prevalent. Demonstrated most notably in the writings of Charles Ives, who disparaged some male composers as homosexuals or—worse yet—women (Kirkpatrick, 1991), homophobia ideologically conflates with misogyny (Bredbeck, 1995).

Performance

Research in music performance traditionally has been focused on study of the music itself, as in performance practice (correct performance), how various audiences perceive musical works, considerations of virtuosity, skill acquisition, improvisation, and philosophical perspectives (see, for example, Alperson, 1991; Bowen, 1996; Cochrane, 2000; Davies, 2001; Donington, 1989; Edidin, 1998; Godlovitch, 1998; Gould & Keaton, 2000; Herndon & McLeod, 1981; Judkins, 1997; Kivy, 1995; Krausz, 1993; Mark, 1980; McClary, 1991; Neumann, 1993; Rink, 1995; Small, 1998; Stubbley, 1995; Treitler, 1992; Young, 1988). For musicologists in this tradition, the score is privileged above its performance, and consequently, it is typically the score that is studied (Fuller, 2000). Ethnomusicologists, however, often study performances because of the absence of scores. Music educators,^[7] however, tend to discuss performance in terms of quality (technical improvement), quantity (how many is too many), and issues of appropriateness (anything from venues to apparel). Arguing that “Music is performance,” (p. 218), Small (1998) suggests that all engagement with music is “ultimately a political act” (p. 213). Notably, Queer theorists,^[8] have addressed performance as “both a theoretical and descriptive device” (Herndon & McLeod, 1981, p. 46) in terms of gay and lesbian positionalities. It is from this literature that much of my analysis is drawn.

Although presented in time, performance exists only in the present (Phelan, 1993; Shield, 1980; Thom, 1993). It cannot be reproduced, and each one is unique. Consisting of activities carried out by performers in a specific place for an audience (Thom, 1993), it includes carefully proscribed behaviors that characterize the culture of performance as ritual (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Cusick, 1994; Green, 1997; McLeod & Herndon, 1980; Small, 1998; Thom, 1993). While the extent of ritualization varies depending on the type of music, Western art music includes entrenched social rules that delineate appropriate behavior for both performers and audiences. Performance in this tradition may be considered to be a joint venture involving all of the people who are present as well as some who may be absent (Cusick, 1994).

Further, performance is both private and public (Bell, 1995); an institutionalized form of display (Attinello, 1995; Green, 1997; Thom, 1993). This display has been described as a metaphorical mask (Green, 1997, p. 21) that both hides and reveals the performer, necessitating that the performer plays two roles (Thom, 1993). The first role is active as the performer demands the audience's attention. The second role, however, is passive as the performer becomes the object of that attention. This dependence on the audience—an audience who may refuse to attend or may reject the object of its attention—is characterized by asymmetrical power relations that position the performer as Other (Green, 1997). Although much display involving the body is often unintended, as in the case of band concerts, the gestures of conductors deliberately convey meaning to musicians and audiences alike. Ultimately in control of the music produced by the band, the conductor, facing away from the audience, is the performer to whom the audience's attention is nevertheless drawn.

College Bands

Since their inception in the U.S. prior to the American Revolution, bands were initially associated with the military. Ubiquitous in the 19th century, they were essentially civilian organizations composed of and directed by men. Because they were so closely connected to military organizations, however, the term “military band” referred to any wind band, regardless of its members' military status (Hazen & Hazen, 1987). Similarly, college bands established in the 19th century were both organized and conducted by students, the vast majority of whom were men (McCarrell, 1971). At land-grant institutions, in particular, they were closely associated with military training courses and activities, and their personnel there consisted exclusively of men (Haynie, 1971).

During the 20th century, women were generally admitted to college bands according to circumstances of the time and to each particular college. Most of these bands originally did not admit women as they had been organized by men students to provide music at athletic events (Beier, 1983; Knedler, 1994; McCarrell, 1971). Permanent concert bands were more likely to admit women, and were mostly organized between the World Wars. World War II caused huge enrollment losses in college marching bands, providing opportunities for women musicians in those bands, as well (McCarrell, 1973; Sperry, 1954). Marching bands at major universities responded to this situation in one of three ways. One, they admitted women into their marching bands to replace the missing instrumentation, but generally excluded them again when the war

was over (Shields, 1977). Two, they created separate marching bands in which the women marched in conjunction with the men's bands. Three, rather than admit women, they disbanded or discontinued giving public performances until the men returned (McCarrell, 1973).

