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Implicit Theories of Singing Ability and Singing Self-Concept in the Collegiate Choral Hierarchy

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine collegiate implicit theories of singing ability (i.e., mindset toward singing) and singing self-concept within the collegiate choral hierarchy. A secondary purpose was to examine collegiate singers' desired ensemble placement and their reasons for wanting to stay in or leave their current ensemble. Participants (n = 142 collegiate singers across the choral hierarchy in two universities in the United States) completed a researcher-designed survey via Qualtrics with questions related to singing self-concept, mindset toward singing ability, and ensemble placement. There were three open-ended questions measuring responses to failure and future ensemble goals. There were no significant main effects for voice part, ensemble level, or year in school impacting singing self-concept or mindset. Participants' scores reflected a growth mindset and high self-concept regardless of voice part, year in school, or placement in the choral hierarchy. However, open-ended responses largely aligned with the characteristics of a fixed mindset, including internal attribution of ability and helpless responses. Singers who reported wanting to stay in their current ensemble cited musical satisfaction as the most common reason. Those who reported wanting to leave often mentioned the desire to be in a more prestigious group or to gain a larger variety of experiences by working with multiple conductors.

Keywords: *choral hierarchy, fixed mindset, growth mindset, implicit theory, self-concept*

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Carol Dweck's (1999, 2007) seminal work on implicit theories of intelligence has been translated into countless fields over the past few decades as individuals from all walks of life have sought to better understand the ways people make meaning of their abilities. In education, scholars have found that implicit theories, colloquially known as fixed and growth mindset, can influence the ways individuals respond to failure and approach challenges. Mindset is domain specific, and researchers have found a prevalence of fixed mindset attitudes toward musical ability in general (Hughes, 2015) and singing ability in particular (Sloboda et al., 2005).

Researchers have also explored self-concept, or the evaluative judgments people make about their abilities. Scholars in education have found that academic self-concept can influence individuals' motivation to continue elective study within a field (De Castella et al., 2013). In music education, Demorest and colleagues (2017) sought to understand the factors that predicted 6th grade students' singing ability and choir enrollment decisions. They discovered that musical self-concept, family musical engagement, and peer influence were the most important factors in future enrollment decisions and that musical self-concept was a unique predictor of actual singing ability. Similarly, Sichivitsa (2003) found that musical self-concept and value of music predicted collegiate students' decisions to enroll in choral ensembles. Taken together, these findings indicate that musical self-concept is an important factor in singers' decisions to continue enrollment in academic choirs. Although Dweck (1999) proposed that implicit theories and self-concept were not related, Robins and Pals (2002) found that mindset can predict changes to self-concept over time. Therefore, there may be utility in examining both constructs alongside one another for more comprehensive understanding.

Competitive practices have also been shown to impact choral singers' mindset and singing self-concept. Adams (2022) examined competitive structures in a secondary choral program and found that success (defined as advancement in the choral hierarchy) was related to greater prevalence of a growth mindset and higher self-concept. High school singers in the top ensemble of a competitive choral hierarchy displayed a growth mindset toward singing ability more frequently than those in lower ensembles. However, failure to attain a position in the top ensemble appeared to have a deleterious effect on singing self-concept. Participants in the lower ensembles reported a lower singing self-concept than those in the top ensemble. The effect was most pronounced among singers in the second-tier treble ensemble who displayed lower singing self-concept, greater prevalence of fixed mindset, and more frequent negative social comparison than other participants. Interestingly, treble participants reported a higher self-concept than tenor-bass singers regardless of ensemble placement at the middle school level, but at the high school level, self-concept scores aligned with the hierarchy (i.e., higher self-concept for singers in the top groups) rather than voice part. Across the hierarchy, students in the top ensemble engaged in negative thoughts toward singers in lower ensem-

bles, and students in the lower ensembles adopted those views toward themselves. These findings indicate that the use of a competitive choral hierarchy at the secondary level was detrimental to both the mindset and self-concept of singers who were not successful in the audition process and were assigned to the lower ensembles.

It is possible that competitive choral structures at the collegiate level have a similar effect on singing self-concept and implicit theories of singing ability. Major and Dakon (2016) explored attitudes within the collegiate choral hierarchy and found that members of the top group harbored feelings of superiority toward members of lower ensembles. In a follow-up study, Dakon and Major (2017) found that singers in the lower ensemble experienced negative feelings and desired to audition out of their current group and into the ensemble they viewed as more elite. These studies established general negative impacts to choral ensemble culture and attitudes due to the use of a competitive hierarchy. However, these researchers did not directly examine singing self-theories. In order to fully understand the impact of these constructs, there is a need for continued investigation regarding individual views surrounding implicit theories of singing ability and singing self-concept rather than collective views in the aggregate.

