Songs of diversity: three case studies of community singing, identity and well-being

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Abstract

The chapter presents insights from three case studies of different community singing initiatives in the UK: a singing group in a women's prison, a singing group in a community music organisation, and an LGBTQ+ choir. These qualitative, culturally and contextually specific accounts are framed in the context of a wider literature on singing and well-being that adopts the more positivistic, standardized procedures of structured surveys and controlled experimental evaluations. It is argued that individual case studies are particularly valuable for the insights they provide in the particularities of individuals, projects and music-making with special reference to a chosen repertoire of songs including songs specially composed, which address challenges of identity and well-being specific to the groups involved. Our aim in this chapter is to illustrate the opportunities for learning that come from discussion across case studies. Doing so, to acknowledge knowledge-exchange as a process of evaluation, situating case studies as a methodological tool that goes beyond evidencing the positive change experiences of participating in community singing.

Key words

Community singing, well-being, diversity, identity, case studies

Introduction

The view that 'singing is good for us' is both an ancient wisdom (Norton, 2016), and increasingly supported by a growing body of scientific research (Clift, 2020; Irons and Hancox, 2021). Prior to 2000, however, there is virtually no research on singing, well-being,

and health despite the value of singing for well-being having been well understood for centuries. William Byrd (1588) summed up his insight in the couplet:

Since singing is so good a thing,

I wish all men would learn to sing.

Byrd elaborated this idea with eight reasons including the ideas that singing is good for health, strengthens the muscles of the chest, exercises the lungs, and can help with voice problems including stammering. He was also aware that if people are to engage positively with singing for such benefits, they need the support of a good facilitator and must value the activity.

Even before research can take place on singing and well-being, it is necessary that certain conditions are in place to allow an assessment of the putative benefits. People will engage with singing only if they value the activity, feel it something they are able to do, and have the opportunity. They will continue if the group is convivial and competently facilitated, the material being sung is meaningful, and if there is an appropriate level of challenge giving rise to a sense of achievement. This is not to say, however, that for some people singing in a group can be a source of frustration and dissatisfaction (Clift et al., 2016), and while it is the case that most people can sing, and singing is probably the most popular amateur music-making activity worldwide, there are many people who feel they cannot sing, and considerable numbers of people who are not engaged actively in singing.

There is now a considerable research literature on the value of singing for well-being and health. Repeated surveys in this field have found that people in established singing groups commonly report that singing is beneficial for their sense of personal and social well-being (Hylton, 1981; Clift and Hancox, 2001; Clift and Hancox, 2010; Moss et al., 2018). Such studies may identify different components to these benefits, with clear overlaps. However,

these dimensions will tend to be positively correlated and so point to a robust general dimension of valuation. Participants in established choirs may also report benefits from singing for their physical health, although the strength of expressed beliefs about such benefits varies according to experience of health challenge (Clift et al., 2009, Clift and Hancox, 2010).

Beyond descriptive surveys of established singing groups, a substantial body of research has sought to establish and evaluate singing groups for people with a wide range of different health challenges, most of whom have little or no experience of singing beyond childhood. Sophisticated controlled trials, involving validated psychological scales and objective physiological and physical assessments have been conducted with people experiencing conditions such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, Parkinson's, cancer, dementia, stroke, and serious mental health challenges (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). There are unavoidable sources of 'bias' in such studies, firstly because people choose to participate in the expectation of benefit, and secondly because members of singing groups can never be 'blind' to the activity they are engaged in. Nevertheless, the common finding is that group singing is a positive experience in terms of personal and social well-being, and so can help to address the psychological and social challenges that accompany serious long-term health problems. However, evidence of clinically important impacts from singing on parameters of physical health have proved elusive. In the context of the UK, where our case studies are set, publicly subsidized singing is commonly undertaken in partnership. At the nexus of interdisciplinary policymaking, such elusiveness has proved problematic for how and why community singing is valued and has contributed to evidencing practices in UK cultural policy. Particularly, where individual narratives of transformation can become the signifier for wider strategic values placed upon who gets to sing and why (Belfiore, 2012; Deane, 2018; Durrer et al. 2019).

