

INVESTIGATING EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERS SINGING TO THEIR INFANTS: IN SEARCH OF MEANINGS¹

Elizabeth Brown Vallim Brisola^{2 3}, Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6170-4130>

Vera Engler Cury², Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2721-3367>

ABSTRACT. Singing to infants has been a part of mothers' lives across the ages and in different cultures. The study of mothers singing to infants tends to focus on how and why songs facilitate mother-infant communication, identifying its effects and benefits for mother and infant. Little is known, however, about the mothers' subjective lived experience of singing. The present phenomenological study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge through a psychological comprehension, in search of meanings, through a Humanistic lens. Thirteen individual dialogical encounters were conducted with Brazilian and American first-time mothers with infants up to 18 months old. Comprehensive narratives based on those individual encounters were written and analyzed by the researcher, and a synthesis narrative was built revealing the structural elements of the experience of singing for mothers. The significant elements that emerged were: singing as a specific way of communicating with the child, allowing the establishment of an emotional bond, a way for the mothers to better know their infant, a means of recognizing themselves in the condition of being mothers, an interesting form of sharing personal values and family customs, and a creative form of expressing themselves. All these meanings enable the development of the mothers' potential personal growth. This article also presents a brief discussion of these results in the context of contemporary psychological scientific data and suggests further research paths.

Keywords: Phenomenological psychology; mother child relations; singing.

INVESTIGANDO EXPERIÊNCIA DE MÃES QUE CANTAM PARA SEUS BEBÊS: EM BUSCA DE SIGNIFICADOS

RESUMO. Cantar para bebês tem sido parte da vida de mães desde os tempos antigos e em diferentes culturas. O estudo do cantar das mães para seus bebês tende a focar como e por que as canções são facilitadoras da comunicação mãe-bebê, identificando seus efeitos e benefícios para a mãe e para o bebê. No entanto, sabe-se pouco a respeito da experiência subjetiva das mães ao cantarem. Esta pesquisa fenomenológica pretende contribuir para esse corpo de conhecimento por meio de uma compreensão psicológica, em busca de significados, a partir da psicologia humanista. Foram realizados encontros dialógicos individuais com 13 mães primíparas, brasileiras

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² Departamento de Psicologia, Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC), Campinas - SP, Brazil.

³ E-mail: ebrisola@bellsouth.net



e norte-americanas, com filhos de até 18 meses. Narrativas compreensivas baseadas nesses encontros foram redigidas e analisadas pela pesquisadora e uma narrativa síntese foi construída revelando os elementos estruturais da experiência de cantar das mães. Os elementos significativos que emergiram foram: um modo especial de se comunicarem com o filho, possibilitando a construção de um vínculo emocional, uma forma de melhor conhecer seu bebê, um modo de reconhecerem a si mesmas na condição de mães, uma maneira interessante de compartilhar valores pessoais e costumes familiares e um modo criativo de se expressarem. Todos estes significados possibilitam o desenvolvimento do potencial para crescimento pessoal das mães. Este artigo também pretende apresentar uma breve discussão dos resultados no contexto contemporâneo da ciência psicológica e sugere futuros caminhos de pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia fenomenológica; relações mãe-criança; canto.

INVESTIGANDO EXPERIENCIA DE MADRES QUE CANTAN PARA SUS BEBÉS: EN BUSCA DE SIGNIFICADOS

RESUMEN. Cantarles a los bebés ha sido parte de la vida de las madres desde tiempos remotos y en las diferentes culturas. El estudio del canto de las madres para sus bebés tiende a enfocar cómo y por qué las canciones son facilitadoras de la comunicación mamá-bebé, identificando sus efectos y beneficios para la madre y para el bebé. No obstante, se sabe poco al respecto de la experiencia subjetiva de la madre al cantar. Esta pesquisa fenomenológica pretende contribuir para este acervo de conocimientos a través de una comprensión psicológica, en busca de significados, a partir de la psicología humanista. Fueron realizados encuentros dialógicos individuales con 13 madres primíparas, brasileñas y norteamericanas, con hijos de hasta 18 meses. Narrativas comprensivas basadas en esos encuentros fueron redactadas y analizadas por la investigadora y una síntesis narrativa fue construida revelando los elementos estructurales de la experiencia de cantar de las madres. Los elementos significativos que surgieron fueron: un modo especial de comunicarse con el hijo, haciendo posible la construcción de un vínculo emocional, una forma de que la madre conozca mejor a su bebé, un modo de reconocerse a sí mismas en la condición de madres, una manera interesante de compartir valores personales y costumbres familiares y un modo creativo de expresarse. Todos estos significados hacen posible el desarrollo del potencial para el crecimiento personal de las madres. Este artículo también pretende presentar una breve discusión de los resultados en el contexto contemporáneo de la ciencia psicológica y sugiere futuros caminos de pesquisa.