Reasons given for excluding women from marching bands included the military association and appearance of the band, purported discipline problems with mixed-sex ensembles, and the theory that women's smaller stature caused uniformity problems in marching. This institutionalized discrimination, coupled with occupationally segregated career advising patterns in instrumental music programs, effectively barred women from participating in many major university marching bands, and did not formally end until the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. College marching band experience is crucial to the preparation of college band directors, and without it, women were insufficiently prepared to conduct college marching bands.

Beginning during the 1950's and continuing to the present, many college band directors have tried to legitimate themselves as ensemble conductors in the music profession by distancing themselves from the band's military and athletic heritage. Strategies they have used include denouncing the legacy of John Philip Sousa (Winking, 1970) and refusing to perform marches of any kind, creating ensembles that eschew traditional band instruments such as euphonium and saxophone, conducting only in concert settings, commissioning new music by well-known composers, and using words other than band to identify their ensembles. The most prestigious college bands are known by terms such as wind ensemble, wind symphony, symphonic winds, chamber winds—anything other than band. Similarly, most band uniforms have been replaced on the concert stage by tuxedos and long black dresses. The one tradition that persists, however, is the almost complete dominance of men on the podium.

Summary and Implications

As college band directors, women are clearly the “wrong gender.” Not only are they not men, their ability to embody the position is compromised by several cultural factors. First, music is positioned as Other in society. It is generally devalued by the public and academic communities (Shepherd, 1993). Further, study and practice of music threatens the masculinity of boys and men, a bias that has persisted for literally centuries in both the U.S. and western Europe (Koza, 1993; La Rue, 1994). Although women are encouraged to participate in music, they have been traditionally limited to singing primarily, and playing selected instruments such as the piano and harp secondarily. Male musicians are considered to be effeminate (homosexual), and the music profession, like U.S. society in general, is characterized at the cultural level by homophobia (misogyny).

Second, performance is positioned as Other within the music profession. The musical object takes precedence over its performance (Small, 1998). Further, the performance of men contradicts their masculine positionality in society, creating cultural tension for them, while the performance of women confirms their feminine positionality, reinforcing their sexual stereotypes. Singing, an acceptable method of performance for women, has been described as

affirming their femininity while playing instruments interrupts it (Green, 1997). This interruption results from the instrument's interfering with the woman performer's natural appearance of connectedness with her body, and with nature—as opposed to technology. Conducting a band only exacerbates this interruption, and gendered behavior that is put on stage through performance acquires “an iconic value, heightening and drawing attention to the conventional or overlooked aspects of the behavior” (Senelick, 1992, p. x).

Third, although dominated by men, bands have been positioned as Other in the music profession for much of the 20th century. Indeed, band directors have been described as belonging to a “truculent fraternity” (Britton, [1961] 1985, p. 225), through which they have worked to legitimate their bands as viable musical ensembles and blunt criticism from the profession that has historically undermined the status of bands relative to other musical organizations, most specifically, orchestras. Further, college band directors, like other professionals, reproduce themselves homosocially (Kanter, 1977); that is, they recruit into the profession and mentor individuals who are most like them (Grant, 2000). This occurs at the cultural level, and is only rarely identified at the individual level. Although they are always welcome at conferences where men who lead the profession meet, women have reported that they feel excluded within the profession. One woman indicated that she always feels like a colleague when interacting with individual men college band directors, but “has not always felt welcome as part of the group” (Grant, 2000, p. 105). Further, some women have noted that in addition to being excluded by gender, membership in the group also is defined by race and socio-economic status. Gender, then, as well as race and socio-economic status, mediate at the cultural level against women's entering and succeeding in the profession, regardless of their education and academic qualifications (Hughes, 1971).

