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The Group Dynamics of High School Show Choir

As a high school freshman, I tried out for show choir. Try-outs were held one day after school, and we found out who made the cut a few weeks later (I was accepted). From then on we would meet once or twice a week in the evenings after school to rehearse. There was no resocialization process for new members, which I didn’t think about at the time but is interesting to me in retrospect. Specifically, the fact that we didn’t have any kind of initiation rituals seems unusual in light of the fact that I have friends in a Capella groups at Elon and they’ve told me that those groups do employ processes that fulfill Goffman’s requirements for resocialization – specifically, I know that at least one of the male a Capella groups takes all their new recruits on a weekend trip during which they’re “initiated,” whatever that entails. I wasn’t privy to the details. We didn’t have anything like that for show choir: no trips, no rituals, we just showed up for our first rehearsal and went from there. The only group experience that we had that might have differentiated us from non-show choir members was that we traveled to and performed at an arts festival every year. Still, that was attended by members of every performing arts group from my school, so it didn’t really serve to set us apart, and it didn’t entail anything that Goffman would see as resocialization.

One thing it did provide us with, though, was our yearly dose of intergroup conflict. Our fall and spring concerts were performed at our school and there was no element of competition; during those two concerts, it was just us. Our trip to this festival was the nearest we got to the drama-filled competitions of *Glee*, although it wasn’t nearly that over the top. It wasn’t even a competition, strictly speaking, since the groups weren’t ranked against each other. Still, just the presence of other groups was enough to breed intergroup conflict. We would go see other groups perform and pronounce them inferior, or talk about how we disliked the kids from a certain school (because they were too artsy, or too snobby, or not arsty enough). In retrospect, and as Sumner might have predicted, all the groups were extremely similar: we were all kids from small liberal-arts schools who had chosen to join show choir. For the most part, we couldn’t have been more alike.

Although there was a small amount of prestige that came with being in show choir, prestige wasn’t a requirement for entry. Neither were wealth and power, beyond whatever was required for attending my high school, since I attended a private school whose student body belonged to families that were disproportionately wealthy and well-connected. But that aside, the only membership criteria were singing and dancing skill, which come closest to being classified as knowledge/cultural resources. The recruitment process was fairly objective because the group’s faculty sponsors (who also ran the whole program) were the ones who held try-outs and decided which prospective members made the cut. The members of the choir didn’t have a say in the recruitment process, which limited the influence that anyone’s social status could have on their acceptance chances. And while I’m sure the sponsors weren’t completely objective, I remember thinking at the time that they did a good job of making the recruitment process meritocratic.

Within the group itself there existed a loose hierarchy, organized by age. In that way, the internal dynamics of the group mirrored the dynamics that existed in my high school as a whole. The older guys would “roast” the younger, though occasionally one of the younger boys would be taken under the wing of one of the elders and thereby become cooler than he otherwise would be. A similar dynamic existing among the girls: they mostly hung out with members of their own class, but occasionally a younger girl might get elevated by an older. Although the members of show choir were drawn from a relatively diverse background, (e.g. there were several football players in the show choir squad), those outside roles didn’t have much impact on the interpersonal dynamics within show choir, beyond the fact that people who already were friends were more likely to hang out during rehearsals. Beyond age, the other relevant factor in the show choir’s internal hierarchy was talent. For example, one girl in the grade above me was a strong singer who was planning on attending college for vocal performance, and so there existed a very slight (but noticeable) worshipful aura around her. Similar dynamics came into play every year around whoever was the most talented upperclassman. Talented freshman and sophomores received respect for their abilities but also needed to know their place, so to speak, and so there could be no worshipfulness around them. Despite the presence of the hierarchy I’ve described, my experience was that the group was, for a group composed of high schoolers, rather egalitarian. Although we didn’t have strong markers of who was in the group and out – No logo, no nicknames, etc.— we developed a bond simply by virtue of time shared together and mutual hard work toward the same goal.

The leadership style that our faculty sponsors/leaders took fell somewhere between authoritarian and democratic, though closer to the authoritarian end of the scale. They made all the big decisions: who would be accepted as new members at the beginning of each year, our rehearsal and performance schedule, and what we’d be performing. They also ran our rehearsals in an authoritarian way, though in fairness to them, they had to, because some of the kids would goof off at the slightest opportunity. The democratic aspect of their leadership was expressed in the way that they would solicit our input on certain things: who wanted to sing what parts, for example, or sometimes which of several song options we wanted to perform. Still, most of the time their style tended towards authoritarianism, as it needed to in order to ensure that we stayed focused and on schedule.