

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AN ALL-STATE VOCAL JAZZ ENSEMBLE:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

Tyler E. Thomas

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INTRODUCTION

Social capital is the “network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together” (Farr, 2004, p. 9). Its applications in music education research have been explored by several authors, particularly in the context of performing ensembles (Brimhall, 2014; Eastis, 1998; Jones, 2010; Kumar, 2020; Langston & Barrett, 2008; Palmer, 2017; Prest, 2016). Two aspects of social capital theory have frequently been cited by music education scholars: the connections within similar groups (bonding), and the connections between different groups (bridging). Both hold rich implications for understanding the ways in which people of different backgrounds come together to pursue a common purpose in an ensemble. As Prest (2016) noted in her review of social capital in music education research, community music ensembles have provided the setting for a majority of existing studies. Its applications to community music are evident in the nature of such ensembles, often organized around explicitly egalitarian social aims. However, as Eastis (1998) asserted in her comparative study of two choirs, the structure of an ensemble influences the ways in which social capital can manifest. As such, I propose an examination of social capital within an all-state vocal jazz ensemble, in an effort to highlight the unique social conditions of the experience for the student participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Capital Theory

Prest (2016) identifies four main branches of social capital theory, as cited in extant music education research. The first flows from the work of Bourdieu (1985), for whom social capital accrues within individuals, and stems largely from habitual actions in families. Next,

Prest considers the studies indebted to Coleman (1988), whom she characterizes as diverging from Bourdieu in one critical way: for Coleman, social capital exists only within the relationships between people. Moreover, Coleman emphasizes deliberate rational action in the pursuit of individual gain as the chief mechanism by which social capital forms. The third and fourth branches stem from the work of Putnam (and through Putnam, Hanifan), in which the bonding and bridging forms of social capital are articulated. Prest points out Putnam's and Hanifan's interest in altruism and the deliberate pursuit of public good, highlighting their influence on research examining trust and fellowship in musical ensembles.

In Farr's (2004) examination of these competing conceptualizations of social capital, he proposes the following summation:

[Social] capital is complexly conceptualized as the network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together as a community via certain norms and psychological capacities, notably trust, which are essential for civil society and productive of future collective action or goods, in the manner of other forms of capital. (p. 9)

Social Capital in Music Education

Eastis (1998) examined social capital in two contrasting choirs—one small, auditioned, and elite, the other large and inclusive. She characterizes the elite choir as fostering *bonding* social capital—that which forms around and reinforces similarities between individuals—while characterizing the inclusive choir by the prevalence of *bridging* social capital—that which forms to span differences between individuals.

Langston and Barrett (2008) looked at social capital in a community choir, expanding their scope to consider both the connections between individual choristers and between the choir

and the larger community. One of the key elements of this study is its inclusion of *fellowship* as an aspect of social capital, defined as feelings of trust, camaraderie, and “deep appreciation” among the members of the choir.

Jones (2010) called on music educators to adopt an active stance toward the cultivation of social capital, arguing for its public benefits in light of rising globalization. Brimhall (2014) took Jones’s charge a step further, and identified four music teacher characteristics as well-suited to the promotion of social capital: knowledge of content, positive rapport, successful communication, and regular reflection.

Kumar (2020) substantially developed on the core tenets of social capital, positing a rigorous, multi-dimensional, and dynamic model of trust and its role in musical ensembles. Unsatisfied with prior operationalizations of trust as a component of social capital theory, Kumar combined Mayer et al.’s (1995) definition from organizational theory with Reimer’s (2003) conception of trust in ensemble music making, resulting in a three-dimensional, nine-element hierarchy of three triads. She posits a foundation of integrity-benevolence-ability, from which autonomy-relatedness-competence builds to arrive at identity-agency-efficacy.

