The Persona Problem: How Expectations Of Masculinity Shape Female Band Director Identity

Dr. Colleen Sears

© Colleen Sears 2014, colleen.sears@tcnj.edu
Copyright Notice: The policy of GEMS is that authors will retain copyright to their materials.

Abstract: The conductor is synonymous with a persona, an inherently masculine identity that is consistently represented as powerful and authoritative in popular culture. The culture of masculinity in band directing restricts access for women seeking secondary instrumental music positions and influences the way female conductors construct professional identities. The purpose of this study is to examine four female high school band directors’ perceptions of the “conductor persona” and to understand how these perceptions influence their teaching identities. Participants agreed that school administrators and colleagues expect high school band directors to perform traditionally masculine behaviors in their jobs. Each participant shaped her teaching identity by accepting, blending, or rejecting behaviors that signify traditional masculinity or femininity in the classroom and on the podium. The expectation of masculinity in secondary instrumental music education leaves little room for the creation of non-masculine teaching identities and is a likely reason for the continued rarity of women in the profession.
Introduction

I sink into the eggplant purple couch and snuggle with my two-year-old daughter to watch this morning’s episode of Sesame Street. “M…Music” the narrator says as a short animated piece begins. We hear the din of the orchestra as they warm up. After a few seconds, the conductor grandly takes his place at the front of the stage. His statuesque figure towers above the musicians. Black tuxedo tails fall behind him; his grey hair is artistically disheveled. He raises his hands and inspects the performers, discerning their readiness to play. He enjoys the suspense for a moment and Beethoven’s Fifth begins. M, music; M, Maestro; M, man.

Purpose

The conductor is synonymous with a persona, a character type, an inherently masculine identity that is consistently represented as powerful and authoritative in popular culture. Females are effectively nonexistent as major orchestra conductors and are severely underrepresented as high school and college band directors (“Gender Trends among MENC Music Educators,” 2001; Sheldon & Hartley, 2010; Woolfe, 2013). The culture of masculinity in band directing restricts access for women seeking secondary instrumental music positions and influences the way female conductors construct their professional identities. The purpose of this study is to examine four female high school band directors’ perceptions of the “conductor persona” and to understand how these perceptions influence the construction of their teaching identities.

Theoretical Framework

Anti-femininity, assertiveness, and toughness have been constructed as traditionally masculine traits (Dodson and Borders, 2006) while expression of emotions and caring for others are traditionally interpreted as feminine behaviors (Gilligan, 1982; Efthim, Kenny, & Mahalik, 2001). The role of the band director is consistently characterized by masculine traits of power, assertiveness, and toughness (Green, 1997; Gould, 2005). Female band directors operate in a world where traditional masculinity is expected and traditional femininity is criticized or rejected (Fuller, 1996).

As Roberta Lamb states, “Foucault has suggested, the problem is not to discover who we are, but to refuse who we are… dominant discourses make available forms of identity which are tightly circumscribed and which exclude many people” (1996, p. 125). The dominant discourses, or institutionalized practices in instrumental music education leave little room for women to create spaces and identities within the traditionally masculine field (Walshaw, 2001). While developments such as blind auditions have created more equitable opportunities for women in instrumental performance (Green, 1997), professional opportunities for female conductors are still extremely limited (Woolfe, 2013). Female conductors are expected to replicate the stylized, traditionally masculine acts of toughness and assertiveness while on the podium. Perceived displays of femininity in choice of attire and conducting style are openly criticized (Fuller, 1996). These gendered expectations make it difficult, if not impossible for females to enter the world of professional conducting.

Judith Butler states, “…gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences…those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (2003, p. 417). Female band directors negotiate a perilous situation. They cannot perform masculinity “right,” as physical displays of femininity disrupt the traditional notion of the male conductor and are pointed out and criticized as points of weakness and distraction (Fuller, 1996). Nor can they cannot perform femininity “right,” as the cultural, social, and historical development of instrumental music requires women conductors to be tough, assertive, powerful, and impersonal. Females in secondary instrumental music education ultimately shape their identities by negotiating the competing roles of authoritative conductor and caring teacher through a careful balancing act of gender performance that allows them to operate within the socially constructed norms of the profession. Female band director identity will therefore be defined as the “categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). The paucity of women in secondary instrumental music could indicate that the cultural expectation of female band directors to perform the masculine conductor role...
is too great a price to pay if the feminine identity is criticized, silenced, or destroyed in the process.

