

***Thesis Proposal***  
*Does Unconscious Racial Bias Influence Repertoire Selection  
in the Segregated Choral Classroom?*

**Chapter 1: Topic Overview**

**General Racial Bias:**

A stereotype is, “a simplistic image or distorted truth about a person or group based on a prejudgement of habits, traits, abilities, or expectations”(Moule, 2009, 321). Since the creation of the human kind, people have attempted to draw lines in order to compare each other. These comparisons quickly led to the formation of class, gender, and racial expectations. As time passed, these expectations transformed into stereotypes that would be used to prematurely judge others in an attempt to gain surface knowledge about the individual without taking the necessary time to get to know them properly.

Unconscious bias is a term that is used to describe individuals who unknowingly stereotype a person or group. Every day such biases are employed whether it is the woman who clutches her purse tightly as she walks past a black man on the street, the pilot whose heart rate increases when a middle eastern man boards his plane, or a young girl who prefers to play with her light-skinned barbie rather than her dark-skinned barbie.

**Bias in Musical Preference and Selection:**

If unconscious bias is an ever-present factor in modern society, such bias must exist in the musical world. If a person were to walk around a diverse city, passing multiple pedestrians listening to music on their I-Pods or MP3 players, that person may make assumptions as to what style of music each individual was listening to as they passed by. For example, a white male may be stereotyped for listening to rock music

such as Linkin Park; a black female may be stereotyped for listening to R&B music such as Alicia Keyes; a white female may be stereotyped for listening to country Music such as Taylor Swift; and a black male may be stereotyped for listening to rap music such as Ludacris.

More specifically, in a choral music setting, if a person were to attend a choir performance consisting of various high school choirs from the area, certain judgements may be made for what style of repertoire will be sung by each choir. Just like the pedestrians on the street, a person may assume or judge unconsciously that a predominantly white choir will perform more traditional, classically conceived choral music or Pop songs such as work by Bach or The Beatles, while a predominantly black choir will perform a spiritual or an R&B song such as works by Moses Hogan or Kirk Franklin.

A student teacher from Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, was placed in two different musical environments. The first choir was led by a black director with a predominantly black choir while the other was a white director with a predominantly white choir. The repertoire selections for both choirs was consistent with the common stereotypes discussed in the previous paragraphs. The black choir performed a great deal of spirituals and popular R&B songs, a few suggested to the director by the students themselves. The white choir performed a variety of songs, but primarily 20th century choral works, carols, traditional hymns, and pop selections.

**Purpose:**

The repertoire that is selected for performance by the choral director can easily feed into the already prevalent stereotypes and bias for music that should be performed

by varying racial groups. According to Jean Moule, “[People] don’t deliberately choose [their] unconscious attitudes...[they] may not even be aware of them” (Moule, 2009, 324). If this is the case, could these repertoire selections be the result of unconscious bias by the director or are the selections intentional based upon their own musical tastes and the tastes of the choir? What factors could be contributing to this unconscious bias? This quantitative descriptive study seeks to determine the influence of three factors:

1. Do the race and cultural background of the choral director and or choir influence repertoire selection?
2. Do the musical tastes of the choral director and or choir outside of the classroom influence repertoire selection?
3. Does the level of student participation in repertoire selection influence the musical styles performed?

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to uncover possible biases that exist for repertoire selection in the segregated choral classroom related to the race and cultural background of the director, the racial and cultural make up of the choirs of which they lead, the musical tastes of the director and choir members outside of the classroom, and the repertoire selection processes for each choir.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Repertoire-based studies:**

Many repertoire-based studies have provided insight into the selection processes of secondary choral directors. To uncover selection strategies, Forbes conducted a study that used personal interviews, a written survey, and an analysis of the repertoire used in past programs for 104 choral directors to determine whether selection was structured.

The study found that directors do, in fact, have a lengthy set of guidelines for repertoire

selection, but the application of each varied significantly by director and the genre of repertoire under consideration. Additionally, the study found that directors believe that students should be exposed to a varied repertoire of music, but the practice of that belief is dependent upon the group as well as the experience and tastes of the director. Finally, the study discovered that demographic differences existed that influenced repertoire selection. For example, directors in smaller or less affluent school districts tended to select repertoire that suited the students' preferences, such as pop music (Forbes, 2001).

Two articles discussed the extensive selection criteria that should be considered by choral directors when programming a concert. The article by Apfelstadt discussed two important considerations that should be made during this process. First, selected music should challenge students enough that they gain more than mere entertainment. Although entertainment is important, music should offer the audience and the students much more than that. In addition, one question that should be asked is whether or not the integrity of the song itself can be withheld in performance. This requires directors to select music that allows each group to perform the song true to the written intent and cultural context (Apfelstadt, 2000).