Collegiate ensembles are often sorted through a competitive audition process and include music education majors who will go on to teach choral music. Scholars in the field of music education have urged in-service teachers to cultivate a growth mindset in their secondary students (Adams, 2019, 2021; Weidner & Skolar, 2021). The experiences that preservice teachers have both in their secondary and post-secondary choral settings can shape the views they hold about their own singing abilities and the singing abilities of others, which will in turn be shared with their own students. Therefore, it is advantageous to understand the ways in which the choral hierarchy structure might impact their self-concept and implicit theories related to singing.

The purpose of this study was to examine collegiate singers' implicit theories of singing ability (i.e., mindset toward singing) and singing self-concept within the collegiate choral hierarchy. Research questions included:

1. To what degree does mindset about singing ability differ by voice part, year in school, and across the collegiate choral hierarchy?

2. To what degree does self-concept about singing ability differ by voice part, year in school, and across the collegiate choral hierarchy?

3. How do collegiate singers in a choral hierarchy predict they would respond to a singing-related failure experience?

4. What reasons do collegiate singers provide for wanting to stay or leave their current ensemble across a choral hierarchy?

Method

Participants

We recruited singers from two large, comprehensive Tier 1 research universities in the Southwest United States. Each university had a choral ensemble hierarchy that included at least three choirs: a top auditioned choir, a midlevel choir, and an entry level choir. There were 84 respondents in University A and 58 in University B. Participants included freshmen (n = 47), sophomores (n = 33), juniors (n = 26), seniors (n = 32), and graduate students (n = 4). They were assigned to sing soprano (n = 34), alto (n = 42), tenor (n = 25), or bass (n = 41), and they majored in music performance (n = 26), music education (n = 38), other music (n = 32), or non-music (n = 46).

Design and Procedure

After securing IRB approval, we distributed a questionnaire to participants (via Qualtrics) with questions related to singing self-concept, mindset toward singing ability, and ensemble placement. We adapted the questionnaire from previous research with secondary choral singers (Adams, 2022). Adams (2022) adapted the mindset toward singing ability scale from Dweck's (1999) implicit theories of intelligence scale, which included seven 5-point Likert-type scale items as well as two open-ended response items designed to measure predicted "response to failure" (Dweck, 1999, p. 6). The open-ended response items were adapted from Dweck's failure-response items to be singing specific (i.e., not doing well at a choir audition and during a solo performance). Adams generated the singing self-concept portion using previously validated musical self-concept scales (Hash, 2017; Morin et al., 2016; Vispoel, 1995). The singing self-concept scale included ten 5-point Likert-type scale responses. We used the same ten self-concept items and seven mindset items as Adams (2022). To ensure the failure-response items were more appropriate for collegiate-level singers, we changed the second failure response context from a solo performance at a solo-and-ensemble festival to auditioning for a solo in choir. Following those two scenarios, we asked participants to share what they would think, how they would feel, and what they would do next (Adams, 2022; Dweck, 1999). The final question was to best describe their goal for ensemble placement—wanting to stay or wanting to leave—and their motivations for either staying or leaving their current ensemble. Participants also provided demographic information, including voice part, major, and year in school. We wondered whether students who were younger (closer to their high school experience) would respond similarly to older students who were more ensconced in the university choral culture. The entire survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Findings

Quantitative Results

Prior to data analyses, we eliminated outliers and checked for normality and equality of variances (using Levene's test, $p > .05$). We converted ensemble names to dummy variables

to reflect the hierarchical structure of top auditioned choir, mid-level choir, and entry-level choir. If a singer belonged to two different ensembles, we classified them in the choir ranked higher in that school's hierarchy. With ten questions related to self-concept on five-point Likert-type scales, the range of possible scores was 10–50. Ranges for the seven mindset questions were 7–35.

In order to answer our first two research questions, we conducted two ANOVAs with three between-subjects independent variables (voice part, ensemble level, and year in school). There were no significant main effects for voice part, $F(3, 94) = .26$, $p > .05$, ensemble level, $F(2, 94) = .36$, $p > .05$, or year in school, $F(5, 94) = 1.88$, $p > .05$ impacting singing self-concept. Mindset scores were likewise not significantly different by voice part, $F(3, 94) = .25$, $p > .05$, ensemble level, $F(2, 94) = .84$, $p > .05$, or year in school, $F(5, 94) = .61$, $p > .05$. Neither were there any statistically significant interactions between variables for either construct.

Ratings for self-concept were similar for singers in the top group ($M = 41.71$, $SE = .83$), singers in the mid-level group ($M = 40.16$, $SE = .78$), and singers in the entry-level group ($M = 41.00$, $SE = .93$). Responses for mindset were also similar for singers in the top group ($M = 26.17$, $SE = .76$), singers in the mid-level group ($M = 27.02$, $SE = .68$), and singers in the entry-level group ($M = 28.80$, $SE = .67$). See Table 1 for complete responses by ensemble, year in school, and voice part.