Methods And Data Sources

Participants for the study were selected via purposeful sampling techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). To identify possible participants, I contacted four individuals responsible for coordinating student teaching in music education departments at nearby colleges and universities. I contacted student teaching coordinators because they are usually familiar with the music teachers who are employed by local school districts. I asked the music education student teaching coordinators to suggest female high school band directors that they thought might be interested in participating in the study. While eleven female high school band directors participated in the study, this paper will focus on four participants who spoke extensively about the band director persona and the process of crafting a teaching identity.

The data were collected via two in-person, semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted for approximately two hours. I developed a semi-structured interview outline that began with broad, “grand tour” questions (Spradley, 1979) about the participant’s initial motivation to teach music. While these broad questions yielded little information that was directly relevant to the purpose of the study, they did assist in developing researcher/participant rapport. Once the participants seemed comfortable with the pace of the interview, I asked questions that focused specifically on gender in relation to issues such as isolation, discrimination, stereotyping, and teacher identity. Subjects were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences with gender in secondary instrumental music education. The final protocol also incorporated questions used by Cheryl Jackson (1996) in an effort to gather more specific information about the role of gender in the participants’ career experiences. Additional questions were added in an effort to better understand how perceived gender roles in secondary instrumental music education influence teacher identity.

I transcribed each interview verbatim. Each transcript was reviewed three times and coded using Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen’s codes as they related to situation, perspectives held by subjects, subjects’ way of thinking about people and objects, and social structure (2007). I also screened the data for similarities and differences that I found from story to story. While the participants discussed an array of gender issues that exist in secondary instrumental music education, I was particularly interested in understanding how the participants’ perceptions of the band director persona influenced their identity as music teachers. In an effort to preserve the individuality of each participant’s perspective, results are presented as individual portraits.

Results

Michelle

Fifth year teacher Michelle described her initial perceptions of the field. “It’s just like this natural thing for men to be in CHARGE of older kids. And it seems so much more natural for women to be in charge of younger, little kids.” It wasn’t until Michelle’s student teaching experience that she encountered a female band director. Becca, Michelle’s cooperating teacher “was like, pedal to the metal. Because she never backed down. It was never like she was the submissive band director. She was always ready to go – on fire and she was like no nonsense. And I think that was “rule with an iron fist” kind of thing.” Michelle described how Becca’s teaching style shaped her own teaching persona. “Seeing Becca do that day in and day out made me be like, I don’t have to be a softie, I can always be on the ball and always be tough...Seeing a really strong female high school band director made me be like, okay, I can do this too. This isn’t out of the norm. It’s few and far between, but it is possible to be as strong and determined as males.” The projection of a tough teaching persona felt natural to Michelle. “I was always the aggressive person. Some of my friends that are quieter- they wouldn’t want to do this job.”

Michelle regulated personal attributes that could be perceived as feminine or weak. “My first year, I didn’t wear a skirt until April. Like I wore pants. The first day of school all the way through. I just felt like the kids would take me less seriously if I dressed up like a little girly and wore a pretty skirt one day.” Michelle regulated displays of femininity because she wanted to be taken seriously by her students, colleagues, and administrators. She explained, “I definitely think that people like administration or supervisors or whoever’s interviewing for those jobs
definitely take women less seriously. I think there’s this preconceived notion, that, being a band director is a highly public job. You are on display all the time. And I think that there’s this preconceived notion that men are much more capable of that. It’s a big gig to manage. I think that having a man’s face on that role is more accepted than putting a young female face on that role.”

Michelle believes that women can combat those preconceived notions with the projection of a tough, confident, and powerful persona. “I think women can be cutthroat in this day and age – not only in corporate America but also in teaching, education. I think females can be as aggressive and headstrong, and cutthroat. I definitely think people are capable of it. I don’t think that other people think that women are necessarily going to be their first pick to pick a high school band director. You know? But women can do it too.”