Surveys of existing groups, and experimental evaluations of singing for health provide important insights into the value of singing for well-being and health, but there is also a need for qualitative and ethnographic research and case studies of group singing, which are sensitive to the wider social and cultural factors that impact on people's lives. Such studies are needed to explore in greater detail the ways in which people relate to one another in singing groups, the relationships between the singing facilitator and group members, and most especially the repertoire of songs which are chosen, or composed by participants, to express issues important to their social circumstances and sense of personal identities. Rather than consider singing a health intervention, which may operate through various causal mechanisms to produce measurable changes in well-being and health metrics, the essential concern in ethnographic work is to understand how active engagement in the collaborative process of the essential characteristics of singing – the singing of songs, interpersonal synchronization and coordination, the production of harmonies – provide resources for people to address issues of personal significance in their lives. Many insightful studies have adopted this approach from the beginnings of formal research on the social and value of singing for disadvantaged, marginalized and displaced groups.

The seminal work of Bailey and Davidson (2002), for example, explored the role of singing for homeless men in Quebec, Canada. A central theme emerging from the interviews was that men experienced therapeutic benefits from the experience of singing in the choir. It was also clear that the factors of mental stimulation and social engagement were important factors for them in giving rise to these benefits. An early case study of singing in a women's prison in Israel, was conducted by the musician leading the choir (Silber, 2005), and documents both the challenges of working with women in a prison setting, but also the ways in which the benefits of singing were generated through the musical processes of working together to

make music. A study by Latimer (2008) of members of a gay chorus in the Mid-west United States showed that the experience of singing had the commonly found psychological and social benefits for the men taking part, but in addition choral singing provided a 'constructive, affirming, and healing social and musical environment' which helped to facilitate 'coming out' and to reinforce 'a positive gay identity.' More recently, Joseph and Southcott (2018) in 'phenomenological case studies' of older people in five choirs in Victoria, Australia, show that singing in community choirs 'offered opportunities for social cohesion, positive ageing, and music learning that provided a sense of personal and group fulfilment, community engagement and resilience.' (p.176)

Clift et al. (2011) approached the value of singing for people with enduring mental health problems by bringing together three case studies of existing singing for health groups established in different part of the UK, with a concern to explore the significance of the lyrical content of the songs they found particularly meaningful:

> When people sing, they sing songs, and the songs themselves, in some contexts, may be central to the impact that singing can have for well-being and health. (p.123)

As the contributors from the 'Sing Your Heart Out' singing group in Norfolk put it:

> One of our special songs, which we sang at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival is "Stand by Me" (…) The first time the group managed the complex chorus section, and heard what an amazing sound they were making, the pride was evident in the ear-to-ear smiles around the room. This song has become something akin to an anthem for us, expressing as it does the need, we all have, for support in times of difficulty:
>
> *When the night has come*

And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see
No I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid
Just as long as you stand, stand by me (p.133)

This chapter follows the model provided by Clift et al. (2011) and brings together three case studies from singing groups associated with the International Centre for Community Music at York St John University. Catherine Birch begins with an account of her work with women in prison, with diverse experiences of mental ill-health and trauma. Ruth Currie describes the development of the Seagull Café choir for older people experiencing isolation, signposted to by local health and social care services. And finally, Wayne Dawson provides insights into the power of group singing for LGBTQ+ people, who have experienced prejudice and discrimination on account of their sexual and gender identities. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on all three community initiatives. Singing in the prison and for the LGBTQ+ choir did not happen during the period of Covid-19 lockdown, but Ruth Currie describes the development of online singing opportunities for the Seagull Café participants, highlighting issues of digital inequalities.