Palabras clave: Psicología fenomenológica; relaciones madre-niño; canto.

Introduction

When a newborn arrives, a mother (and a father) is born and changes take place. A new routine is instilled, carrying with it additional needs and challenges. The mother's role usually involves distress and fatigue (Zelkowitz & Papageorgiou, 2012), as well as joy and satisfaction in the daily interaction with her infant. Set with the task of raising a child, a

mother is confronted with information and options as to how to deal with each situation. Pediatricians, family members, books, magazines, and her personal experience offer solutions and directions (Searle, 2010) that can be complementary or even contradictory.

One common practice is to sing to calm and soothe one's infant, to play, stimulate and accompany the many routine activities such as feeding, diaper changing and bathing. These musical experiences are fundamental to encourage, support and promote a healthy relationship between mother and infant (Creighton, 2011).

When singing, a mother communicates emotion, which is perceived through her voice, gestures, movements, and facial expressions (Trehub, Plantinga, & Russo, 2016). This musical communication stirs emotions in both mother and infant (Baker & Mackinlay, 2006) as they develop a bond.

The mother's emotional availability is essential to the development of their attachment and of the infant's health (Woodhouse, 2010). Hanley (2010) believes that the attention given to a mother's emotional needs is intimately related to her child's psychological health.

Maternal mental health has become an area of increasing concern for researchers, clinicians and public policy-makers since evidence has been accumulating that the consequences of perinatal mental illness are not limited to the suffering of the affected women, but extend to marital quality, the mother-infant relationship and the developing child (Zelkowitz & Papageorgiou, 2012, p. 205).

Although these authors are primarily concerned with maternal anxiety and depression, we believe their statement is also true when regarding mothers' mental *health* (as opposed to illness); and would venture to say that a woman's mental *health* also reflects on her relationship with her partner and infant. If singing has already been identified by research as a means of promoting mental health (Brisola & Cury, 2015), then it should be better understood and explored.

In this article, we present an overview of current knowledge about mothers singing to infants that contributes to its psychological understanding, especially in regards to the mother's experience. We then relate a phenomenological study that investigates the mother's subjective lived experience of singing, asking: what is it like for a mother to sing to her infant? What meanings does it convey? We aim to contribute to answering these questions by means of a psychological understanding of a mother's subjective day-to-day experience of singing to her infant, in search of its meanings. A brief discussion of the implications of these results and suggestions for further research paths are also presented.

Research about mothers singing to infants

The study of mothers singing to infants is a relatively new field that developed in the 1990's and is claimed by many different areas of science (nursing, music therapy, psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, midwifery, and linguistics, among others). Research studies convey interest in its acoustic characteristics, its impact on mothers and infants and their relationship, its use by families, music therapists, and music educators. They view it as a vehicle of communication (Creighton, 2011) and as a sociocultural enterprise (Ilari, Chen-Hafteck, & Crawford, 2013).

Articles addressing mothers singing emanate from a variety of countries, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Ireland, Italy, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical investigations are conducted in laboratories, Neonatal Intensive Care Units, and in a mothers' natural setting,

with populations that include healthy and depressive mothers, and children ranging from pre-partum to childhood.

What do these research studies say about mothers singing that contribute to a psychological understanding of the *mothers'* experience? They inform us that mothers have different abilities to perceive and react to their infants, responding according to their life experiences. A mother changes her way of singing as she interacts with and accompanies her infant, adapting songs to make them appropriate for the moment and help the infant to adjust. Her sensitivity and affection are transmitted by the sound of her voice, facial expressions, hands, body movement, and touch (Vlismas, Malloch, & Burnham, 2013).

Since the 1990s, studies already indicate that singing is a means of expressing emotions. De l'Etoile (2012), studying mothers with depressive symptoms, clarifies that there is emotional expression in a mother's singing, even if she is not conscious of it, and infants perceive this emotion. Baker and Mackinlay (2006) believe that the words to songs can be a vehicle to express both positive and negative emotions, reflecting care and/or frustration, as well as social themes deemed important. Rendering feelings into words (and sounds) can be, as Brazilian psychologist Amatuzzi (2010) says: a significant step "towards new meaning", an "existential movement" (p. 27).

