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Pilot Study: Investigating the Racialized Habits of Global-Majority Professional Singers in Germany

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BMPF 7008 | Work Based Learning Project

VOICE STUDY CENTRE

Introduction

“When something becomes part of the habitual, it ceases to be an object of perception” (Ahmed, 2006; p. 131)



Context

- Germany is home to 83 state funded theatres (Siebenhaar and Müller, 2019).
- Over 12,000 performance opportunities in the 2023-24 season (Operabase, 2024)
- Attractive working conditions create incentive for international singers to come to Germany (Riva, 2023).



Defining RCS & PoGM/GM

People of the Global-Majority

People of the Global-Majority (PoGM or GM) refers to “people who identify as Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and or have been racialized as ethnic minorities” (Campbell-Stephens, 2020; p. 1)

Racialized Code Switching

Racialized Code Switching (RCS) is the conscious or unconscious, physical, behavioral or linguistic modification of self (Krasas, 2018), to safely navigate professional and social majority-white-spaces (Ngo, 2017).

Situating the Problem

Racism in Germany

- 47% of PoGM have direct experience with racial descrimination (Foroutan *et al.*, 2022; 2023).

- Racial discrimination is present in German music conservatories (Riva, 2023), but research is limited for singers at the professional level.

Racism and Wellbeing

- 35% of black UK musicians report a decline in mental health due to racism (Gittens et al., 2021).

- RCS may result in “Racial Battle Fatigue” (Quaye *et al.*, 2019).

No study focused on RCS was found using a similar sample population based in Germany

Situating the Problem

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There is a focus on what is happening, but not why it’s happening!

Defining Racialized Habits

Visibilities

- White perceptions of race often are project onto, and speak on behalf of PoGM (Yancy, 2008).
- Visibilities can impact behavioral dynamics between singers (Kolbe, 2021)

Practice

- Racialized habits are *sedimentated* into the perceptual lens of the body-subject (Merleau-Ponty, 2014; Ngo, 2017)
- Racialized expectations and habits can be reaffirmed and transmitted generationally (Kolbe, 2021)

Research Question

How do GM professional singers in Germany experience RCS and racialized habits in their workplaces?



Aims and Objectives

- Extend the knowledge of RCS within this target population
- Bring awareness of this phenomenon to the singing community
- Contribute toward equitable policies and practices

Learning Outcomes

- Gain a proficient understanding of IPA research processes
- Improve interpersonal and communications skills
- Develop an awareness of issuses specfic to GM singers
- Learn how to make informed recommendations



Methodology

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2006)

- Investigating Through the Lens of Individual Lived Experiences
- Finding Meaning Behind RCS Habits
- Lifting up Marginalized Voices

Anti-Racist Research Framework (Goings *et al.*, 2023)

- Acknowledges Researcher Positionality
- Integrates a Critical Framework to this Study
- Aims to Dismantle Racism

Embodied Phenomenology (Alcoff, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 2014; Ngo, 2017; Spatz, 2017)

- Centering the physical body and behavior as a lens to view racial phenomenon
- Maintaining a focus on habits as a foundation for identity

Critical Race Theory and Antiracist Research

Relevant Framework Principles
Goings et al., (2023)

1. “Racism is embeded in structures, policies, and procedures that maintain the status quo.”
2. “Antiracist research seeks to dismantle racism.”
3. “Antiracist research centers GM experiences.”
4. “A marginalized identity often intersects with other marginalized identities.”
5. “Antiraist research foregrounds the importance of self-knowledge.”

Critical Race Theory and Antiracist Research

Positionality & Increasing Rigor

- Challenges of Insider Research (Saidin, 2017)
- Developing a Positionality Statement as recommended by Goings *et al.* (2023)
- Reflexive Practice was Essential at Each Step of the Process (Goings *et al.* (2023)
- Positionality (identifiers that may affect data collection, interpretation, and participant interaction):
  - PoGM
  - Queer
  - Cis-Male
  - Lighter-Skinned PoGM
  - Native English Speaker
  - Non-Native German Speaker
  - Immigrant

Methods

Data Collection

- Semi-Structured Interviews (Vagle, 2018) via Zoom (Online Video Conferencing)
- Literature Review (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2006)

Population Sampling

- Purposive Sampling (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009)
  - Selection Criteria: Identify as PoGM, a professional singer, living and working in Germany
- 2-4 Participants (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2006)
- Recruited online within professional singer group forums (Facebook)



Analysis

01 **Reading and re-reading**
Immersing oneself in the original data.

02 **Initial noting**
Free association and exploring semantic content (e.g. by writing notes in the margin).

03 **Developing emergent themes**
Focus on chunks of transcript and analysis of notes made into themes.

04 **Searching for connections across emergent themes**
Abstracting and integrating themes.

05 **Moving to the next case**
Trying to bracket previous themes and keep open-minded in order to do justice to the individuality of each new case.

06 **Looking for patterns across cases**
Finding patterns of shared higher order qualities across cases, noting idiosyncratic instances.