***Something Inside So Strong*: A Case Study from the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project** (Catherine Birch)

Music-making programs in carceral settings have shown to improve the well-being of participants, as well as enable deeper interpersonal connections and a positive shift in self-identity (Cohen, 2019, Cohen and Henley, 2018, Lamela and Rodrigues, 2016 Silber, 2005; Urie et al., 2019). Group singing in regulating of the body's hormonal, endocrine and respiratory systems (Osborne, 2009, 2017), and stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (Porges, 2017, van der Kolk, 2014) can be particularly beneficial to positive social

cohesion as well as an individuals' physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health (Clift et al., 2011).

The York St. John University (YSJU) Prison Partnership Project's singing and song-writing sessions are designed with an understanding of the potential benefits of group singing as described above. Based in a maximum-security women's prison in the north of England, the facilitating team acknowledge the need for both gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches (Birch, 2021, Harris and Fallot, 2001) as integral to the work. We need to be both aware of and responsive to the visible and hidden manifestations of traumatic experience (Caruth, 1995, Herman, 1992, van der Kolk, 2014), using a model of practice based on the understanding that women in custody are statistically likely to have experienced prior trauma[i] (Conlon, 2020, Covington, 2016, Lempert, 2019).

I lead the singing and song-writing workshops with the support of undergraduate community music students. This case study details findings from the first year of the project, 2018-2019, and frames these with consideration of 1) situated approaches and group processes; 2) the expression of identity and personal concerns through choice of repertoire; and 3) identity validation of the group and transformation through music. Data collected was from twenty-four of the women's pre- and post-project evaluation forms. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' anonymity.

Group processes begin with the development of a group contract, Ways of Working, whereby the facilitating team collaborate with the women to negotiate a shared code of practice for the course of the ten-week project, as exampled in the image below:

[INSERT Image 1: Shared code of practice for the ten-week course HERE]

This step of positive collaboration enables the beginnings of development of safety and trust. One participant stated, 'You're made to feel safe and the students/staff are so supportive'

(Shelley, evaluation, July 2019). Safety is of paramount importance when working with participants who have experienced trauma (Caruth 1995, Covington, 2016, Herman, 1992, Lempert 2016).

Development of social cohesion is key for each ten-week project, and the level of safety and trust needed for creative risk-taking, starts from the first moments of interaction with the group. We open each workshop session with the Focus Game, a space to connect and engage with every participant, and for the facilitating team to read the room, involving reflexivity (Etherington, 2004) and observation. It was interesting to note the following response from one participant who stated, 'Everyone was treated as an individual and encouraged to be the best of themselves' (Heather, evaluation, April 2019). This is certainly an intention set by the Prison Partnership team.

The negotiated process of collaborative group songwriting can offer the women a safe place in which to develop both personal and musical skills and evolve in deeper understanding of themselves by 'providing opportunities for self-discovery' (de Quadros, 2016, p. 188). It can enable individual as well as group expression, positive interaction, and connections to be developed. As Cohen (2019) states, 'Emotional expression through choral singing, particularly in prison contexts, provides a conduit for people to share and receive complex human experiences' (p. 9). One of the women expressed this shared experience in the following statement on the project: 'The girls really supported each other. The energy was positive' (Shelley, evaluation, July 2019).

The women also had to make adjustments and several moments of tension occurred during song-writing sessions. One of the women reflected, 'I've learnt that I do not do conflict well. This is a skill I am continually working on and also asserting myself' (Clare, evaluation, July 2019). The sense of ownership over a completed group song, however, has seemed for some

of the women to outweigh the challenges in the process and has enabled the group to bear witness to the individual contributions (Anderson, 2016). One of the participants explained the song-writing process as 'the power of collaboration – how many minds were better than one, many voiced were better than one' (Sheryl, evaluation, April 2019). Another commented on the 'strong feeling of accomplishment' (Sophia, evaluation, April 2019) when listening back to recordings of the group songs.

[INSERT Image 2: Examples of ideas for song lyrics HERE]

Singing has been described as 'an act of generosity' (Zeserson, 2005, p. 125), of courage and hope (Barnwell, 2000; Conlon, 2020). Within the context of incarceration, the importance of these acts is heightened. We aim to work with negotiated processes, employing a non-formal approach to music making with hospitality (Higgins, 2008, 2012, 2020, Urie et al., 2019) as a key value in practice. In the initial stages of a project, I bring a mix of vocal exercises and warmups, repertoire I think will be suitable, and song-writing activities. It has been fascinating to observe the repertoire that the women have resonated with most strongly, often songs which express profound connections to their circumstances, and offer a position of hope and strength.