**Beth**

Beth is a high school band director with over twenty years of experience in the field. She spoke about the lack of females in the profession. “Growing up, I’ve never, ever encountered woman band director. Ever. All of my conductors have always been men- always throughout my entire college and the whole bit. I didn’t really encounter a woman band director or a strong female figure until I was probably halfway through college. And I was like, alright, wow- she can really do this and do I have to be that tough?” The woman band director that Beth spoke about was a composer who guest conducted a performance of her pieces with Beth’s college wind ensemble. She described the experience: “At that point I had never had a woman conductor before- ever. And I was like, alright, you know, being a woman- who cares? Bravo for you. And she got in front of the ensemble and was brutal about what she wanted. She didn’t let those kids do anything that she didn’t want. And that’s when I was like, wow- she really knows her stuff.” Beth continued: “And that was very interesting because she was tough and then she’d turn around and be “hahaha…” and I was like wow- turn it on and turn it off. But maybe she had to do that in order to make it in a man’s world. She was tough. Brutal. Brutal.”

Beth talked about the hiring process for high school band positions. “I think it all stems back to it’s a male dominated field. Band director is male. Boom.” Beth feels she may not have been hired for her current position, had the position been for the Director of Bands. “I guess even the board of eds are probably leery about hiring a woman band director, solely a woman band director. I don’t think I had a problem being hired because I was not in charge. I was not THE band director, so it’s okay. They probably perceive you not to be tough on the football field. You don’t want to be cold, you don’t want to be wet- that typical female type thing.”

Beth identified festivals and marching band competitions as events where she needed to project a tough and confident persona. She described the judges meetings: “That’s where you have to develop a tough skin and stand your ground.” Beth continued, speaking about the judges at these meetings: “Some of them will just talk to you like, “What do you know? You should be an elementary teacher.” It’s almost like you have to be in a deep voice) strong, and big, and talk like this in order to get the respect you deserve.” Beth talked about times when she needed to assert herself in front of the judges to defend her band and her program. “I have jumped down their throats many a time- many a time. And if they start the whole patronizing type thing, then I will stand up and say, “You know what? This is not right. This is not right.” And you have to get in their face. Unfortunately sometimes, that’s the only way you can get their respect- is if you jump down their throat and then they’ll be like, “alright, fine…let’s talk.” But you do have to fight a little bit.” Beth’s willingness to fight for her programs and produce excellent ensembles has earned her respect and recognition within the field. “I didn’t really get the respect of being a band director, a good old boy, until we beat every other band director who I had associated with. And I smacked them. And then all of a sudden, everybody knew my name.”

**Cathy**

Cathy, a band director with twenty-three years of experience believes that one must possess certain personal characteristics to effectively manage a large high school band program. “You need to have an extraordinary amount of confidence. You have to have a- a much bigger personality.” Cathy explained that this big personality is something that she has developed over time. “I’m a very, very shy person, but
my students wouldn’t know that.” The persona that Cathy projects is one that helps her to manage a large group, achieve success, and earn the respect of her colleagues. Of this she said: “I had to really develop a person who’s really not me.” To a certain extent, Cathy developed and practiced what she refers to as a masculine persona in the classroom and in the professional world. “I’m a hybrid. I think of myself as a hybrid. I mastered that masculine persona. I have a certain amount of masculinity in my personality that I have learned to develop to be an effective teacher, all the while nurturing, hanging on to dear life with my femininity because I’m so connected to that.”

Cathy shared how she blends different personal characteristics to project her band director persona in the classroom. “The mastery of this confident persona doesn’t come necessarily with a loud voice. The idea of anything that I can do to be effective and work with a large group, a large voice, or aggressive behavior…sometimes to that end, I’ll go down to a whisper or I’ll conduct without any verbal communication at all.” In addition to these techniques, Cathy finds that wearing a certain style of clothing to work has also helped her to project the confident persona. “So for me the confidence part and the preparation- to always think everyday about…..I even dress that way at school. I’m not a scarf, hairspray, makeup… You can see how I dress. I’m not…unisex clothing for me always helped. A man tailored shirt, and a pair of Dockers, and a brown belt and flat shoes. Never heels. It always helped me feel who I needed to be….”