Table 1
Means and Standard Errors for Ensemble, Voice Part and Year in School

Variable	Self-Concept Mean (*SE*)	Mindset Mean (*SE*)
Soprano	42.11 (*1.03*)	26.17 (*.76*)
Alto	39.30 (*.89*)	27.02 (*.68*)
Tenor	41.76 (*1.23*)	28.80 (*.67*)
Bass	40.75 (*.85*)	27.36 (*.68*)
Freshman	39.89 (*.92*)	26.57 (*.62*)
Sophomore	41.39 (*.94*)	28.93 (*.61*)
Junior	41.84 (*.84*)	26.92 (*.90*)
Senior	41.12 (*1.06*)	27.03 (*.75*)
Graduate Student	43.00 (*4.35*)	23.66 (*4.33*)
Top-Auditioned Ensemble	41.71 (*.83*)	26.17 (*.76*)
Mid-Level Ensemble	40.16 (*.78*)	27.02 (*.68*)
Entry-Level Ensemble	41.00 (*.93*)	28.80 (*.67*)

Open-Ended Responses

To address our third and fourth research questions, we used open coding (Saldaña, 2016) to code participants' predicted response to failure and reasons for staying or leaving their current ensemble. We independently created codebooks for the ensemble placement items. For response to failure items, we used a codebook from Adams's (2022) study which was derived from the literature on failure attribution and response, and added codes as needed. We began coding deductively and inductively, then met to discuss and refine the codebooks. Next, we coded 10% of responses together and finalized the codebooks. Finally, we coded another 20% of responses independently and calculated intercoder reliability by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of codes. We determined the resulting intercoder reliability of 80.87% to be acceptable (Fraenkel et al., 2012) and proceeded to code the remaining open-ended response items.

Research Question 3: Response to Failure

Participants responded to two open-ended items derived from previous studies (Adams, 2022; Dweck, 1999) to measure what Dweck (1999) referred to as "response to failure" (p. 6). After reading two prompts about potential failure scenarios when auditioning for the top choir or for a solo, participants reported what they would think and feel (attribution) and what they would do next (response). After coding, we calculated code frequencies by determining the percentage of participants who provided at least one response with the corresponding code. From our coding, four categories emerged: attribution, interpretation, response, and false growth mindset. *Attribution* codes referred to the ways in which respondents attributed the failure. The *interpretation* category included responses wherein participants were explaining the failure. Comments related to how the participants would respond following the failure were organized into the *response* category. Finally, *false growth mindset* represented open-ended responses that were consistent with the characteristics of a fixed mindset provided by participants who scored in the growth mindset range. For a code frequency of response to failure by ensemble placement, see Table 2 on the next page. For the full codebook with definitions and example quotes, see Appendix A on pages 105–107.

Attribution

Overall, participants most frequently attributed the failure to internal factors (50.70%). The most frequent internal attribution was to ability (30.99%; e.g., "that I am not a good singer," Mid, mindset score 18) followed by effort (16.90%; e.g., "I would be upset with myself and feel as though I could've worked harder," Mid, mindset score 31). A smaller percentage of respondents attributed the failure to external factors (15.49%), most commonly by blaming others (12.68%; e.g., "I would think the conductor is too mean," Top, mindset score 28). These findings were consistent regardless of ensemble placement. However, participants in the entry-level ensemble attributed the failure to ability and effort equally (22.72% each)

Table 2

Response to Failure by Ensemble Placement

		Total		Entry (n = 44)		Mid (n = 60)		Top (n = 38)	
Category	**Code**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Attribution	Internal	72	50.70%	20	45.45%	32	53.33%	20	52.63%
	Ability	44	30.99%	10	22.72%	20	33.33%	14	36.84%
	Effort	24	16.90%	10	22.72%	9	15.00%	5	13.16%
	External	22	15.49%	5	11.36%	7	11.67%	10	26.32%
	Blame	18	12.68%	3	6.82%	5	8.33%	10	26.32%
Interpretation	Fit	56	39.43%	12	27.27%	29	48.33%	15	39.47%
	Temporary	31	21.83%	9	20.45%	11	18.33%	11	28.94%
	Comparison	24	16.90%	8	18.18%	9	15.00%	7	18.42%
	Self-Worth	17	11.97%	2	4.45%	9	15.00%	6	15.79%
	Effort-shame	14	9.86%	5	11.36%	8	13.33%	1	2.63%
Response	Helpless	50	35.21%	14	31.81%	17	28.33%	19	50.00%
	Coping	49	34.51%	11	25.00%	21	35.00%	17	44.73%
	Practice	44	30.99%	13	29.54%	19	31.67%	12	31.58%
	Mastery	41	28.87%	14	31.81%	16	26.67%	11	28.95%
	Redemption	41	28.87%	12	27.27%	21	35.00%	8	21.05%

Note: Percentages calculated based on number of participants, not codes. Most participants' responses yielded more than one code. Therefore, percentages add to more than 100%.

while those in the mid-level and top ensembles attributed to ability (33.33% and 36.84%) at more than twice the rate of effort (15.00% and 13.16%). Additionally, some participants in the entry- and mid-level ensembles attributed failure to external factors such as luck or having a bad day, but all participants in the top ensemble who attributed failure to external factors blamed the conductor.