An additional article that discussed selection criteria was written by Rebecca Reames. This in-depth article investigated beginning high school choirs and their directors to determine the factors that influenced repertoire selection. All high school choral directors, that were also members of MENC in the state of Virginia, were chosen to participate in a high school choral survey developed by the researcher. The results found that the majority of repertoire selected was from the 20th century, even though all directors indicated that a variety of styles and centuries of music should be used. This

could be attributed to the fact that 20th century repertoire allows for a greater level of success in performance as well as the fact that it is highly favored by students and directors alike. The article also mentions how choral literature should meet the criteria of both aesthetic and technical demands. Selecting repertoire that is aesthetically pleasing ensures that the interest level of the choir will be high; selections based on technical ability ensures that the students will grow and mature musically. A middle ground should be achieved for both domains for each piece selected (Reames, 2001).

Another study interviewed eight leading choral directors from the United States about their thoughts on the standards of excellence for choral ensembles. Each director answered the same set of five questions and their answers were recorded. The primary discovery from this article that is critical to mention for the purposes of the current study, deals with the importance of cultural expression. A collection of answers for one question stressed the importance of allowing music from other cultures to speak because each song was written in order to communicate a specific message. Varying repertoire can allow students to experience an array of human emotion from cultures throughout the world. In addition, performing a song can allow the students to unite together as one voice to sing a song that conveys a particular message to the audience. Directors must contemplate the message that their choir may elude to or seek to convey as they sing together. This sense of purpose for performing will vary significantly for each choir and piece (Feirreira & Tagg, 1998).

Lastly, Murphy discussed important factors that must be considered when directing choirs in at-risk middle schools. Students from this environment seek to be enriched emotionally, therefore, students must be able to connect to a piece of music in

order for it to serve as an outlet for expression in this way. Additionally, a varied selection of repertoire will increase the chances for each student to find a song that they can personally identify with, whether it be through the subject, the text, the music itself, or the composer. Finally, music for such choirs can be used as a portal to inspire students. Murphy gives a few incredible examples of this,

“Perhaps studying the poetry of Langston Hughes or singing arrangements of spirituals will help students who have felt marginalized or disenfranchised. For those students where English is a second language, quality repertoire could be chosen that is indigenous to their culture. If the song is in another language, the teacher can ask them to help with the pronunciation and background on the piece” (Murphy, 2009, 63).

### **Racial and Gender Discrimination-based studies:**

In addition to repertoire-based studies, racial discrimination and gender-based studies add significant value to this research. In one particular study by Bertrand & Mullainathan, fake applications were sent out to employers in response to newspaper advertisements for jobs in the Chicago and Boston area in order to research the call-back rate for applicants based on race. Each application sent had either a stereotypically white name, such as Emily or Greg, or a stereotypically African-American name, such as Lakisha or Jamal. The results found that stereotypically white names received 50% more call-backs compared to their African-American counterparts. These results were consistent across a variety of other variables, such as quality of resume, type of job, “equal-opportunity-employers”, and gender (Bertrand, M. & Mullainathan 2003).

A similar study by Silvey researched the influence of band labels, such as concert band or wind ensemble, on judges’ evaluation of a group’s performance. Recordings of six musical excerpts were chosen to be evaluated by inexperienced directors,

experienced directors, and students who were unknowingly put into two randomly assigned groups, either “band labels group” or “no labels group”. After evaluation, the results showed slightly higher ratings for the wind ensemble label. This may be attributed to the fact that, “listeners rate performances more favorably when they believe the performances are of high quality” and many believe that wind ensemble labeled groups are the top performing ensembles in a school (Silvey, 2009, 52).

Furthermore, a study done by Johnson & Stewart sought to determine whether a bias existed for instrument assignment based on gender. Band directors and music education students, that were recruited to participate voluntarily, took part in an online survey. Participants were divided randomly into two groups. One group received a survey with headshot photos of instrumentalists, while the other received a survey with photos of students’ lips and teeth. The results of the research did not indicate that there was a bias based on gender, but other issues arose. First, one particular student may have been selected to play an instrument because, “he just look[ed] like” he would play it. Also, students may have been categorized based on weight and stature because both could attribute to the success of the person on that particular instrument. In addition, results found that there may be a bias for assigning African-American students particular instruments. All three issues warrant further research to determine the influence of these assertions (Johnson & Stewart 2004).