Examples of the most popular songs of the project are Labi Siffre's *Something Inside So Strong*, Bill Withers *Lean on Me*, Bruno Mars *Count on Me*, and John Farnham's *You're the Voice.* The women have also enjoyed singing energized warmup songs, especially those with roots in gospel, blues, or spirituals. These resonances with songs originally written as a call for social justice, seem particularly powerful within this fragile community. As facilitators, we have had to be mindful of the women's past trauma when introducing repertoire or creative stimuli, exercising continual reflexivity and responsiveness to the women's needs. The women have also been keen to share their musical tastes and contribute to the group

processes. As an example, during the second week of the pilot project, one of the women came with lyrics for two of her favorite songs; *Fly Like a Bird* by Nelly Furtado and Christina Aguilera's *Beautiful.* We added these into our portfolio of group songs, and they became firm favorites of the pilot project.

Responses from the women to the project overall, have emphasized benefits for their emotional health and well-being in attending the weekly sessions. One participant stated, 'I found it incredibly uplifting and therapeutic' (Anne, evaluation, July 2019). As a facilitator of the project, I have found the tangible positive shift in emotions for some of the women, from the beginning to the end of a session, very powerful. It is hard, however, to capture exactly what it is in the music-making and group processes that enables this shift. There is a need here for further research to try to investigate further what exactly is happening during the course of a singing session in the prison. One of the women said, 'I feel so much happier after our singing sessions' (Mary, evaluation, January 2019), but there is not the specificity to uncover what supported this feeling of happiness. Another of participants stated, 'It has lifted my spirits and increased my self-value. It has also increased my confidence in my own abilities singing and non-singing' (Heather evaluation, April 2019). What is clear from this quote is that the participant attributed increased confidence in both singing and other aspects of her life, connecting to the increased self-value she spoke of.

Increased confidence was spoken about by another of the participants when she stated of the project, 'It has definitely helped build my confidence back up. Something I lost when I was given a custodial sentence' (Amelia, evaluation, July 2019). One of the women spoke specifically of increased positivity in mental health through involvement in the singing sessions, in the following statement: 'I feel it uplifts people, gives them confidence and is so good for positive mental health' (Janet, evaluation, July 2019).

One very important motivating factor for me as a facilitator on the project, is that creative access is limited within the carceral system. One of the women commented on this: 'It's made me remember how much I love music and singing - music is a big part of my life' (Mary, evaluation, January 2019). Another of the women spoke of the ability to be involved in a project outside of their day-to-day experience of incarceration: 'Being in prison is grim, there are few opportunities to do anything constructive - PLEASE! More!' (Carol, evaluation, January 2019 (capitals in the original)). It is hard to imagine how monotonous and isolating life within the prison walls can be (Hughes, 1998, Lempert, 2016). The women commented on the project helping bring an element of normality in their week with one participant stating, 'it distracts me from everything else that's going off around me' (Janet, evaluation, July 2019), and another, 'it's an opportunity to get off my wing and have a 'nice zone' to feel a bit normal' (Stacy, evaluation, January 2019). Several of the women also commented on the project being fun, energizing, and enjoyable.

One of the women stated in her pre-project evaluation: 'I hope it helps save me from feeling useless' (Marjorie, evaluation, January 2019). After engaging in the project and when asked, 'has taking part and attending the singing & song writing project had a positive impact on other areas of your life – if so, please explain why?' she responded, 'Not to be alone, not to feel alone' (Marjorie, evaluation, April 2019). This positive shift from having felt isolated and useless to not feeling alone is important in perhaps explaining why the music-making in itself is not enough, it is the bringing together of the group that is also significant (Herman, 1992). This is within a context where for one of the women, her "main personal challenge is being able to sing with other people, and in a group" (Carol, evaluation, January 2019). Another of the participants stated, 'I might come across as brave and nothing phases me, but I'm quite shy and suffer with anxiety, just being in the group is a challenge for me' (Mary, evaluation, April 2019).