07 **Taking interpretations to deeper levels**
Deepening the analysis by utilizing metaphors and temporal referents, and by importing other theories as a lens through which to view the analysis.



Charlick et al. (2016)

Participant Descriptions

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Racial Identity	Nationality	Voice Type	Other Marginalized Identities	Professional Context
David	41	Cis-Male	Black	American	Tenor	Bisexual/Queer, Overweight, Non-Native German Speaker	Western Classical Opera, Choral and Concert Repertoire
Joseph	35	Cis-Male	South Asian/Indian	Canadian	Tenor	Gay/Queer, Non-Native German Speaker	Contemporary Commercial Music, Musical Theater, Crossover-Classical
Sylvia	37	Cis-Female	Black	American	Soprano	Bisexual, Overweight, Non-Native German Speaker	Western Classical Opera, Choral and Concert Repertoire

Ethical Considerations

- UWTSD and Voice Study Centre Approval
- Informed Consent
- Data Protection
- Safe-guarding and Providing Resources for Support
- Reflexive Practice

Results

Hypervigilance



The Need for Community

White Allyship

Hypervigilance

"60/40"

"I think I always had this -- especially, when I'm in here around non-black people. I always have to. It's never gonna be a hundred percent authentic. It's gonna be maybe like 60% authentic and at 40% keeping that bubble, so that they don't judge you negatively. I hate that -- cause it only takes that one time, and then they don't wanna work with you anymore" ... "I can't trust, that I'm gonna be perceived the right way"

(David)

Internalizing RCS

"Whether it is dressing, or whether it is the way I present myself, or the accent, or whatever it is... I just feel, uh, it's a safe bubble that I've created to feel safer in an environment that actually rewards being North American versus Asian."

(Joseph)

Intersectionality

"When I first got here, it was, like, very much going to the gym, exercising, intermittent fasting -- to make myself more appealing to this audience, to make myself castable ... trying to make my body fit into this German [cis-female] beauty standard (laughs), is I guess the biggest, um, or like most prevalent form of this [RCS] throughout my time here so far."

(Sylvia)

The Need for Community

Knowing your Room

“There's a time and place, to show who you are here, and to put on a... or to be a character. Unfortunately, as black singers, we have to be a character a little bit longer, some of us... For me, that's what I do.”

(David)

Combatting Lonliness

“I think one of the main thing[s] is finding a group of people -- that are similar to you, or have similar identities, and experiences -- to actually talk about it because like they said, that actually really helps having a community to reflect on, because it can be quite a lonely space, especially when you are alone on it, and maybe sometimes your [white colleagues] band even doesn't understand”

(Joseph)

Vetting Opportunities

“I'm very hesitant to even reach out to agents, (pause) um... or not audition for things, or like, reach out to organizations that I don't have some other connection with, that someone hasn't recommended me to, essentially. So, the way I've dealt with it is trying to like take myself out of that equation” ... “I have not been in a space that was primarily white, that was really made, to like, designed with my comfort in mind. Let's just say”

(Sylvia)

White Allyship

Instrumentalizing Whiteness

“If I see one [white] person that I know, I can go talk to them and make sure that everyone sees my personality, see this (points to self), so that I don't appear threatening.”

(David)

Combatting Systemic and Institutional Conflicts

““Um, we can certainly point it out to white people, and white Germans, and people who are hiring and casting, but unless they are forced, or interested in making that a priority, they're not going to. Um, so I would say, um, you know... (pause) make as many contacts as you can before coming here.”

(Sylvia)

Discussion

The Cost of Hypervigilance

Redefining Safe Spaces

The Cost of Hypervigilance

- RCS is often invisible to white colleagues and must be pointed out (Sylvia)

- RCS may cause emotional, mental, and physical harm
  - Racial Battle Fatigue (Quaye *et al.*, 2019)
  - Long-term exposure to racism may deteriorate ability to RCS (MacIntyre, Zare and Williams, 2023)

- Hypervigilance is a **response** to white racialized habits (Ngo, 2017)

- The burden of finding a solution should not fall on PoGM singers

Reconstructing Safe Spaces

- GM singers experience consequences for not aligning with white racialized expectations (Kolbe, 2021; Riva, 2023)

- Emotional toil on educating white German colleagues on racialized issues

- White spaces are disrupted by black and brownness (Ahmed, 2006)
  - David's "60/40" behavior
  - Joseph playing into white expectations of Indian identity
  - Sylvia not fitting into Eurocentric beauty standards

- Embracing the discomfort of investigating White Racialized Habits (Lee, 2014; Ngo, 2017)

Limitations

- Single Interview Study
- Time
- Participants are all from North America

Future Considerations

- Long-term studies with a focus on identifying specific RCS behavior
- Evaluating the efficacy of existing safe-guarding policies for PoGM
- Long-term mixed-method studies on the effect of racialized hypervigilance, and racial burnout, on the professional singing voice

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