Interpretation

The most common reason participants gave for the potential failure was fit (39.43%; e.g., "That person has a great voice, they probably deserve it," Entry, mindset 29). Participants regularly explained the failure not as a reflection of their ability, but as the conductor wanting a specific sound. Although a few fit responses were present in the ensemble audition scenario, the vast majority of comments related to fit followed the solo audition prompt. Most participants explained that the failure would be painful, but represented temporary discomfort rather than an indication that they would never succeed (21.83%; e.g., "I'd be disappointed that it didn't go as planned but realistically that audition doesn't define me as a singer," Entry, mindset score 31). The third most common interpretation was others-comparison, or the belief that the participant was not as good as their fellow singers (16.90%; e.g., "It would make me think I am worse than my friends and that I am not as good of a singer as I thought," Top, mindset score 28). Others-comparison was the third most common response overall and in the entry-level and top ensembles. However, in the mid-level ensemble the third most common response was low self-worth (15.00%). These mid-level participants indicated that the failure experience would make them think that they were not good musicians and would lower their singing self-concept (e.g., "I would see myself as lower than others," Mid, mindset score 30).

Response

Overall, participants most frequently provided helpless responses to the failure scenario, which included quitting, not trying again, or ignoring the failure (35.21%; e.g., "While I know this is an opportunity to find ways to improve, I would probably just not audition in the future," Entry, mindset score 30). The second most common response was to engage in a coping mechanism, such as talking to a friend or indulging in a treat (34.51%; e.g., "I would call my mom," Mid, mindset score 22). Some participants (30.99%) indicated they would practice without providing a specific strategy. Others (28.87%) provided mastery responses, which included specific strategies they would utilize to improve their skill, or redemption responses, where they indicated they would immediately ask for an opportunity to redo the audition (e.g., "I would do mock auditions to be more comfortable in auditions. Then I'd reach out to the director to get feedback on what specifically I need to fix and improve on," Entry, mindset score 31). In the entry- and mid-level ensembles, helpless and mastery responses occurred in similar frequencies. However, helpless responses were much more frequent in the top ensemble at a rate of 50.00% compared to only 28.95% of participants in the top

ensemble providing mastery responses. Although coping responses were the second most frequent for the top ensemble, redemption requests were the second most common responses in both the entry- (27.27%) and mid-level (35.00%) groups (e.g., "I would ask for a second chance," Mid, mindset score 29).

False Growth Mindset

The frequency of ability attribution and helpless responses stands in contrast to the prevalence of growth mindset scores in the quantitative findings, possibly indicating a high occurrence of false growth mindset—a phrase coined by Dweck (2015) to describe the tendency to self-report a growth mindset while acting and thinking with a fixed mindset. For example, one participant in the top ensemble with a mindset score of 27 wrote "I would feel as though I'm not as good as I initially thought, I would feel like I couldn't do it (I base my confidence on my accomplishments)." Another participant from the entry-level ensemble with a mindset score of 35—the highest possible score—engaged in others-comparison and blamed their lack of ability for the failure: "It feels like my musicianship doesn't stack up to others." Similarly, a participant in the mid-level group with a strong growth mindset score of 32 wrote, "I'd feel like I'm not a good singer and would doubt my abilities. I'd feel discouraged and compare myself to my friends. I'd feel like my time and energy was wasted and feel discouraged from auditioning again." This written response indicates others-comparison, a lowered sense of self-worth, shame in having expended effort, and a likelihood of quitting in the future, all characteristics more associated with a fixed mindset.

Research Question 4: Stayers and Leavers

A majority of singers (n = 106, 74.65%) indicated a desire to stay in their current ensemble ("stayers"), and others (n = 36, 25.35%) responded that they'd prefer to leave to a different (higher: 34, lower: 2) ensemble ("leavers"). Among the stayers, 36 were in the top ensemble, 37 in a mid-level group, and 33 in an entry-level group. Overall, stayers most frequently cited their reasons for staying as musical satisfaction (44.34%; e.g., "I like to sing, it adds to my joy," Entry) followed by the supportive culture of the ensemble (26.41%; e.g., "Kind community not as cut-throat and exclusive," Mid), their love of the conductor (26.41%; e.g., "[Dr. X] is the best conductor I've ever had, he's like a father figure and mentor," Top), and being able to perform repertoire at their desired difficulty level (25.47%; e.g., "difficult level of music that pushes me," Top). Although musical satisfaction was the most frequent reason for staying across all levels, the second and third most frequent reasons varied by ensemble. For example, the second most frequent reason respondents in the top ensemble cited was repertoire difficulty (41.67%), but the second most common response in the entry-level ensembles was a degree requirement (24.24%; e.g., "I need 4 ensemble credits for my degree"). For a code frequency of stayers by ensemble placement, see Table 3 on the next page.