Finally, the move towards thinking positively about the future (Henley and Cohen, 2018) was notable from the data. For example, one of the women stated, that she will endeavor to 'become more positive with myself and look towards a better future' (Heather, evaluation, April 2019) and another of the participants commented, 'I feel stronger in myself and so positive about my future. I have found my voice in so many ways!' (Anne, evaluation, July 2019). For these women, the singing project was positively impactful not just for the duration but as they look towards the future. It is interesting that for both women, the positive shift in self-identity is apparent in these statements. Articulated clearly in the group song lyrics (below) devised by the women in the pilot project, is the importance they place on music as so much more than just a passing activity. This reinforces the value of these kinds of music-making programs within carceral settings and serves as a call for wider provision and engagement.

Music means the world to me
It's a burning feeling, it's part of my healing
Music means the world to me
A voice from deep within

I need music to feel alive
I need music to keep me strong
I need music to help me survive
I need music to know I belong
(Group song lyrics, pilot project, 2018)

Relational Understandings of Well-being in Community Singing: A Case Study of Music Leaders and Older Music Participants in Seagull Café (Ruth Currie)

Seagull Café is a singing group for older adults in Morecambe (United Kingdom), established in 2019 by More Music[ii] and funded to address isolation; understood to be systemic and at

risk of worsening as part of becoming an ageing population (Fakoya et al., 2020). Seagull Café aims to support and improve people's sense of well-being through singing. At its inception, such aims were targeted towards older adults who participate. However, through the process of developing a singing group with older adults, those working in the project also acknowledged improvements in their own well-being.

This case study is a glimpse into Seagull Café and the experience of the digital shift in their weekly singing sessions, as a response to COVID-19. It is based on reflections shared by the Seagull Café workforce through action research in 2020 and interviews in 2021. Findings indicate a distinction between valuable evidence and valued experience in Seagull Café and, at times, there is a sectoral bias that reproduces assumptions about what music is meant to 'do' within the context of well-being (Currie *et al.* 2021). This case study focuses on experiences that celebrate the ways music leaders are considering their roles critically within the context of community singing, towards well-being. Three themes frame this case study:

- how music leaders collaborate with older adults through singing
- how music leaders negotiate their own perspectives of the role of singing for well-being
- ways that music is understood as part of a healthy life.

Sharing how the Seagull Café has moved online shows how our research learnt about the influential experiences produced by singing with older people. Particularly, ways music leaders' reflexive practice, repertoire negotiations, session formats and pedagogies are informed.

Situating Seagull Café

Evidencing value through the impact musical participation has on individual well-being is a means through which much subsidized cultural activity is often measured (Oman and Taylor, 2018; Oman, 2021). Such ways of valuing musical participation produce understandings rooted in cultural policy practices that historically privileged instrumental outcomes. Particularly, whose which tend to serve the national interest (Durrer et al., 2019), often producing 'activity that is of debatable benefit' (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 265). With a pre-pandemic focus from cultural institutions on health and well-being compounded through the impacts on people and communities through COVID-19, the well-being imperative for being with people through musical participation has sharpened. Furthermore, this may contribute to a competitive process of evidencing impact and advocating the arts' role in health and well-being aggressively. This contributes to a 'defensive instrumentalism' (Belfiore, 2012) that 'relies, defensively, on what it perceives to be rhetorically powerful justifications for funding, irrespective of their inherent robustness and validity (Belfiore, 2021, p. 13). Seagull Café's funders are interested in supporting community projects that can implement organizational learning, supporting grant recipients to contribute to positive change experiences in their communities. More Music established Seagull Café as a response to Morecambe's stratified health inequalities, and it is with intention to transform this that situates this project, whilst in acknowledgement of the cultural sector ecosystems that privilege particular kinds of evidence for music and well-being (Currie, 2021). Furthermore, they are collaborating through research to better understand the experiences within the project and the ways these are represented through evidence.