Cathy admitted that she has felt hindered by the femininity that she so consciously tries to protect. “I feel that being a woman has held me back. Well, I shouldn’t say that it’s held me back. I feel that it’s taken me longer to get to the point where I am today.” Cathy believes that male band directors do not have to think about developing the confident and assertive persona that she has so carefully crafted. “I would bet a gazillion dollars that men never worry about any of those issues- because I know a lot of men. Including my husband who’s a high school band director. I will say that I don’t think he’s given a second’s thought to how much confidence he needs to grow and how much work he needs to do to be able to articulate.” Cathy speculated on why this difference appears to exist.

“Women are constantly in our own minds and we’re also in everyone else’s head. We’re always judging- this person is in a rush, I have to speak faster. This person is stressed out and I’m feeling that they’re stressed out. There are times that I wish I didn’t have that- just for that one minute. Oh, I just wish I didn’t get so choked up when the superintendent looked at me funny- because I didn’t finish what I wanted to say.” While there are times that she wishes to be free of these qualities, Cathy also finds value in them. “Women are so perceptive and so intuitive. And I love the fact that I’m that way. I wouldn’t want to ever, ever be a guy- ever. I love being a woman. I think women are empowering and it’s helped me to be a sensitive musician and to have very, very musical performances.”

**Liz**

Third year teacher Liz attributes the lack of females in the field to inequitable hiring practices. “I think a lot of it has to do with the person who is interviewing and what their issues are. I think a lot of people probably would still see the male as the perfect candidate. They want a certain kind of guy to walk in and have the high school band director personality. I still don’t think they expect that from women. I think even though you may be a good candidate for it- not everybody will see it, just because of what their previous thoughts were.”

Liz does not possess the expected high school band director personality. “I know I’m not an intimidating person, I’ve had to rely more on forming relationships and being able to use them to my advantage. Like making sure the kids didn’t want to disappoint me, knowing that I believed in them and wanted to encourage them, because I knew I couldn’t scare the kids. Other people can scare them and make them do what they want, maybe it’s not necessarily a better thing- but it immediately gets you that result.”

Liz is careful to regulate her tone of voice while teaching. “I think the one thing that I struggle with more than anything else is that I think there are a lot of things that a male band director can say and a woman will say it the same way and it sounds kind of bitchy. I try not to get too emotional when I say things, without sounding whiny or cranky.”

Liz believes that men sometimes have an easier time as high school band directors because of their...
ability to project an intimidating, powerful persona. “I think they can get by better than women can. I think men can be more intimidating, they can grab control of things. When it comes down to classroom management, you can even not be teaching music so well, but as long as you have their attention, you could be successful.” The positive relationship that Liz and her students share forms the core of her teaching persona. “If I didn’t have that, I don’t think I would be able to do the job. If I had that personality- if I was a man, or just a more intimidating woman, maybe I wouldn’t have to form some of those relationships. I kind of have to make that extra effort- and I think if I wasn’t willing to do that, then I wouldn’t be able to do this because they would just walk all over me.”

**Significance**

Each participant shaped her teaching identity by accepting, blending, or rejecting behaviors that signify traditional masculinity or femininity. Despite being separated by over fifteen years of experience, Michelle and Beth both replicated the teaching personas of their female mentors and performed the traditionally masculine traits of toughness and assertiveness while on the podium. Cathy carefully and intentionally blended femininity and masculinity in her teaching persona, but endured personal and professional struggles and conflict as she attempted to navigate her own path. Liz recognized that she was both unable and unwilling to include traditionally masculine characteristics in her teaching persona. She used her ability to form positive relationships with her students to craft a band director identity of a different kind.