Research on the All-State Experience

A number of studies have partly included vocal jazz in surveys of all-state choirs. Wine (1996) surveyed the structure, procedures, and variance of all-state choirs around the country for the 1994-95 academic year, including two all-state vocal jazz ensembles. A similar study by McCord (2003) produced a more complete picture of national all-state choral practices, which included vocal jazz ensembles. Within that study, McCord surveyed the perceptions of all-state ensemble conductors, soliciting their views on the educational purposes of such ensembles.

Social bonding and peer inspiration were among the more frequently reported intended outcomes.

Both Hendricks (2009) and Hickman (2015) considered the role of competition in shaping the all-state experience. Hendricks examined the effect of competitive elements *within* the festival, including solo auditions and chair placement hearings, while Hickman focused on the impact of competitive selection *to* an all-state ensemble. Hickman's findings refute Austin's (1990) assertion that competition in music education diminishes student experience and is often detrimental to student social and emotional wellbeing, instead suggesting that the competitive all-state selection process resulted in both positive and negative student experience. Hendricks arrives at a similarly-nuanced conclusion, highlighting the complex relationship between student perceptions of self-efficacy and competition at the festival.

Williams and Goff (2019) explored student motivations for and perceived benefits from participation in secondary-level honors ensembles. Though it is unclear whether any participants in their study had experience in all-state vocal jazz ensembles, Williams and Goff found that students reported prioritizing musical dimensions of the experience over social dimensions. However, social benefits were also strongly indicated in their participant responses, including "spending time with talented musicians," "[developing] self-confidence," and "[meeting] new friends." Moreover, Williams and Goff included participant enjoyment of rehearsals, performances, and interactions with the clinician within the reported musical benefits, only, as opposed to the nonmusical, social benefits.

Freer (2007) offered guidelines to honor choir guest conductors, underscoring that the student experience is the most significant responsibility of the clinician, and that students should

feel proud and satisfied. While Freer does not explicitly discuss trust or rapport as elements of social capital theory, he cautions against becoming perceived as critical and pedantic, and encourages laughter, relaxation, and *reflection* (emphasis added), placing his recommendations at least partially within Brimhall's (2014) characteristics.

Vocal Jazz Ensembles in Music Education Research

The vocal jazz ensemble paradigm is a hybrid of the large instrumental jazz ensemble and the traditional choral paradigms (Perea, 2012). As Perea (2012) notes, however, vocal jazz ensembles have largely been excluded from scholarly consideration within either parent tradition: "Choral traditionalists view vocal jazz as fun at best, potentially damaging at worst, while critics on the jazz side deride the vocal jazz subgenre as inauthentic, disingenuous, or just plain cheesy" (p. 221). While more recent jazz education scholarship has been critical of earlier narratives, most still presume the exclusion of vocal jazz. West's (2015) meta-analysis of jazz education research includes only one article with an explicitly vocal focus—Madura's (2008) study of vocal jazz improvisation cognition.

Pisciotta (1992) crafted the first substantive history of the vocal jazz education movement. Her research established definitions for vocal jazz ensembles, including changes in performance practice and voicing/instrumentation from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. Amerind (2013) updated Pisciotta's historical account, explicitly centering the vocal jazz ensemble as the core of the movement, aesthetically and pedagogically. Each of these authors focus on developments at the post-secondary and professional level, and as such, largely ignore the growth of vocal jazz education in high schools, including all-state ensembles. Scholarship focused at the secondary level has tended to stay within the confines of individual states or

regions, though none have directly examined all-state vocal jazz ensembles (Cruse, 1999; Hamilton, 2017; Postas, 2017).

Jensen-Hole (2005) conducted an ethnographic case study study of a collegiate vocal jazz ensemble, providing perhaps the only extant portrait of the paradigm in action. Her primary interest was to examine the ensemble through the lens of David Elliott's model of musicianship and educatorship; though implicitly this involved consideration of norms, trust, and social interactions, Jensen-Hole did not directly employ a social capital lens.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM LITERATURE

In consideration of Prest's (2016) analysis of the four main branches of social capital theory, I have chosen to examine social capital as articulated by both Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995). Given the inherent competitive/collaborative dynamics of an all-state vocal jazz ensemble, I believe that employing concepts from both Coleman and Putnam will allow me to more clearly identify the ways in which the participants pursue individual versus collective gain.