A smaller number of participants (n = 36) indicated a preference to leave their current ensemble. Out of these 36 "leavers," 2 were in the top ensemble, 23 in the mid-level group,

Table 3

"Stayers" Code Frequency by Placement

	Stay Total (*n* = 106)		Stay Entry (*n* = 33)		Stay Mid (*n* = 37)		Stay Top (*n* = 36)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Conductor	28	26.41%	5	15.15%	13	35.13%	10	27.78%
Excellence of Peers	9	8.49%	0	0.00%	1	2.70%	8	22.22%
Musical Satisfaction	47	44.34%	15	45.45%	13	35.13%	19	52.78%
Repertoire Difficulty	27	25.47%	2	6.06%	10	27.03%	15	41.67%
Social	21	19.81%	6	18.18%	9	24.32%	6	16.67%
Supportive Culture	28	26.41%	7	21.21%	11	29.73%	10	27.78%
Prestige	7	6.60%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	7	19.44%
Scheduling/Degree Requirement	14	13.21%	8	24.24%	5	13.51%	1	2.78%

Note: Percentages calculated based on number of participants, not codes. Most participants' responses yielded more than one code. Therefore, percentages add to more than 100%.

and 11 in the entry-level choir. Overall, leavers most frequently cited the prestige of a higher ensemble (41.67%; "Because [Top Choir] is really good and I want to be the best," Mid) and the desire for varied experience (27.78%; e.g., "I only want to move out so that I can work with all the different conductors [University] has to offer. I want as much experience as possible," Mid) as reasons for leaving. The third and fourth most frequently given reasons were the desire for musical growth (25.00%; e.g., "I want to grow as a singer," Entry) and wish for more difficult repertoire (22.22%; e.g., "I really want to engage with more difficult music," Mid). The two leavers in the top ensemble cited the desire for a varied experience (50.00%) and wanting to leave a toxic and competitive culture (50.00%). The most frequently given reason for midlevel leavers was wanting to experience other ensembles and the prestige of the top group (39.13% each) followed by the desire for more difficult repertoire (21.74%). In the entry-level group, most leavers said they wanted to achieve the prestige of a higher ensemble (54.54%) and experience a higher level of musical growth (45.45%). Participants in the entry- and mid-level choirs spoke of the prestige of the top ensemble both in terms of the top choirs' quality and their own perception that they were too good for their current ensemble. For example, one participant wrote, "I feel as if the ensemble I'm currently in does not match my own skill level. The reason I feel this way is because I received a call back to [the top two choirs], but somehow ended up inside of the lowest placed choir." For code frequencies of leavers by ensemble, see Table 4 on the next page.

Table 4

"Leavers" Code Frequency by Placement

	Leave Total (*n* = 36)		Leave Entry (*n* = 11)		Leave Mid (*n* = 23)		Leave Top (*n* = 2)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Prestige	15	41.67%	6	54.54%	9	39.13%	0	0.00%
Varied Experience	10	27.78%	0	0.00%	9	39.13%	1	50.00%
Musical Growth	9	25.00%	5	45.45%	4	17.39%	0	0.00%
Repertoire Difficulty	8	22.22%	3	27.27%	5	21.74%	0	0.00%
Different Voicing	5	13.89%	2	18.18%	3	13.04%	0	0.00%
Culture	2	5.55%	1	9.09%	0	0.00%	1	50.00%

Note: Percentages calculated based on number of participants, not codes. Most participants' responses yielded more than one code. Therefore, percentages add to more than 100%.

Discussion

In our first two research questions, we sought to explore whether self-concept and mindset scores differed for collegiate choral singers based on voice part, year in school, or placement in the choral hierarchy. Overall, participants in this study reported high self-concept and mindset scores regardless of these factors. These findings align with previous researchers' assertions that singers with high self-concept scores (Demorest et al., 2017; Sichivitsa, 2003) and growth mindset toward singing ability (Adams, 2022) are more likely to persist in choral singing. Adams (2022) found that treble singers reported a higher self-concept than did tenor-bass singers at the middle school level, and singers in the top ensemble at the high school level had higher self-concept and stronger growth mindset scores than singers in the lower ensemble. It could be the case that high school singers with a lower self-concept or fixed mindset are less likely to enroll in a choral ensemble at the collegiate level, leading to stable mindset and self-concept scores across the collegiate choral hierarchy. More research is needed with singers who discontinue singing to better understand this phenomenon.

