

# Surveying attitudes towards singing and their impact on engagement with this musical activity

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## ABSTRACT

### Background

Singing is the most natural of all musical activities and one that is readily accessible to most individuals. It can be used on our own or in a group, in different cultural settings, on different occasions, and for the most diverse purposes (entertainment, grieving, religious rituals, alliance rituals...). A recent, yet growing body of literature highlights the potential benefits of singing on well-being and health (Clift, Hancox, Staricoff and Whitmore, 2008). This evidence shows singing as an activity with several psychological, physical and social components that can interact and contribute to feelings of well-being and impact on the immune system. However, Bailey and Davidson (2002, 2005), highlight an *elitist* view of music-making that is predominant in Western world. According to these authors, this musical elitism present in the western societies, not only views musical ability as being limited to a talented minority, it also restricts the majority of the population to being procurer rather than producer of music. This idea of an elitism in western cultures was first proposed by Blacking (1973) in his ethnographic work with the Venda people in South Africa. In his work, Blacking (1973) noted that it is likely that there are strong social inhibitions in western societies that prevent musical behaviours from being exhibited as freely as in non-westernized societies.

If this musical elitism is present in our society, then it is possible that it influences our engagement with singing activities. If this is indeed the case, then it is possible that a majority of individuals in the western and westernized societies are missing out on an activity that can benefit their well-being and even health.

### Aims

This study aimed to explore how our attitudes towards singing influence our engagement with this musical activity. Specifically, we hoped to see how people's opinions on their own voices, their own singing, singing in general and the general singing voice influenced their likelihood of singing in public or private, in formal or informal settings and in group or on their own. We suggested that the majority of our respondents share an elitist attitude towards singing. We

expected this attitude to impact negatively on their engagement with singing and this impact to be more pronounced when asked about public, formal and solo singing.

### Method

This was an exploratory study where a sample of one hundred and fifty-five participants (mean age=35.12,  $SD=12.33$ , range=21-79, 112 females, 53 singers) completed an online survey containing questions related to their views on singing and singing behaviours. Our respondents originated from twelve European nationalities, two north American nationalities, two south American nationalities, one African nationality, one southeast Asian nationality, and three Oceania nationalities. Indian nationality was also present.

### Results

There seems to be an ambivalent feeling towards singing with a majority of respondents rating the activity as something they highly enjoy, but are reluctant to do in front of others. Elitist views of singing were significantly different between singers and non-singers, with non-singers having stronger elitist views of singing. Non-singers also rated their own singing voice and singing in a significantly more negative way than singers.

The less formal and public singing is, the more likely respondents reported engaging with this activity. Singing on their own in a private and informal setting was the context where singing was more likely to occur. This was followed by, in order of more likely to less likely, singing with others in private and informal context, singing with others in a public informal context, singing with others in a private formal context, singing with others in a public formal context, singing solo in a private formal context, singing solo in a public but informal context, and finally, respondents were less likely to engage in singing on their own in a public formal context.

Elitist views of singing had a negative impact on engagement with singing activities. The only context in which this impact was not significant was solo private and informal singing (e.g., singing in the shower).

## Conclusions

In a research context where singing is increasingly becoming focus of scientific attention, the implications of these findings are considerable. Approaches to research and promotion of singing for well-being may have to start taking these differences in attitudes between singers and non-singers into account. It seems people who don't already sing enjoy singing as much as people who do. However, the non-singers are more inhibited to engage with singing. A better understanding of the complexity of the situation would benefit not only recruitment of participants for research studies but also for health programs that focus on singing as a main vehicle for health and well-being promotion.

## Keywords

Singing Attitudes Elitism

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