Seagull Café: Becoming a group

On the North-West Coast of England in 2019, 40 adults over 60-years old come together at the Hothouse: the premises of More Music, an arts organization in its 30th year, with a focus on community music making with people in Morecambe.

[INSERT Image 3: The Hothouse venue in Morecambe HERE]

As a new pilot project, the group familiarize themselves as they become Seagull Café each week through the informalities associated with having a cup of tea and a cake: synonymous with the hospitality of people and place. The singalong format and songs played are reminiscent of Morecambe's seaside entertainment culture between 1950 -1970s. Many of the Seagull singers remember this time fondly. Scaffolding this repertoire, to connect with the group, is the music leaders' ability to improvise and their collective catalogue of songs. Music leaders work with flexibility, developing their approach and repertoire in response to who is there, with an openness to its possibilities (Higgins, 2012). Seagull Café has grown through its pilot from 15 to 40 participants and action research during this time indicates that it is supporting connections between people in the group, including music leaders and the NHS Social Prescribing team[iii]. To celebrate their growth and to mark the end of the pilot in early 2020, More Music and Seagull Café participants recorded a short video about their singing and how it supports connections and friendships, and the NHS's strategic aim to explore social prescribing of group activities to support preventative health interventions (NHS, 2021). In response to growing demand, More Music planned for an additional weekly session, as Seagull Café continued into 2020. The team believed the group would continue to grow in numbers and enthusiasm, with some participants inviting friends to join them together at the Hothouse.

[INSERT Image 4: Members of the Seagull Café Singers (Photo credit: Jonny Bean) HERE]

Action research and interviews in the Seagull Café project pilot

Our research team joined the project pilot to support its development, through action research[iv] and it appeared that the important qualities of the session, which were informing their development of the project, were:

- responsiveness to people and place
- opportunities to know participants beyond the NHS's clinical settings, where they are understood predominately as 'patients'
- the musical content of the sessions

Complimenting this was a set of interviews with Seagull Singers, using the Emotion Regulation Strategies for Artistic Creative Activities Scale (ERS-ACA) developed by Fancourt et al. (2019). Broadly, there was a sense that taking part in Seagull Café positively impacted older adults' sense of isolation. Furthermore, the Seagull Café workforce was not solely recognizing positive change experiences in participant well-being through singing, but their own. Collectively, there was a sense that the Seagull Café supported positive well-being experiences, the implications of which blurred the established boundary lines of who was perceived to benefit from music intervention. Within this, recognizing the likely positive response bias in our conversations of well-being with Seagull singers and workforce, given they were already engaged and invested. This was important to consider, particularly if the positive well-being impacts are to be understood better within the experience of taking part, whilst also understanding the investment of sectors motivated to evidence impact around well-being.

Moving online and connecting through distance

As the pilot moved into its newly awarded two-year funded program, music leaders were open and ready to welcome singers in Seagull Café. However, with the imposed limitations on singers through COVID-19 restrictions, these weekly sessions moved online. Instead of the Hothouse, they are welcomed online from their homes, the homes of their loved ones, and care-home workers facilitating access to the digital music making sessions. To facilitate the musical content that everyone valued so profoundly, much of the session's usual spontaneity

was overtaken by a need to ensure the musical scaffolding was in place to support participants to take part, despite the technical challenges this presents. One research participant suggested the musical spontaneity 'bottled the essence' of Seagull Café and many of our interviews in 2021 indicated that the digital shift required unfamiliar pedagogies for digital singing, towards reduced isolation. Sadly, some of the 40 strong collective, of Seagull Café did not participated online, prevented by access issues that digital exclusion and social inequality exacerbates (People's Health Trust, 2020). However, there was a gleeful connection between those joining, albeit with a new and unfamiliar format for all involved. For those who couldn't be there, the NHS Social Prescribing team and More Music staff are carefully and critically planning for how to reengage them and welcome them, once more, to the Hothouse.

