Voice shame: Self-censorship in vocal performance

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Abstract

Voice shame is the uncomfortable feeling of being heard as ridiculous, worthless or 'not good enough'. Voice shame arises when a subject becomes aware of an observer's attention and believes the evaluation to be negative. It causes intensive monitoring of one's vocal expression and of others' perception of oneself. The effects of voice shame are largely hidden, since performers will tend to gravitate towards self-staging strategies that comply with conventions, in order to avoid shame. Worried attempts to prevent shame through self-monitoring and active control of one's voice, body, and impact on others may cause serious difficulties with vocal performance. Voice shame can affect professional and non-professional voice users. Shame is a non-cognitive self-rejection. It presupposes internalized ideals and criteria of quality, learned through interaction with external authorities, such as parents, peers, mass media or music teachers. The self that judges and rejects itself is a product of social interaction; it is situated and reflects the demands and constraints posed by both tacit and explicit cultural values and educational traditions, ideals and methods. Triggers of, and thresholds for, shame differ between individuals, within frameworks that are largely common to members of a given subculture. Based on empirical studies of music students and professional pop, jazz and classical singers, we apply French philosopher Michel Foucault's discourse-theory to the analysis of disciplinary mechanisms among vocal performers. The concept of voice shame is presented as a source of insight into the dynamics of singers' self-regulation, self-staging and self-censorship, and hence as a useful tool for the voice teacher.

Keywords: Shame; voice shame; singing; self-censorship; disciplinary mechanisms; Michel Foucault; discourse-theory.

This paper is the work of both authors, but the "I" in the text is that of TBS, who is a singer, voice teacher and choir conductor. ES is a medical doctor and a choir singer, with a professional interest in the functions of shame and self-censorship in medical work.

Mom's Lullabies

My mother sang me lullabies every evening. I remember her song from the kitchen when preparing breakfast or from the basement washing the clothes. In my memories she was always singing. The melody lines were most often smooth and floating, with lyrics from old Norwegian rhymes or folk songs. Her voice established confidence, familiarity, warmth and security in me. It was like being in a cradle.

These are thoughts from the grown-up "me", the researcher looking back at a childhood filled with good memories concerning vocal utterances and self-staging in- and outside of my family. I loved to sing then and I still do. It felt natural to sing together or to sing solo in front of family or friends, for which I am deeply grateful. It is a privilege, and it is not shared by everybody.

Where do the rules come from?

As a voice teacher in music high schools for 13 years I experienced a large number of talented music students who struggled with lack of self-confidence and trust in their own vocal expressions. It was never clearly stated in words, yet it was evident when I observed their body language and listened to their voice, – with constrained breath, stiff muscles and a timbre that revealed tensions. My job as a voice teacher taught me over the years to become a counsellor, a listener, a coach. "The singing will not really take off until they have cried", I used to say, only half-jokingly. And even then, some of these students never came to accept their vocal expressions as good enough. Where did the rules come from, I wondered.

This phenomenon was not systematically talked about among voice teachers, which triggered me to explore it more closely. Why did the students avoid the situations which should be the best, when they had the possibility to sing out the songs they loved? Why did they find excuses, such as a never-ending cold or hoarseness, for not being prepared for a concert or not being able to join the class in a song? I did not know how to label what I experienced with my students. Not until I had constructed the concept *voice shame* in my master's thesis (Schei, 1998).

Some years later I wrote my Ph.D. on the subject of *vocal identity* (Schei, 2007). I did in-depth interviews over a year of three professional singers within classical, pop and jazz song, and explored, through their stories of education and performance, how the professional identity of singers was established (Schei, 2009). The research question was: What are the professional standards and demands experienced by singers within classical, pop and jazz, and how are these demands integrated and expressed in the identities of the vocal performers? I used discourse theory as my theoretical framework, based on the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1972, 1979, 1980, 1988). A Foucauldian perspective implies that you examine empirical data and statements with the purpose of identifying and deciphering the taken-for-granted truths, what the informants consider to be self-evident, natural, true and correct. Then you analyse how they submit to such truth-patterns, how they are governed by them. Examples of such self-evident truths could be conceptions of correct vocal technique within classical song, how to practice groovy timbre in pop, or the necessity for a jazz singer to produce her own, personal style in improvisations. Seen in this light, the informants' ways of speaking, behaving and singing revealed disciplinary mechanisms, that regulate our culture and our educational institutions.

Discourse Analysis and How Rules Emerge

Discourse analysis looks for the reasons behind norms, values and rules, and how power operates in the relations between people. It is an attempt to trace how subjects are shaped and formatted by power, neutrally understood as the structuring framework of a culture. The relation *is* the power. Choosing a Foucauldian perspective allowed me to focus on how the informants' complied with demands they perceived to be natural aspects of their professional life. What, in the singers' opinion, was important if you wanted to be regarded as a "real" singer within the three different genres? How did they practice, how did they plan their performances? By observing their concrete practices and listening to their talk about what professional singing demands of you, a pattern emerged, where I could identify cultural criteria of quality and perfection that shaped their professional identities. And I could see how they were governed by tacit norms that are embedded within vocal ideals, voice genres, educational traditions, conceptions of normality and common sense. That analysis allowed me to realize that we are all governed by hidden norms and values. This again raises the question of how? What are the mechanisms that make us so compliant? The answer, I believe, is connected with the central topic of this talk – the phenomenon of *shame*.

Why "shame" and not just "stage fright"?