Studies reveal that singing has both physical and emotional effects on the mother: it relaxes, entertains, reduces stress, relieves tension, and boosts self-esteem and confidence in her ability to be a good mother. In this way, singing helps women adjust to maternity, helps them deal with the innumerable challenges, demands, and adversities. As it helps soothe a restless infant, it also helps a mother deal with challenges in a more relaxed way (Carolan, Barry, Gamble, Turner, & Mascareñas, 2012).

Creighton, Atherton and Kitamura (2013) researched mothers singing in relation to certain attachment constructs, asking 23 mothers: "What is your experience of singing songs with your infant?" (A control group was also asked about playing and interacting). They analyzed the interviews using a twelve-step phenomenological method, comparing meaning units to the constructs. The mother's experience of singing included the following descriptions:

fun, enjoyable and affectionate... [giving a] sense of togetherness or bond... reinforcing the mother's perception of the infant as her own baby... The mothers expressed feeling very satisfied, pleased and proud when singing effectively made her baby happy, calm, relaxed, or likely to fall asleep. The achievement of settling her baby reinforced the perception of being 'mum' or 'good mother' and validated the sense of being significant to her infant. (pp. 24-25).

These authors inquired into the mother's experience of singing, but focused on comparing them to pre-selected attachment constructs.

Brazilian psychologist Stahlschmidt (2015) engaged in a program that offered musical activities to 195 infants (0-24 months old) and their caretakers. She described how singing became, for caretakers, a *soundtrack* of life, translating the meaningful experiences they had with the infants into sounds.

Research studies also point out that singing connects mothers to their past, to family singing traditions, which can be changed and built upon, according to current needs, expressing one's life style and values (Ilari, Chen-Hafteck & Crawford, 2013).

In her phenomenological study, Norwegian musician Lisa Bonnár describes lullaby singing as a cultural activity in which parents can share, in a deep and meaningful way, personal and cultural values. She investigated the lived experience of singing lullabies of 20 parents (Bonnár, 2014), concluding that singing involves "care, calm, communication,

contact, safety, co-creation and human depth, as manifested by parents' 'good-enough' singing" (p. 349), helping create a routine, giving parents a feeling of control and enabling them to be creative, making up words or songs.

In general, studies tend to concentrate on the impact singing has on mothers, children or on their relationship, describing how and why it facilitates their communication, but they do not focus on what singing *means* to mothers. The present study, therefore, turns to *mothers*, exploring their subjective experience of singing, in order to uncover its meanings, through a method inspired by Husserl's phenomenology, hoping to contribute through a psychological humanistic perspective.

Method

This phenomenological study consists of a process of discovery of the nature of mothers singing to infants with the active involvement of the investigator as an instrument of research. It aims to comprehend the invariant elements of common experiences of life, through the study of instances in which the experience is lived and accessible. The researcher, through an empathic relationship that immerses "enough in the participant's experiences to begin to have a sense of what it would be like to be having such experiences themselves" (Davidson, 2003, p. 26), puts aside objective knowledge and preconceptions searching for that which represents the essential, not the incidental. In this way, it fulfills the steps proposed by Husserl (1954/1970): to assume a phenomenological attitude, engage imaginative variation and seek for a transcendental reduction.

The theoretical reference of this study is humanistic, which views human beings as a whole in constant movement (Amatuzzi, 2010); it sees people defined by their emotionally significant relationships and their psychological development as an innate tendency that impels autonomy; it also describes choices as being based on internal references which develop through symbolization in intersubjective experiences.

Contact with participants in this investigation was guided by what humanistic psychologist Carl R. Rogers described as essential attitudes: congruence, empathy, and deep understanding, facilitating self-revelation and exploration of ideas and feelings. Rogers believed that when people are heard - really heard and understood - and feel free to be truly themselves, "incredible things" happen.

In this way, the quality of the encounters with participants is paramount in a phenomenological study, in order to see a person's horizon "from where he or she is standing" (Davidson, 2003, p. 120). The researcher strives to be transparent in her objectives and in her intentions of comprehending and following the participant in his or her preferred pathway of conversation, exploring together their experience as the participant wishes. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee with Human Beings at the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas.