What is also not clear is whether the current study's non-significant main effects among ensemble levels is a function of the set up for conductors. In the collegiate settings we stud-

ied, there were multiple conductors, each leading a different ensemble. Contrastingly, most senior high schools have a single choir teacher for all levels of the hierarchy. Because some participants commented on the desire to learn from multiple teachers and perspectives, it is possible that collegiate singers' goals are different than those of high school singers. Additionally, conductors in charge of multiple choirs at the same school might inadvertently send a message that one group is considered more valuable than others.

Neither voice part nor year in school significantly impacted mindset and singing self-concept scores. Perhaps these factors did not impact scores because participants majoring in music had already attained a certain status by admittance into competitive university music programs. And with 47 singers majoring in something outside of music, those singers were likely highly motivated to pursue an elective like choir, an indication that they were both accomplished at singing and could continue to grow. Although Adams (2022) found differences in singing self-concept by voice part, participants in this study did not evidence these differences. It might be the case that there is a unique psychological interplay with students' experience with the competitive choral hierarchy and the adolescent voice change. Further research is needed to understand whether secondary school singers' beliefs about or experiences with the adolescent voice change influence how they engage with the choral hierarchy.

Per our third research question, we explored how collegiate choral singers would respond to a potential failure scenario. About half of respondents attributed the failure scenarios to internal factors, and it was more common for participants to provide the internal attribution of ability rather than effort. Additionally, helpless responses were more common than mastery responses. Both findings are more in line with fixed mindset. In her original use of the implicit theories scale, Dweck (1999) categorized a mean score of 3.0 (or summed scores of 7–21) as entity theorists (or fixed mindset). In this study, only 14 participants scored in that fixed mindset range. However, many participants who scored in the growth mindset range provided responses to the failure scenarios that were more consistent with the characteristics of a fixed mindset, including attribution to ability rather than effort, comparing themselves negatively to others, reporting a negative and sometimes permanent impact on their self-worth, and displaying helpless responses to failure such as giving up or never trying again. Dweck (2015) noted that, as the principles associated with mindset became more prevalent in schools, students who had been exposed to the idea might provide answers consistent with a growth mindset because they see it as the more socially acceptable view. However, their actions might not align with their professed beliefs. Adams's (2022) high school and middle school participants displayed a false growth mindset toward singing ability. It is possible that the surface-level approach to mindset in schools has generated a tendency for individuals to provide what they view to be the "correct" answer to mindset scales while still holding a fixed view of their abilities. Given the inconsistency of results by method, it might be advantageous to shift the ways in which we examine implicit theories of singing ability to include more action-oriented items rather than only beliefs about ability, or to focus exclusively on qualitative methods that provide richer, more nuanced data.

When interpreting the failure scenario and what it meant for their ability and future sing-

ing, 39.43% of all respondents interpreted the failure as an issue of fit—their voice was simply not the sound the conductor was seeking. Anecdotally, we know that this reason is one that conductors frequently provide to console singers following a failed audition. It is possible that singers have had conductors, peers, or family use this type of logic in the past to explain their own failure situations and have internalized it to make meaning of future failures. While "I wasn't the right fit" might sometimes be true, this interpretation could also serve as a thought-terminating cliché (Lifton, 1961)—a "highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrase, easily memorized, and easily expressed" (p. 429) that serves to ease cognitive dissonance and halt further inquiry. If so, this thinking could stop singers from examining the actual cause of failure and result in a helpless response. If the issue was only fit, then there is nothing they can do about it. In these scenarios, self-worth can be protected, but potentially at the expense of future development and growth. If conductors want to facilitate a true growth mindset in singers, it might be useful to provide more detailed and accurate feedback following auditions rather than leaving singers to interpret the reason for an audition outcome on their own.

Although response to failure scenarios represent projected responses, it is likely in this study that all participants had experienced at least one of these failure scenarios in the past. In particular, participants in the entry- and mid-level ensembles had likely experienced a failure to audition into the top ensemble at the collegiate level—the first failure scenario for this study. Therefore, it is likely that failure responses in this study represented not just projected failure responses to a hypothetical scenario but reflective responses to how they had actually reacted to and interpreted a recent failure. It might be the case that participants in the top ensemble displayed a higher frequency of helpless responses because, unlike the entry- and mid-level participants, they had most recently experienced a successful audition into the top ensemble and therefore were reporting a forecasted response to losing their membership in the top ensemble rather than simply being denied access. Both stayers and leavers cited prestige as a reason for wanting to be part of the top ensemble. Therefore, for members of the top ensemble, a projected failure to audition into the group represented rejection from their social group and loss of prestige.