Excluding women from the profession of college band directors constitutes a cultural imperative. Enacted at the cultural level in the context of a homophobic and misogynist society, it is the necessary response of a culture determined to legitimate itself. Women threaten that legitimation. Accepting women as college band directors would position instrumental music and conducting as Other, creating further cultural tension for men college band directors. Similarly, allowing women to conduct college bands would reinforce the positionality of band music as Other, confirming its purported lesser aesthetic value. Finally, embodying the profession of college band directors as women would further marginalize its positionality as Other, increasing the outsider status of band directors in music. This indicates that the cultural systems of music, performance, and college bands—not the actions of individual college band directors, women or men—explain the persistent gender segregation among college band directors. Efforts to change this situation, then, must be focused at the cultural level, through the socialization of individuals who are committed to creating social relations in a profession that is not homophobic or misogynist.

Changing any culture, obviously, is a slow process. This is compounded when members of the culture either do not acknowledge the need for change or are simply reticent to try alternatives to a system that has afforded a great deal of success to some individuals. The perspectives of others (those who may be marginalized due to gender, race, or sexuality, for instance) in that profession, however, may provide valuable insights in relationship to change. These individuals

experience the profession from positionalities that often include teaching music education courses in addition to conducting (Gould, 1996), connecting them with students personally and directly beyond the ensemble performance program. This situation tends to increase their responsibilities, however, making their enacting the traditional position of college band director more problematic. Hearing their voices, too, can be very difficult, as they do not, by definition, emanate from positionalities of power. As in all situations with asymmetrical power distribution, it is essential for dominant groups to seek out subordinate groups in order to listen, watch, and learn. Professional organizations and university conducting and music education programs may facilitate this by connecting individuals through visits and various types of forums that include and reflect the material realities of those with less power.

This is important and necessary for virtually all band students, particularly those who do not become college band directors. The vast majority of band students who remain involved in music after college will at the very least, likely teach lessons for the instruments they play, or in many cases, will conduct bands and other ensembles in schools and other institutions. They will interact with students prior to their attending college, and consequently have the potential to influence them profoundly. College band directors, then, should acquire through their professional organizations and university conducting and music education programs critical teaching strategies that involve conductors and students in their total education, focusing on the margins—in terms of both people and the profession. Changing the culture of conducting college and university bands requires that conductors have the expertise and commitment to transform the profession in ways that legitimate multiple ways of being a college band director.

Notes

[1] Essentialism is the belief that biology (sex) determines the quality and extent of one's achievements and abilities, confirming the stereotypes of women's inferiority in relationship to men. See Fawcett-Yeske (2002). [view reference](#)

[2] Positionality is used in the singular for ease in writing. It is understood that all individuals and groups inhabit any number of positionalities based on, for example, personal and social characteristics, and historical and economic factors at any given time. [view reference](#)

[3] Oppositional or binary dualisms, such as mind/body and male/female are an integral aspect of Western logic, and are representative of the construction of Western societies. Hierarchical in structure, the dualisms are constituted by asymmetrical power relations which privileges the former over the latter. In addition, the latter is defined by what the former is not; that is, the latter is literally not-the-former, and necessarily Other to the former. Other is capitalized in the subject/Other dualism inasmuch as it is a specific concept originated by de Beauvoir (1963/1974). [view reference](#)

[4] This is not to suggest that women are socially constituted in a single, monolithic group. Harding (1987) notes that “class, race and culture [are] always categories within gender” and, therefore, women as a group constitute “categories within every class, race and culture” (p. 7).

Analysis of women, then, must be based on more than gender; it must be cognizant of all sources of difference in the lives of women. [view reference](#)

[5] The term “tale” is borrowed from John Van Maanen (1988), who uses it to focus on decisions made by writers: “[W]riting is something writers do, and it stands at least one-off from what is written about. There is no direct correspondence between the world as experienced and the world as conveyed in a text, any more than there is a direct correspondence between the observer and the observed” (p. 8). [view reference](#)

[6] See, for example, Abeles and Porter (1978), Giswold and Chroback (1981), Coffman and Sehmman (1989), Delzell and Leppla (1992), Fortney, Boyle, and DeCarbo (1993), Tarnowski (1993), and Zervoudakes and Tanur (1994), among others. Taken as a group, the findings of these studies suggest that gender associations with musical instruments are persistent, they seem to override all other considerations in instrument choice, and that the sex segregation of instrument selection becomes more pervasive as students become older. [view reference](#)

[7] See, for instance, almost any issue of *Music Educators Journal* or *The Instrumentalist*. [view reference](#)

[8] See, for instance, Brett (1994), Cusick (1994), and Attinello (1995). [view reference](#)

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