Participants

Thirteen first-time mothers with infants up to 18 months old participated in one encounter each with the researcher, usually lasting about an hour and a half. Women were between 21 and 40 years of age, had a college education or higher, and lived with the infant's father. Eight were Brazilian and, because of the first author's internship at Yale University during her doctorate, five were American. Mothers' and infants' names were changed. See Table 1, below:

Table 1. Description of participants

Participant	Mother's age (years)	Infant's age (months)	Occupation
Maria	33	6	Psychologist
Lilian	31	10	Lawyer
Esther	33	11	Psychologist
Silvia	32	6	Elementary teacher
Nicole	32	16	House-keeper
Alice	28	17	Physical therapist
Gabriela	32	5	Psychologist
Rosana	33	2	Quality analyst
Encounters in the USA			
Helen	32	18	Speech pathologist
Rachel	33	7	Psychologist
Anita	36	7	Scientist
Monica	40	8	College professor
Sheila	21	1	Dentist

The age of the children was determined based on their pre-verbal stage, considering that research identifies this phase as being the one in which mothers most sing to their infants.

The participants were recommended by the researcher's acquaintances and were invited to participate by phone or email. When the participant's interest was asserted, a time and place for an individual encounter was set that was most convenient for the participant; eight (60%) preferred their own homes and nine (70%) women were with their babies during the encounter.

The researcher presented the Consent Form⁴ and explained the objective of the research study ("I'm interested in understanding what it's like for mothers to sing to their infants"), and waited for the participant to respond in whatever manner and path she preferred. When necessary, to stimulate the conversation, the researcher asked the mother to share an instance when she sang to her infant. The researcher's effort was to seek closeness, to be present, available and accessible, trying to understand her world and experiences, talking and asking questions as each singular dialogue progressed, in a way that motivated her to explore and comprehend, together, her lived experience (e.g. "what was *that* like for you?"). In this way, the objective was not to answer specific questions but facilitate the participant's exploration process.

At the end of each conversation (which was not recorded), the researcher immediately drafted a comprehensive first-person narrative, while still impacted by the encounter. This narrative explored the participants' experience of singing; but in order to stay close to the

⁴ All participants provided informed consent in writing to be part of the study.

mother's experience, the researcher used her perceptions, thoughts, feeling and impressions of the encounter to guide the process of writing, refining the narrative until she reached a sense of completion. Being a psychologist, the narrative reflected, necessarily, a psychologist's view, but did not include judgment. Each new encounter and subsequent narrative enabled a deeper and more thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

The process of writing these narratives was inspired by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Clark Moustakas' heuristic research, and was developed over the past 10 years by the "Psychological Attention in Institutions: Prevention and Intervention" Research Group at the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas in Brazil. More information about research using these narratives can be found in Oliveira and Cury (2016).

Having finished the 13 narratives, the researcher stepped away from the individual experiences, to look for "what these people *as a group* might have shared in common *across* their experiences" (Davidson, 2003, p. 104). She asked: "What does this say about the experience of mothers singing?" This reflects a search for meaning; for the general structure (essence) of the experience of singing for mothers as described by Husserl (1954/1970).

Results

The following elements of the experience of mothers singing to their infants were uncovered, and, although listed separately, are interconnected. Some excerpts from the comprehensive narratives are also presented for illustrative purposes (see Brisola, 2017, for the narratives in their entirety).

Singing is a means of **communication** with the infant at a profound level; saying much more than words can express, hugging them with their song, filling the air around them with emotion and intention, while giving of themselves. Whether at home during bedtime or while driving the car - when mothers cannot hold their crying children - singing enables them to feel connected and close, without necessarily touching them. Singing is different than rocking, feeding, changing or bathing, though it can also be part of these activities. The song transports their presence, their person. Although it can include words, the infant does not understand them at first; it is sound that is prominent.

While singing, she [Anita] feels close - it's when she feels most connected. "It's a good feeling. And I'm more present with her when I sing. While breastfeeding, my mind will wonder off to work and stuff, things I need to get done, but while singing, I'm focused, concentrated on Marie" (Brisola, 2017, p. 108)

"Singing is just something I do. I don't even think about it. What's it like for me...?" Silvia looked for words in vain. I tried to help by describing the situation: "You're in the kitchen and Erica is in the stroller. You start singing". "It's communicating", Silvia affirmed suddenly, "with sounds, I can communicate much more" (Brisola, 2017, p. 90).