Finally, we examined the reasons participants provided for wanting to either stay in or leave their current ensemble. In the entry-level and top ensembles, musical satisfaction was the most frequently cited reason for staying. In the entry-level group, participants cited musical satisfaction (45.45%) at nearly twice the rate of the second-most common response, scheduling/degree requirement (24.24%). In the top ensemble, musical satisfaction received over half of responses with repertoire difficulty receiving 41.67% of responses, a difference of over 10%. However, in the mid-level group, musical satisfaction received the same number of responses as admiration for the conductor. This finding might indicate the importance of the conductor's role in facilitating a place of belonging for singers in the mid-level group, which aligns with Dakon and Major's (2017) observation that mid-level singers suffer from negativity brought on by frustration from not making the top ensemble.

Participants who wanted to leave the entry-level ensemble most frequently cited the desire to be part of a group they perceived as more prestigious than their current group or to be in an environment where they could experience more musical growth. Prestige appeared as a reason for leaving the mid-level ensemble as well as for staying in the top ensemble. Researchers (Dakon & Major, 2017; Major & Dakon, 2016) similarly found that collegiate choral singers in mid-level ensembles frequently cited the prestige of the top group as a reason for their desire to audition out of their current choir. While there could be advantages to having a group perceived as prestigious, there might also be drawbacks. One participant indicated a desire to leave the top ensemble because they felt the culture was toxic and ultra-competitive. Another who wanted to stay in the top ensemble wrote that they were relieved to be in the group because their friends had treated them differently when they were in the mid-level group. They wrote that being in the top group meant they experienced "less weird cliqueyness from my friends that were in it when I wasn't." They went on to say that they still witness people in the top group looking down on those in the mid-level group and said "it's annoying when people do that and I try not to." These sentiments echo Dakon and Major's (2017) findings that members of the top ensemble viewed singers in lower ensembles negatively. Clearly, ensemble culture plays a large role in shaping singers' perceptions of their value. Future researchers might consider exploring strategies that students and conductors can use for reducing haughty behaviors like those referenced by some of our participants.

Although prestige was an important factor for mid-level leavers, it received the same number of responses as the desire for a varied experience. Of the two participants from the top ensemble who expressed a desire to leave, one reasoned that they wanted to experience other ensembles and work with other conductors while at the university. Anecdotally, we have noticed that it is not uncommon for some singers—particularly tenors and basses—to be placed in the top ensemble in their first year at a university. Placing a student in the top ensemble during their first year and presumably leaving them in that ensemble for the entirety of their collegiate career reduces their opportunities to experience a variety of conductor-teachers. According to the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM, 2025), music education majors should, throughout their undergraduate career, be enrolled in ensembles that are "varied both in size and nature" (p. 127). It is especially important for preservice teachers to have time in multiple ensembles as they are learning about and reflecting on pedagogy. It might be advantageous for collegiate conductors to reserve the top choral ensemble for upper-level students to allow all singers a variety of experiences during their collegiate singing career.

There are several limitations to this study. Participants represented only two schools within the same state. Future researchers could examine more schools with a variety of hierarchical structures, sizes, and audition approaches. For example, at both of the schools in this study, all students who major in music audition for the top ensemble and then are placed through a trickle-down process into their ensemble. At other schools, students might audition only for the ensemble into which they would like to be placed, providing students with more agency. It could be useful to examine the experiences of singers in a variety of hierarchy contexts

and processes. Additionally, the participants in this study had all elected to sing in a choral ensemble at the collegiate level. A study examining the musical self-theories of the larger collegiate student population, regardless of elective musical activity, could provide a more detailed view of collegiate self-theories toward singing. Finally, future investigations might consider collegiate singers' past experiences with the choral hierarchy. Some singers might first engage with a hierarchical structure as young as middle school, but singers from smaller schools might not experience a choral hierarchy until they enter the university setting. It is possible that their interpretation of the hierarchy and the audition process could vary depending on when they first enter the structure. We recommend further investigation into factors that impact singers' perceptions across the choral hierarchy, with particular attention to rich data exploring their experiences, barriers to success, and potential access concerns limiting lifelong music making.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined singers' experiences within the collegiate choral hierarchy. Unlike explorations of self-theories at the secondary level (Adams, 2022), participants in this study did not display differences in self-concept or implicit theories across voice type or ensemble placement. However, similar to Adams's (2022) findings, open-ended responses revealed patterns more in line with a fixed mindset despite quantitative results indicated a prevalence of growth mindset. These findings highlight the potential limitations of traditional measures of implicit theories and the need for future investigations to employ more nuanced approaches to self-theories. Results of this study also emphasize the need for choral conductor-teachers to provide actionable feedback following auditions, cultivate a positive ensemble culture, and emphasize the value of all ensembles across the hierarchy. Conductors at the collegiate level might also consider the potential negative impacts of allowing first-year students to move straight to the top of a hierarchical structure. Continued investigations into singers' experiences with the choral hierarchy could help conductor-teachers create choral environments that are conducive to both musical growth and positive self-theories.