Each participant carefully considered the extent to which she successfully performed the expected masculine band director identity. Michelle, for example, expressed pride and a sense of progress when she stated that females “can be just as aggressive and headstrong and cutthroat” as males; indicating that these qualities are necessary, admired, and desired. Beth indicated that aligning with the gendered identity of the field is the way that females can earn professional respect. Cathy consciously worked to form a masculine teaching identity, one that is contrary to what she perceives as her natural personality. While Cathy was the only participant who referred to being female in the profession as “empowering,” she, like Michelle, made conscious efforts to conceal the physical signs femininity in her choice of attire. While Liz has arguably forged a non-masculine identity within the profession, she spoke about it apologetically by stating that she had to (rather than chose to) rely on forming relationships with her students to achieve her musical goals.

With the exception of Liz, all of the participants idealized, valued, and strived to incorporate the qualities of toughness, assertiveness, competitiveness, and confidence in their teaching personas. Characteristics traditionally associated with femininity (such as building relationships, caring, sensitivity) were often referred to as hindrances, something needed to be dealt with, or overcome. Has Liz then captured the essence of a feminine band director persona? Are Beth and Michelle inauthentic; acting like men in exchange for professional respect? Dawn Wallin asks, “Is it not feminist to allow a woman to define herself, even if her alignment is sometimes more masculine in its orientation?” (2008, p. 808). Perhaps the persona problem in secondary instrumental music lies not in the feminine performance of masculinity, but rather in the underlying message that one must perform the qualities of toughness, assertiveness, and aggression in order to succeed and earn respect within the field. While Judith Butler asserts, “gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenously constituted in time – and identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (2003, p. 415), repeatedly stylized masculine performances both on the podium and in the classroom have resulted in the construction of a stable masculine identity for the secondary instrumental music profession.

It has long been suggested that increased visibility of female role models in the profession may encourage more women to seek positions in secondary instrumental music education (Greaves-Spurgeon, 1998; Grant, 2000; Gould, 2001). This goal is unlikely to come to fruition if the majority of potential female role models replicate the traditionally masculine behaviors that have left little space for the development of alternate identities within the profession. As Cynthia Johnston Turner states, the development of a new kind of teaching persona comes with a specific set of challenges. “Let’s face it: I’m a control freak— I’m a conductor. But control is largely
an illusion and usually about fear... fear that I will not be as “respected”; fear that by not perpetuating the traditional dictatorial rehearsal techniques that exist in most college and university band rooms, I’ll be ostracized by my colleagues; fear that this is perceived as a typical “feminine” approach to teaching...” (2013, p. 69-72).

It may be time to challenge the masculine/feminine dichotomy as it relates to the band director persona. Just as women like Michelle and Beth replicate what Cynthia Johnston Turner (2013) described as “traditional dictatorial rehearsal techniques,” surely there are men who have crafted teaching personas (similar to that of Liz) that are characterized by a more democratic approach. It is also possible, however, that men may be granted more freedom in crafting unique identities because it is unlikely that a male band director’s non-masculine teaching persona will be criticized as being feminine or weak. Females are not likely afforded the freedom to explore non-masculine identities without intense scrutiny and criticism. In challenging the masculine/feminine dichotomy, we cannot mitigate or discount that nearly three centuries of masculine musical traditions have significantly shaped the personality of the profession.

While diversity training for administrators and increasingly transparent hiring practices could challenge the expectation of masculinity in the field, the perception that the performance of traditionally masculine behavior is the key to quality teaching and professional respect must be challenged from within. Who could we become as individual teachers, as a collective profession, if women and men band directors could truly define themselves and form organic, authentic, and original teaching identities? What might our students take away from our rehearsals and our teaching styles if compassion, human connection, and democratic teaching practices were the major components of the band director persona? I recently sat next to an elementary school band teacher at a conference. When I told her about this research, she responded, “Ha! High school band director. I knew that wasn’t in the cards for me, so I didn’t even try.” We must diversify the personality of this profession by challenging expectations of traditional masculinity and by honoring and respecting educators who take the professional risk to forge a different kind of teaching identity. In their fear and vulnerability, they push the profession forward and create space for something and someone else.

References


Wallin, Dawn C. (2008). From “I’m not a feminist” to CASW president: Reflecting on space(s), time(ing), and his(her)-story. Canadian Journal of Education, 31(4), 795-812.