Mothers singing means the **establishment of an emotional bond with their infants**. It requires them to be truly present, for (and in) a relationship with them, building a bridge, a connection. It involves reaching out, stepping beyond themselves, with a desire to interact. Mothers portray singing as connecting with their infants, building a feeling of closeness and caring, through a melodious and emotion-filled presence. There are times when mothers do not want to sing, when having to deal with certain circumstances, when they are too tired or

sad, for example. For whatever reason, at that moment they are not available to sing to their infant, since it would demand that they be emotionally and physically available.

“I feel connected... it’s the bonding thing”, [Rachel] replied, then paused, thought, then added: “When I sing I concentrate on him... and the millions of things I need to get done disappear.” (Brisola, 2017, p. 106)

When I asked what it was like for her, Helen stopped and was quiet for a while. Then, surprisingly, tears filled her eyes: “Singing to Kardia is... a sharing of souls...,” she disclosed, making a circle movement with her arm to express a flowing link between the two of them. She feels so very close to her daughter. Helen continued exploring this: “I... it is being connected, it’s... love”. The intensity she put into this took me by surprise. I wasn’t expecting so much emotion (Brisola, 2017, p. 103).

Singing is also a way to **better get to know their child**, as they develop. As mothers sing and watch their infant’s reactions, they absorb information about them. They choose a song, sing, and observe. This allows them to learn their infant’s preferences and adapt to each situation and each new phase. As infants grow and change so does their relationship with their mothers. This is evident, for example, at meal times, playtime or while changing diapers; the same songs don’t have the same effect and mothers must learn to deal with issues of limits and liberty which, according to Moustakas (1995), are part of significant relationships.

When [Lilian] sings, she likes to watch her son’s reactions and already sees how he’s developing, gesturing, for example, with his hands, the indian song – clearly he understands (Brisola, 2017, p. 81)

Alice is really happy, satisfied to see her daughter accompanying the song, singing along, pointing to the different parts of the body. But she stresses that it wasn’t always like that. It happened little by little. “When Daniela was small it was only being with her, because she didn’t really react very much” (Brisola, 2017, pp. 95-6).

Singing means **recognizing themselves as mothers**. When they sing, mothers hear their own sound and evaluate what they are able to do as mothers. Being successful while singing, be it in their task of soothing or playing, gives them a sense of accomplishment and confidence; this satisfaction is important in keeping them motivated in their numerous motherhood challenges. It’s a useful resource for mothers who are learning to deal with an infant for the first time. Initially, singing can bring about doubts: am I capable? What if I don’t remember the words? As they become more comfortable with their voice, mothers live their maternity through this means. Also, as her infant listens unconditionally, with no judging or evaluation, she experiences *being heard*.

When I asked [Rosana] what it was like to sing to her daughter, she said she sang to calm her down. It’s something nice, she feels good passing on something to her daughter, having a moment of interaction, of exchange. “I do it as something expressive, significant... of being a mother, giving of myself” (Brisola, 2017, p. 101)

Sometimes singing is a positive experience for her [Monica], “I love it when I sing and Max smiles” and other times it is not. One day they were in the car and Max was crying; she turned on the radio and sang along, singing and sort of yelling along. “It didn’t really help; but as a mom you try everything” (Brisola, 2017, p. 113)

Esther noticed that as Sara grew up and months went by, singing worked! "That gave me security! It made me feel powerful!" These words came with strength (Brisola, 2017, p. 85).

Singing is a form of **sharing personal values and family customs**, revealing who they are and what they believe in. Through their choices of songs, and the ways in which they sing, mothers stroll down memory lane, sharing their life, stories, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, language and culture. Experiences they had mold their "way of being" a mother, including the choice of songs, even if they are not completely aware of doing this.

The experience of sharing another culture is evident when a mother sings in another language, as some of the American mothers indicated they do, striving to include these other songs in their routine. They see the importance of this for their children and use their resources for this.

When singing during bath time she [Alice] feels good teaching, passing on information about the body, "it's my physical therapist side, and also I'm delivering an important message, for life, the most important message of all, of values, of my faith" (Brisola, 2017, p. 95)

At first Anita sang the songs she remembered from childhood, in English. Then she decided to sing in French. So she looked for Canadian songs from her childhood and also translated the English songs she knows to French. "Singing in French is like sharing another culture" (Brisola, 2017, p. 108).