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Appendix A: Codebooks

Table 1

Response to Failure Codebook

Category	Code	Definition	Sample Quote
Attribution	Internal-Ability	Internal attribution specifically related to ability.	"I would think I'm not a good singer"
	Internal-Effort	Internal attribution specifically related to effort.	"I must not have practiced enough"
	External	Caused by external factors, such as luck, task difficulty, or someone else	"It was just a bad day"
	Others-Blame	External attribution specifically related to blaming someone else.	"The conductor might just not like me"
Interpretation	Fit	Interprets the decision as being based on looking for a specific sound that is simply different from the singer's voice.	"The conductor wants a certain timbre and my voice just wasn't the best fit."
	Temporary	Sees the outcome as temporary rather than permanent; refers to opportunities to try again.	"I'm just not ready yet. I'll do better next year."
	Others-Comparison	Compares the self to others negatively.	"I'm not as good as my friends."
	Low Self-Worth	Comments specifically denigrating their own ability level.	"I'm not a good singer."
	Effort-shame	Mentions disappointment or shame specifically tied to the fact that they worked hard and still failed.	"I'm disappointed because I worked so hard."
	Social	Concerns about what other might think of them.	"The conductor will be disappointed in me." "My friends will leave me."
	Pride	Comments related to pride in their work regardless of the outcome.	"I wouldn't care much, as long as I gave my best effort, I know I gave it my all."

Continued on the next page

	Permanent	Sees the outcome as reflective of their ability in a permanent way. No hope for improving or achieving the goal later.	"I'll never be good enough."
Response	Helpless	Comments related to helpless responses, such as quitting, giving up, or believing there is nothing they can do to impact the outcome.	"I'm not going to get in and I can't do anything about it."
	Coping	Helpless with a specific mention of a way to try to feel better or numb any negative feelings.	"I would talk to my mom."
	Practice	Mentions practice, trying again, or working harder, but without specific strategies.	"I would try harder next time."
	Mastery	Specific strategy mentioned.	"I would take voice lessons to improve."
	Redemption	Ask for a second chance or work to prove my value.	"I would work really hard in the ensemble I'm in so the conductor sees that I could be an asset to the higher ensemble."
	Happy for peers	Celebrating success of others.	"I would be happy for the person who got the solo."
	Jealous of Peers	Jealous of success of others.	"I would be jealous that my friends are in choir together and I'm in a different ensemble."

Table 2

Stayers and Leavers Codebook

Category	Code	Definition	Sample Quote
Stayers	Conductor	Comments related to feelings about the conductor or attributes of the conductor.	"I love Dr. X!"
	Excellence of Peers	Comments related to the musicianship level of other singers in the choir.	"The people who sing with me are great musicians."

Continued on the next page

	Musical Satisfaction	Wanting to continue to sing with the ensemble because they derive musical satisfaction from the experience.	"I love singing and this choir is fun."
	Repertoire Difficulty	Repertoire is correct level of challenge for singer's needs.	"This repertoire challenges me" or "I don't want to do more challenging repertoire."
	Social	Finding social connection and fulfillment in the ensemble.	"I want to be here with my friends."
	Supportive Culture	Feelings related to a positive ensemble culture.	"This choir is a supportive community."
	Prestige	Wanting to stay in the ensemble because of its reputation as a high-quality ensemble.	"This is the best choir at X School!"
	Scheduling/Degree Requirement	Comments related to either convenience of scheduling and/or obligations to perform in an ensemble for the degree.	"I have to be in a choir for my degree" "This choir fits best in my schedule.
Leavers	Prestige	Wanting to leave the current ensemble to move into a more prestigious ensemble.	"I want to be in the premiere ensemble."
	Varied Experience	Desire to learn from different professors, sing with different peers, or explore new kinds of repertoire.	"I don't want to sing in the same choir all four years."
	Musical Growth	Indicating that the current ensemble in general is not challenging enough for their current level.	"I can grow more as a musician in a higher ensemble."
	Repertoire Difficulty	Indicating that the repertoire in their current ensemble is not at the appropriate level of difficulty.	"I want to sing more challenging repertoire" or "I want to sing easier repertoire"
	Different Voicing	Desire to sing with a differently voiced ensemble, for example switching from a treble choir to a mixed-voice ensemble.	"I want to be in a mixed choir" "I miss singing in a treble choir"
	Culture (Negative)	Comments related to toxic or negative ensemble culture.	"It doesn't feel good to be in this choir."