A driving motivation to reconnect with Seagull singers, for whom digital access has been restricted, is a strong felt sense of well-being in the sessions for all who are there: music leaders, Seagull singers and NHS staff. There is also a sense of responsibility to ensure that Seagull Café does not extend the social distance between fellow Seagull's whose personal circumstances do not allow for them to participate: making more unequal an already unequal starting point for participation, specifically, regarding digital activity (Martins Van Jaarsved, 2020). Being online has presented technical challenges for collaborating musically and challenged the ways that music leaders understand the role music has as part of healthy living for older adults. In our interviews, music leaders identified that through collective and acute attention to health through COVID-19, they were learning more about the experience of being an older adult in the project, for whom, lockdown demanded a great deal of isolation. Music leaders learned more about the implications of participant isolation within participants' broader life through the informalities of the online chats; once around tables decorated with lace and flowers, alongside tea and cake, now, in people's homes connected through distance.

Developing critique through reflecting on experience

In our interviews, the Seagull Café workforce expressed the positive impact that the project offered them personally. In many ways, this resonated with interviews from Seagull participants in 2019. They discussed this alongside their developing understandings of well-being in relation to participants lives and the health inequalities that exist within Morecambe. Although inclusive of positive perceptions of change through the sessions, they also offered ways to move towards criticality for what the role of singing may be regarding people's well-being. For example, music leaders questioned why they understood it important to find creative ways to build movement into the online singing sessions: an action stimulated organically from the pilot sessions, as people responded to and interacted with the gestures and singing experience of others. Or the unexpected ways that the household items used to support movement also stimulated discussion and exchange that helped those on the online singing sessions to learn more about the lives and experiences of people, beyond their musical encounters. Our analysis identified enriched networks, a sense of community, and positive and enriching experiences in the moment as emerging themes for how singing together, towards well-being, was valued. In the context of challenging health inequalities, Seagull Café is supporting relational understandings of singing together – older adults and the workforce motivated to support them. This contributes ways to think about health inequalities relating to isolation, but also to new ways of thinking critically about what this means, to whom, and why. Overall, responses in our research suggested that, though the conduit of singing and the joy this brings the group, music leaders' understandings of what it means to sing for well-being is influenced by the new ways of knowing Seagull singers online. Such understandings were relational to the connections made and their time together before and through the Seagull I's digital shift.

Concluding thoughts

Understanding singing's role in well-being is relational and context has, in Seagull Café, been significantly influential on how well-being is framed and understood. Particularly regarding the possibilities for a music project to challenge health inequalities. Although meaningful moments were shared through the process of Seagull Café's digital shift, the access issues surrounding how participation is understood and why, demands attention. Seagull Café, from its pilot to its digital shift, is centered on a belief that music can scaffold a space to reduce isolation. Those who work in it are motivated to support Morecambe as a healthy place and it continues to be a site for asking important questions of the role and responsibilities of community singing, towards well-being.

A Rainbow of Voices: A Case Study of a UK-based LGBTQ+ Choir

Wayne Dawson

Colours of the Rainbow is an LGBTQ+ choir based in York. I established the choir in 2019 and continue to act as the lead facilitator. It is the first of its kind in York and from its inception, has shown to have positive effects on the people who attend the group. Through case studies of individual participants, resilience form mapping and feedback form capturing collated for reporting purposes during 2019 and 2020, the choir has demonstrated how it helps to reduce isolation, makes members feel empowered, improves their mental health and well-being, improves confidence as well as increasing self-esteem and self-worth. This discussion of York's first LGBTQ+ choir will provide a brief overview of the challenges that LGBTQ+ people face in society today; my facilitation approach with such a unique and marginalized community; the importance of the repertoire of songs relevant to people's experience, as well as the journey that members have taken through their participation in the choir. This discussion will be framed and explored through both the individual statements collected during 2019/20 as well as through my own reflections as the lead facilitator.