Singing is a **creative way of expressing themselves**. Often mothers sing their own versions of songs, making up words and changing melodies. Sometimes they create entirely original songs expressing in their own particular ways, with their own unique voices, their inner thoughts and feeling that they yearn to express. During their busy day, mothers have opportunities to develop their potential using creative resources during fun, happy times and in moments of tension and stress, helping them deal with each situation.

While Carlos was with us, Lilian sang many times for him. One song after another, sung with ease, with words by heart or substituting words for a thought that occurred to her at that moment, for example (when Carlos cried): "I'm still going to find out what's going on" (Brisola, 2017, p. 82)

[Anita:] "I have my own version of the songs, different from theirs. I have tried singing along [with the CD] but I don't like it and I don't think Marie likes it as much either" (Brisola, 2017, p. 108).

Through these meanings, singing carries the **possibility for personal growth**, as a subjective way of actualizing experiences. Mothers express what they are living with their voices, through song. Their choice of song makes sense at the moment, expresses and represents in words and sounds, their thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and/or frustrations. These songs become tied to a place, to emotions, to their infant and to their relationship.

In this way, singing is an integrative activity, different from other means of communication, like speaking, writing or crying, for example. People *yearn* to express themselves and as they do so, through song, they engage their body (since singing is also a very physical activity), their thoughts, and feelings in this integrative activity, enabling mothers to be themselves, express who they are and how they feel at the time. This happens through non-verbal language (although it may also contain words) that both mother and

infant understand and that, as time goes by, enables them to build meanings together (perhaps not unlike lovers when they choose “their song”?). As they learn to deal with the novelty of motherhood, to cope with new situations - especially the distressing ones - mothers can express themselves in this unique, creative, wholesome, “art-full” manner.

Discussion

This phenomenological study proposed to investigate the naturally occurring phenomenon of mothers singing to their infant, based on individual encounters with 13 mothers who bore their children in the last 18 months.

Comprehensive narratives revealed the experience of singing as a unique way of being with an infant, of approaching its world, of communicating and interacting with it; it is much more than a musical performance or a way to put an infant to sleep, play or distract them; this experience is filled with meaning and affection. Singing to one’s infant involves expressing emotions, sharing information and culture, and being open to them; it is an expression of creativity and a possibility of personal growth. It is a relational, creative, and integrative experience.

Connecting or bonding with another human being is a fundamental aspect of life. Psychiatrist and human relationships scholar, Irvin Yalon, believes that “interpersonal relatedness has clearly been adaptive in an evolutionary sense: without deep, positive, reciprocal interpersonal bonds, neither individual nor species survival would have been possible” (Yalon & Leszcz, 2005, p. 19). Sure enough, we begin our lives “in relatedness”, in our mother’s womb, accompanying her body’s rhythm. This first relationship has a strong impact on our lives (Stahlschmidt, 2015), on the quality of future relationships (Moustakas, 1995); it is fundamental, not only to our physical survival, but also to our emotional health. Therefore, it should incorporate as many healthy elements as possible, those that help us move towards the mature development of our *self*, our wellbeing and insertion into community life; enabling us to learn to relate to others in a healthy way. Singing seems to be one of these “relational” elements.

In an interview documented by Kirschenbaum and Henderson (1989), Carl Rogers, who’s life was dedicated to studying human relationships in various situations such as psychotherapy, small and large groups, school and family, considered that “the kind of psychological climate which promotes growth and development is the same whether we are talking about therapy, or school, or the home” (p. 140). He described this climate as that in which the person feels prized, truly understood and in which there is genuineness.

Infants yearn to be understood, prized and cared for, and, as research studies indicate, are attentive to coherence (O’Gorman, 2006) and easily detect genuineness (or a façade) in their mother’s voice (Conrad, Walsh, Allen & Tsang, 2011). Levitin (2009) states that when singing, it is hard to hide one’s true intentions. Perhaps this is why infants prefer their mother’s singing than speaking. They yearn for authenticity and consistency in what they hear and perceive (O’Gorman, 2006) finding this in maternal singing.

It seems that a mother, as she sings to her infant, communicates a certain level of openness as well as affection, which are ingrained in her sounds and perceived by the infant who is equipped with an “emotional eye”. Hungarian psychologist, Csibra (2010) states that infants are able to grasp emotions and intentions of people they come in contact with. Perhaps, from a very early age, we look for coherence and genuineness, “listen” for it, and continue to do so as adults, listening for it in the voice of a friend, a stranger, a politician. We do, after all, hear people’s voices (in a phone call for instance) and have impressions

about them, without necessarily knowing how we came to that knowledge. We begin life through very musical interactions, learning meanings through our senses, building relationships along with the sounds that accompany them.