### **Education-based studies:**

A few educational-based studies provided additional insight into this research question. In a study by Hunt, nine key representatives, including teachers, administrators, and parents, from four rural and urban districts were interviewed about

the role of music education programs in their schools. Participants mentioned a variety of roles in response to the broad, open-ended questions, but most important to mention is the importance of the director's ability to understand the role their music program has in the context of the cultural make-up of the environment in which they teach. The culture of the school district determines the expectations for the music program itself, so it is critical to know the background of the community. Specifically, one participant mentioned that, "Many of [her]...marching bands march Southern style...once [she] figured out that it is a cultural treasure for Black marching bands, then [she] was better off" (Hunt, 2009, 40).

One final study worth noting was conducted by research coordinator, Camille Cooper. She interviewed African-American mothers who had children enrolled in public schools in Los Angeles and asked them to discuss the detrimental effects that teacher bias can have on African-American students in relation to race, gender, and class. Responses urged teachers to examine themselves and search for any bias they may hold before entering the classroom. In addition, mothers would like to see teachers examining their instruction from the perspective of the student with their main focus on what will inspire and encourage the student to learn. Most importantly, the mothers stressed the ability that teachers have to either strengthen or weaken their child's self-esteem and racial identity. Therefore, they want teachers to uncover the students' assets and use them to provide pedagogy that is culturally relevant (Cooper, 2003).

### **Chapter 3: Method**

#### **Population and Sample Selection:**

Subjects for this study included groups of secondary students and their directors that could be categorized into one of the following six groups:



- A: 5 choirs with a white directors and predominantly white students
- B: 5 choirs with white directors and predominantly black student
- C: 5 choirs with white directors and a racially mixed group of students
- D: 5 choirs with black directors and predominantly white students
- E: 5 choirs with black directors and predominantly black students
- F: 5 choirs with black directors and a racially mixed group of students

Each categorical group contained one choir from each of the five regions of the United States (West, Midwest, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest).

Participants were selected using recommendations from the National Association of Music Educators. The organization used information regarding the racial and cultural demographics of each choir and director and systematically listed twenty choirs from each region ranked sequentially by the highest percentage of the desired composition of students with the desired choral director per category. After receiving lists from each region, directors were contacted directly, in rank order, in order to ask for an agreement to participate in the study. Directors were given basic information as to the format of the study, but were not given any information about the purpose of the study.

#### **Data Collection:**

Once five directors from each category per region were in agreement to participate, an official envelope was sent to each school, requiring a signature of receipt, with details and directions regarding the study. Directions instructed each student and director to partake in an online survey created with [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) (see end of document for links). Surveys were to be completed within fourteen days of the date that

the official envelopes were received by the participants and each choir was instructed to take the survey together as a class in one sitting.

Each survey was separated into three sections. Section one addressed general demographic information, musical background, musical tastes, and repertoire selection processes with questions varying for both student and director. Section two asked participants to listen to five excerpts of choral repertoire from varying styles and genres and then answer the following four questions:

1. Would you enjoy singing this song? Yes or no.
2. Would you listen to this song outside of choir? Yes or no.
3. Would you select this song for your choir to sing? Explain.
4. Do you think that your choir would enjoy singing this song? Explain.

#### Listening Selections:

“Requiem” (Fauré)

“Elijah Rock” (Moses Hogan)

“Zion’s Walls” (Aaron Copland)

“Erev Shel Shoshanim” (Israeli song of the desert, arr. Jack Klebanow)

“ABC, 123” (The Jackson 5- arr. Roger Emerson)

Section three requested that participants examine three photos of secondary choirs: a racially mixed choir, an entirely black choir, and an entirely white choir. After viewing the photos, participants were instructed to select what style of music they would expect to hear at each choir’s performance. Choices were as follows:

1. Traditional Choir- Bach/Handel/Benjamin Britten
2. Pop/Show Tunes- The Beatles/Disney/Miley Cyrus
3. R&B/Spiritual- Moses Hogan/Kirk Franklin/Alicia Keyes

## **Analysis:**

Section one will be analyzed using a Chi Square of the categorical group versus the musical style preferences as well as the race of the participant versus the musical style preferences. An analysis of the open-ended qualitative teacher responses will be examined by the researcher in order to examine trends in selection and to evaluate whether or not racial stereotypes or preferences affect the overall selection of styles in the repertoire.

Section two will be analyzed using an Analysis of Covariance to test for a music positivity score per categorical group. The greater amount of positive responses of “Yes” will signify a wider range of musical tastes. Section three will be analyzed using a Chi Square of the categorical group versus the song selected for each choir to sing for each choir’s photo. This measurement will examine the trends of stereotypical responses for repertoire based on race.

## **View the Survey:**

Part 1-Director: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/7PDRCT2>

Part 1-Student: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/7PY2FFY>

Part 2: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/7P9F5QC>

Part 3: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/7P7MNBM>

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