

What a Shame! Limited Understanding of the Effects of Shame on Voice

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While research is emerging on how the emotional state of voice users can impact voice quality and production, the emotion of shame has been underrepresented in that research. This paper examines what research currently exists regarding shame and offers future directions for future research in this area.

WHEN IT COMES TO RESEARCH investigating emotions and their effect on voice, the impact of anxiety certainly has played a central role. This is undeniably for good reason, as the effects of anxiety on voice can be powerful and have been documented for some time.¹ Singers under stressful and anxiety-provoking conditions can suffer various effects on their performance and their voice.² The causes of these effects are complex and span from psychophysiological, to environmental, to cognitive and more.

Yet an important emotion that affects human behavior—but that is not widely researched in voice science—is shame. Shame is defined as a “self-conscious” emotion that involves painful focus on the self, in ways that manifest themselves in distressing self-judgment such as “I am bad.”³ Shame is associated with feeling exposed, worthless, and small. Shame tends to motivate a purely defensive response, often evoking a desire to escape and hide.⁴ Of note, shame has been associated with distinct body language features, including slumped shoulders and narrowed chest, which can arguably have an effect on the output of voice and on the experience of the singer in performance.⁵ Shame has been found to be associated with the feeling of being a failure and fear of being ridiculed, often accompanied by avoiding gaze and avoiding public settings.⁶

In older studies, shame has been described as intense and dysphoric, accompanied by a rise in temperature and physiological changes, and changes in facial and verbal expression.⁷ Shame can incline someone to avoid further embarrassment, and wish they had acted differently, which manifests itself in stillness and lowering the head.⁸

HOW DOES SHAME EFFECT VOICE PRODUCTION?

Research examining the effects of shame on voice (particularly the singing voice) is not well-developed, yet addressing the role of shame in the voice community can be beneficial.⁹ One study investigating the relationship between acoustic measures of voice in singers and a variety of psychological constructs, found

(in a phonetogram / voice range profile) that maximum intensity in singers was negatively correlated with both trait anxiety and trait shame.¹⁰ Also, maximum intensity in singers was predicted by symptoms of anxious attachment style. This means that the higher the singer's self-reported anxious attachment, the lower their maximum intensity. A detailed explanation of attachment theory is beyond the scope of this article, but we can concisely say that the impactful force known as "attachment" has to do with the initial bond in infancy with one's caregivers. The quality of this bond can have an impact on several factors within an individual later in life, including how they relate to others, to themselves, and to the world.¹¹ Of note, "anxious attachment"—which results from a lack of sense of security established with caregivers and often later, with others—has been linked to differences in nervous system structure and physiology between individuals with anxious attachment as compared to individuals securely attached.¹² Importantly, the study that demonstrated a negative correlation between anxious attachment and maximum intensity indicated that what significantly mediated this correlation was not anxiety, but was found to be shame.¹³ This could be due to a variety of factors, including the discussed effects of shame on body language, which could then influence voicing.¹⁴

A similar finding emerged in a study examining the role of shame in autonomic arousal as part of a trauma-reminder paradigm.¹⁵ In this study, it was shame (and not anxiety) that was found to be a significant predictor of *vagal tone* (a measure of parasympathetic activity in the autonomic nervous system) when participants were prompted to view violent images. It is therefore important to reflect on the numerous other instances in which shame could be affecting physiology and voice. Mentioning these studies is, of course, not meant to downplay the role of anxiety as it relates to physiology, behavior, and voice; rather, it is to emphasize that anxiety and shame may both present different elements that could be negatively affecting singers. Critically, anxiety-related elements have been investigated much more than shame-related elements.

SHAME IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

Despite the limited published research that specifically targets shame's effect on quantifiable voice qualities—

and the authors would like for this paper to serve as a call to action for researchers equipped to carry out such investigations—there is a larger corpus of evidence that environmental factors can influence how individuals experience a wide variety of emotions, including shame, in the workplace and other professional settings (e.g. educational or religious environments).¹⁶ Many of these environmental factors can be changed or influenced by leadership and administration in these institutions. The intent is not to remove emotion from these settings, but to mitigate the impact of those emotional experiences that may be deleterious to the desired output of that setting.

A logical question, then, is which emotions are deleterious? Germaine to this article, is shame always a negative? A meta-analysis of nearly 150 published studies on shame and guilt reveals that the answer is somewhat nuanced.¹⁷ In this analysis, Leah and Cidam attempted to reconcile the emerging view that shame (and later, guilt) could be part of a constructive approach to improving performance, with the prevailing sentiment that shame is decidedly un-constructive. Their review found that shame was only experienced as constructive and helpful when the damage to the participants' social image caused by their failure was seen as repairable. Importantly, it was the participant (the one experiencing the shame) who had to judge the damage as repairable or irreparable for the effect of shame to be determined. In other words, the individual in power who inflicts the experience of shame does not get to decide how shame impacts the outcome.

Brian Manternach recently wrote an article in this journal about shame in the singing studio.¹⁸ In his article, he pointed out a number of studio and classroom practices that are likely to elicit shame. These include asking questions of students who are known not to have the answer, or pointing out students' mistakes in embarrassing or even humiliating ways. Generally, practices that serve to highlight the power differential between the learner and the teacher are likely to result in feelings of shame when mistakes are (inevitably) made during the learning process. Manternach, however, points to the power of empathy as an antidote to shaming practices. By practicing empathy in their studios, drawing upon their own lived experiences to infer the likely experiences of those around them, singing teachers can weigh the likelihood of their teaching practices to elicit a shame response from their students.

CONCLUSION

There is not enough known about how some emotions directly impact voice quality or voice production and more research is necessary. Of the emotions that have actually been studied in regard to their effects on voice, shame is perhaps the least represented. While there is insufficient evidence to determine whether or not shame is deleterious to voice quality, there is more evidence that shame is rarely correlated with improved performance, much less learning. While awaiting research on shame's effect on voice production and output quality, singing teachers can learn from other fields and work to mitigate their teaching practices that are likely to invoke shame in their singers.

NOTES

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