It might seem obvious to say that a mother feels heard by her infant when she sings. However, the intensity with which a mother yearns for her infant's response, the attention she pays to its feedback, to each reaction, smile, look, and laugh, points to this aspect as one which should be examined more closely. Rogers (1980) has already recounted how crucial being heard is: it "rescue[s me from] the chaos of my feelings . . . [relaxes] the tension in me. It has permitted me to bring out the frightening feelings, the guilts, the despair, the confusions that have been a part of my experience" (p. 12). People yearn to be heard and understood by others.

In the mother-infant situation, one could say the infant is not truly listening, since it does not process what the mother says in the same way another adult would. True, it is different. But still, the mother can *feel* heard without judgment, she can *feel accepted*, encouraged; and this, in turn could enable her to express herself more fully.

Since the 1960's, humanistic psychologists, such as Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Carl Rogers have identified creativity as an essential element of emotional health. May (1975) affirms that "creativity must be seen in the work of the scientist as well as in the artist, in the thinker as well as in the aesthetician; and one must not rule out the extent to which it is present in captains of modern technology as well as in a mother's normal relationship with her child" (p. 40).

Even though a mother singing to her infant is not customarily seen as an example of creativity - possibly because it usually happens in the intimacy of the home - mothers have innumerable opportunities to develop their potential, using their creative resources, even as they improvise a melody or insert a different lyric to a common known song, expressing themselves in a singular way. But this aspect has not yet been investigated; perhaps mothers don't even see themselves as being creative as they spontaneously make up lyrics or songs. Yet, this creative expression brings her satisfaction, a feeling of mastery, capability and self-trust (Moustakas, 1977), and, with it, comes an opportunity to grow and change in an enjoyable way (Cury & Bilbao, 2006) – all in the company of an infant.

Rogers believed that creativity is intrinsic to human beings, an expression of what he called an actualizing tendency, a movement toward developing one's full potential and independence. Singing to infants is such an opportunity, as mothers choose a song. And how does this choice come about? Perhaps the song, the choice of melody, and the words spring (like an artist's) from the perception they have of the present situation, through a tacit knowledge of what is necessary, as well as by their emotional availability. The result is a song that "matches" them, building what psychologist Stahlschmidt (2015) described as a "soundtrack of life".

As a mother sings, and actualizes herself as a person, she becomes not only closer to herself but also more available to others, more connected to the world around her. After all, actualizing oneself, although a personal experience, is not a solitary road, but one of *self-with-others*.

We believe this research study brings an important contribution to the area of women's health in a broad sense that involves physical, mental and social health. While singing to their infants, mothers extend an extra resource, enabling the expression of their way of being, their feelings (anguish, fears, uncertainties) as well as their culture, values, and what they've learned; all this creatively, using their body, memories, and personal abilities. In this way, as they sing, they foster self-actualization and mental health. For

decades now, humanistic psychologists have been emphasizing the importance of self-actualization in the process of growth. Singing to an infant is a carefree and risk-free activity, and seems to promote what Moustakas (1977) describes as a relationship in which both are “free to affirm, express, actualize, and experience their uniqueness” (p. 9).

Considering that maternal singing is a natural, easy and effective way of cultivating intimacy, it seems necessary to promote it in the context of a society in which the contrary – speed and superficiality - is valued.

We recognize that the present study has its limitations, deriving from relatively homogenous participants (all had relatively high incomes and education levels and were currently living with the infant’s father) and therefore, suggest that future research involve a more diversified group, encompassing different family structures as well. This could include conversations with grandmothers, caretakers or teachers who sing to infants, single and teen mothers.

Music’s ubiquity and affection as well as the importance of a mother’s role make maternal singing an excellent instrument and means for further psychological intervention and investigation.

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Elizabeth Brown Vallim Brisola: doutora do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas, participante do grupo de pesquisa "Atenção Psicológica Clínica em Instituições: Prevenção e Intervenção, Centro de Ciências da Vida, Campinas. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6170-4130>

Vera Engler Cury: docente permanente do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas, no grupo de pesquisa "Atenção Psicológica Clínica em Instituições: Prevenção e Intervenção, Centro de Ciências da Vida, Campinas. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2721-3367>