Brimhall's (2014) four music teacher characteristics for the cultivation of social capital will inform the core of my examination of the role of the clinician. Specifically, I intend to contrast Brimhall's criteria with the model of clinician success articulated by Freer (2007).

Existing studies on social capital within secondary-level ensembles have emphasized the impact of continuity, district and ensemble-specific traditions, connections between the ensemble and the wider community, and especially peer mentorship (Bannerman, 2016; De Bruin et al., 2020; Goodrich, 2007; Palmer, 2017). I contend that each of these factors play significantly-reduced roles within all-state ensembles. The all-state ensemble I intend to study has traditionally

high levels of student turnover year-to-year, reducing the capacity for both continuity and peer mentorship (K. Koch [assistant state chair], personal communication, April 24, 2021). Moreover, the nature of the selection process to the ensemble reduces the differentiation of prior student experience in vocal jazz, challenging the traditional notion of mentoring from more-experienced to less-experienced peers.

Like Hendricks (2009), I contend that all-state ensembles represent a rich research context, due to the magnifying effect their intensity brings to aspects of ensemble music making. Furthermore, though Hendricks focused on self-efficacy and not social capital, I believe there are aspects of the key findings of her study that can inform my research: specifically, that peer modeling tended to exert a negative influence on students, while verbal encouragement from other students exerted a positive influence. The vocal jazz paradigm, with its blended emphasis on ensemble and solo singing—including the improvisation of melodic treatments and on syllables (Amerind, 2013)—is particularly well-suited to building on Hendricks’s findings, since it involves many opportunities for students to model in implicitly competitive settings.

Eastis (1998) and Jones (2010) provide further support for my research context. The former, for demonstrating the unique function of social capital in smaller, “elite” choirs; the latter, for asserting that popular music and chamber ensembles foster unique expressions of social capital—two traditions which substantially inform vocal jazz (Amerind, 2013).

I am particularly interested in exploring Eastis’s (1998) structural attribution of bonding versus bridging within the context of this study. I posit that for as many ways as students in an all-state vocal jazz ensemble might perceive one another in terms of their similarities, so, too, might they perceive one another in terms of their differences. As such, I believe I could find

significant evidence of both bonding *and* bridging in the course of this study. Furthermore, I suggest that a high degree of simultaneous sameness and difference perception could be a result of the structural conditions of an all-state ensemble, potentially strengthening Eastis's core assertions.

Kumar's (2020) model of trust in musical ensembles provides me with a rigorous, multi-dimensional framework from which I can seek to observe *trust* in the all-state ensemble rehearsals, as well as to explore through interviews with the student participants.

METHOD & DESIGN

Researcher Positionality

Since I am proposing an ethnographic case study, allow me to briefly describe my relationship to the research site. I have experience with this all-state vocal jazz ensemble as a former student participant, as a member of the host organization, and as a teacher of student participants. As an arranger, director, performer, and scholar of vocal jazz ensemble music, I contend that I come to this site as a cultural insider. The current assistant state chair and I have known each other for several years; we met as student participants in the all-state ensemble, and have maintained a professional and personal relationship since. I recall my own experience of social capital as a student participant as complex and transformative; during the event, my perception of *bonding*, *bridging*, and *fellowship* increased, despite my initial self-conception as an outsider to the group.

Ethnographic Case Study Methodology

This study is grounded in the epistemological and methodological tenets of qualitative case study as articulated in Merriam (1998). Working from a constructivist orientation, I am adopting Merriam's definition of a case, and its three defining characteristics: I am focusing on the bounded system of an all-state vocal jazz ensemble (*particularistic*), I intend to do so by generating rich, thick description (*descriptive*), and through this process, I aim to advance our understanding of the role of social capital in musical ensembles (*heuristic*).