When I tell colleagues in the singing community that I am working with a concept that I call voice shame, they usually stop and think for a second, and then say: "Oh, you mean stage fright!" And then they seem to lose interest. With lay people I don't get that reaction. Instead, they immediately share a story. "Yes, I know what you mean, I have NEVER dared to sing after my third grade teacher made fun of me in music class forty years ago! I know I have a horrible voice." Usually these confessions are accompanied by smiles and laughter, of the kind many of us use to cover up the emotional pain of shameful experiences.

Does it matter whether we call it stage fright, performance anxiety or voice shame? Yes, it does. We need words that help us think clearly and allow us to look in the right places for knowledge that will let us understand and, hopefully, be of help. I will explain to you why shame seems to be a more productive concept than fright or anxiety. The most important reason is that the latter two concepts, stage fright and performance anxiety, give us little or no understanding of the mechanisms that produce fear in performers. Are they afraid of the stage itself? No, of course not. Then what is the cause of fear? Is performance anxiety an anxiety disorder, a disease of the mind? Some of the literature treats it as a psychiatric problem, rooted in the mental wounds and losses of an individual's personality and biography, and hence subject to individual therapy. Though anybody might profit from the luxury of a few good therapy sessions, I do not see that a medicalised focus on the individual is a promising way forward. As will become clear, the emotional reaction often called performance anxiety is a deeply relational and cultural phenomenon.

I do not deny that there is a lot of fright and anxiety when people perform. Obviously there is, as we have probably all experienced as we have entered the stage with trembling voice, sweaty palms and a racing heart. My point is that we should look beneath the nervousness itself, and try to understand what it is that causes the fear, in situations where we dearly want to do well in front of an audience - but fear we may not succeed. When I have dug deeper into the experiences of voice trouble, stage fright and performance anxiety of my students and informants, and their strategies for control and avoidance, I have discovered that what they, and maybe all of us, most of all fear, is to fail, disappoint, lose face, lose dignity, be laughed at, feel worthless, incompetent, ugly and ridiculous in the eyes of others. Simply put, the dangers faced by anyone who chooses to perform in front of an audience are varieties of one thing: shame.

What are the functions of shame?

The word shame is not often used in everyday talk; it is more or less tabooed and shameful in itself. This is one of the interesting findings in the sociological and anthropological literature on shame –the word is in itself shameful, something we do not want to talk about because it feels shameful. Shame is contagious; we blush when we witness the embarrassment of the other. All these mechanisms work in tacit cooperation so that we keep potentially shameful topics out of our conversations and thoughts. Hence, we do not often talk about or reflect on shame, and perhaps do not realize how important it is in our daily life. Shame is a threatening feeling, we will go to great lengths to avoid it, and that is precisely what makes us human.

Among the most important contributions to our understanding of shame is the work of Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, who wrote books like *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959) and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Goffman, 1968). Goffman pointed out that shame, or more frequently anticipation of shame, is a continuing presence in most social interaction. In fact, shame is, according to Goffman, the dominant emotion of social interaction. He showed that shame has a protective function in human relations; it safeguards the norms, values and customs that unite groups of people. And belonging to groups is vital for our survival. Our sense of self emerges in the family and other groups that we are totally dependent on. Our self-esteem is made from the respect others give us. And that respect is contingent on how others like our social behaviour, it always hinges on our willingness to adapt to, comply with and confirm the worldview of others.

What happens if we break the tacit rules, and do things that are ridiculous, offensive or disgusting in the eyes of others? Shame immediately arises. Once is usually enough, we do not do it again and again. Hence, experiences of shame are strongly formative. We learn to do

the right things, and then shame does not arise. Then we can forget the shameful episodes, and forget that shame plays any role whatsoever in our lives, since it is an emotion we never experience. Yet it is shame that gives us direction as we try to navigate between right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, in our attempts to be accepted, admired and loved. We are like animals behind an electrical fence; we never touch it, never even think of it, because we do not want that pain.

Goffman writes that a sense of shame is a sign of normality. "When a person becomes uneasy in a social situation is not because he is personally maladjusted but rather because he is not. ... [E]mbarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through social prescribed behavior, but part of this orderly behaviour itself." (Goffman, 1967, p. 111; Scheff, 2005, p. 160).

The Self-Evaluation of Professional Singers

Let me now return to my own research. I only questioned my informants once about voice shame and all three said that they had no experience with such a phenomenon. Yet, when analysing my empirical data I found that all three of them reported years of hard work to comply with the demands, norms and quality criteria of their professional singing environment. Tacit demands and immediate recognition of mistakes (wrongdoing, sin) and transgression were structuring much of their practice as singers, both when they rehearsed, when they planned for concerts and when they performed. They were concerned about the demands of their own genre, the ruling ideals and truths that were structuring their cultural field. The classical singer would never dare to sing a jazz song in public, because he was a classical singer. He was a brilliant singer who performed every stylistic detail perfectly, but he was acutely aware that he only mastered the technical skills within the classical genre. The pop singer thought that the demands of classical song made it impossible for her to perform a

classical song, even if she had studied some of the classical repertoire. The jazz singer told

me that she saw each concert as an exam, with a lot of evaluations going on. All three had

very high standards for their own singing. They were perfectionists, critically judging their

own song as if someone continuously told them what was right and wrong, good and bad. Yet

they felt these norms and criteria to be totally their own. They knew down to the least detail

how they had to sing and perform to deserve their professional labels. These central themes

seemed to infiltrate their well-being as singers both when practicing and performing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the concept of voice shame as a source of insight into

the dynamics of singers' self-regulation, self-staging and self-censorship, and hence as a

useful tool for the voice teacher.

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