I am drawing further methodological guidance from Fusch et al. (2017), specifically their explanation and justification for mini-ethnographic case study research:

This type of blended design also allows researchers to explore causality links, which is not typical for ethnographies [...] the use of a mini-ethnographic case study design enables researchers to generate as well as study theory in real world applications. (p. 926.)

Fusch et al. (2017) specifically suggest the use of the following sources of data collection for mini-ethnographic case studies: direct observation, field notes, reflective journaling, informal interviews, and focus group interviews. I plan to incorporate each of these data sources over the course of this study, in the pursuit of improved credibility through crystallization (Tracy, 2010).

Three-Phase Design

I propose a three-phase design for this study, detailed below. By organizing the study in three phases, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the case, with data from each phase

informing my inquiry in subsequent phases. I have confirmed the feasibility of the proposed research timeline in a conversation with the current assistant state vocal jazz chair.

Phase I: Before the Festival

In early September, students selected to the all-state vocal jazz ensemble confirm their participation; historically, the group includes twenty-four vocalists. In coordination with the host organization, I will mail invitations to participate in the study, along with letters of consent and assent in the informational packets distributed in mid-October. At this stage, I will also include a short survey to be completed and returned, along with letters of consent and assent, for any students electing to participate. Responses to this survey will inform my subsequent purposive sampling. I aim to identify between four and six student participants for the course of the study, encompassing the following variance of backgrounds (some categories may overlap): (1) a returning student who participated in the ensemble the previous year (students in this state are only eligible to participate in their junior and senior years), (2) a student who participated in a different all-state ensemble the previous year, (3) a student who is a member of a vocal jazz ensemble in their home district, (4) a student with no equivalent ensemble in their home district, and (5) two students from the same district, (or in lieu of that) same county, (or in lieu of that) same state hosting organization zone. My intention with this sampling strategy is to maximize variance of participant experience of the *norms* of the all-state vocal jazz ensemble, since understanding and perception of *norms* has been identified as a key component of social capital theory.

Following the example of Sweet and Parker (2019), I will solicit written responses from these participants two weeks before the festival; the prompts will seek to explore anticipated participant experiences of the festival. Citing King and Horrocks (2010), Sweet and Parker propose that a combination of “written and interview data help maximize the depth of participants’ description” (p. 66), and permit the crafting of specific follow-up questions in interviews.

Phase II: During the Festival

Beginning on the Thursday afternoon of the festival, I will conduct non-participant observations of the entire rehearsal duration, collecting field notes throughout. Following the end of rehearsal Thursday night, I will conduct a semistructured, 30-minute interview (pending consent) with the conductor; this interview will seek to explore the conductor’s initial perceptions of social capital in the ensemble, as well as their implicit and explicit strategies for fostering social capital in subsequent rehearsals. These interview responses will inform my rehearsal observations throughout Friday and Saturday. During the lunch break and dinner break on Friday, I will conduct similar interviews with each student participant, including questions tailored to their background and their responses in Phase I. After the concert on Saturday afternoon, students in the vocal jazz ensemble have no formal commitments within the context of the festival; during this time, and before the Saturday evening performances, I will conduct a 60-minute focus group interview with all of the student participants. By conducting this focus group interview, I intend to solicit *synergism*, *snowballing*, *stimulation*, *security*, and *spontaneity* (Hess, 1968 as cited in Vaughn et al., 1996). I will record all interviews for later transcription and

analysis. Additionally, I will maintain a researcher journal to record my hunches and reflections after each day of the festival.

Phase III: After the Festival

Four weeks after the festival, during the last week of December, I will provide participants with initial findings and excerpted interview transcripts to solicit written member reflections; this will provide participants with an opportunity to clarify my representations of their responses and offer additional reflections on their experience of social capital in the all-state vocal jazz ensemble (Tracy, 2010).

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