In 2018 a report conducted by Stonewall (Bachmann and Gooch, 2018) found that over half (52%) of LGBTQ+ people experienced depression the year that the research took place, almost half of trans people (48%) had considered taking their own life as well as 41% of non-binary people disclosing that they self-harm. Although this is just a handful of the findings from the report, combined with first-hand experience of working and being part of the LGBTQ+ community, funding was granted to York LGBT Forum charity to run a community choir as a medium to help address the prevalent health inequality. Subsequently, the choir first met in June 2019 with funding granted by York Mind mental health charity to help address the saddening health inequality prevalent within the LGBTQ+ community.

The first session saw just under 30 attendees join the choir, engaging the full array of the LGBTQ+ umbrella, including a few allies. Being aware of the nature of the group through both my own experience as a queer person and taking suggestions/feedback from the LGBTQ+ community, the choir established a simple but important format which would help to craft out the safe space the choir would become for the LGBTQ+ community. Every session began with introductions which consisted of telling the group our names and pronouns, followed by a question to get to know each other. I would always model the introductions as it would be common for some people to have not come across the concept of introducing pronouns. Making pronoun introductions a staple part of the sessions was vital in removing barriers which many LGBTQ+ people face in other contexts: this might include having to hide their identity or feeling the need to justify or explain who they are on a regular basis. Introducing our pronouns in every session meant that it was less likely for people within the group to be misgendered. A second aspect of the group format would be the distribution of vocal groups: the standard choir setup of choral singing would be bass, baritone, tenor, alto, mezzo-soprano, and soprano; however, this setup could be interpreted to have gender connotations attached to each part. With this, I opted to rename groups to Group

1 and Group 2 and would teach each part of the song and allow members to choose which part fit most comfortably within their voice.

[INSERT Image 5: Colours of the Rainbow Choir Recording *Through the Storm* HERE]

The repertoire for the choir has varied over the years with most songs coming from suggestions from the members. Popular songs have included Whitney Houston *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, Cher *Believe*, The Greatest Showman *This is Me*, and most notably the choir's original charity single *Through the Storm.* Often, members have gravitated towards songs that have strong themes of self-acceptance, self-love, recovery, and community. The choir's original song, which was written by my duo Brightlights with input from the choir, specifically incorporated all the themes I had seen the choir connect to. Perhaps most significant to the song would be its specific reference to the LGBTQ+ community. The song references the Stonewall riots which is considered the birth of Pride (Lamé, 2017), as well as loss within the community that alludes to the Aids pandemic, and a key symbol of diversity and acceptance within the LGBTQ+ community: the rainbow. One member said:

> This song has a special place in my heart because I have been with the choir from the beginning and was part of the group that helped make the single happen. The lyrics have a strong meaning for each of us and together we felt empowered. It was a special moment for the choir when we first heard the single in its entirety. We felt connected more than we ever had before and singing the song live to an audience meant such a lot to us. (River, case study, February 2020)

Members of the choir have articulated feeling empowered being part of the choir, highlighted an improved state of well-being, noted the significance of being around like-minded people, prided themselves in feeling like they have found their voice again, as well as expressing that their confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth had increased. One member said:

> Going to choir has made a huge difference in my life. Before I went, I was lonely, severely socially anxious and my self-esteem and self-worth were terrible. Since going to choir my self-esteem and self-worth has gotten much better and my social anxiety has improved as the people who go are so friendly, it has made it easier to challenge myself socially and, in the process, reducing my anxiety. (Alexis, case study, November 2019)

For this individual, the choir acted as a safe space where they could go and work through some of the challenges they were facing. Another member noted: "The colours of the Rainbow choir has remarkable qualities. On the one hand it brings together friends and like-minded people as well as being an extremely diverse group." (Joanna, case study, February 2020). Whilst another said: "The feeling of being around people like myself has helped improve my confidence in myself and who I am, thanks to everyone's supportive nature." (Blake, case study, October 2019). Similarly, another stated: "Joining the choir has helped me to rediscover my voice in more than one way. I have always loved singing and being able to do this in a relaxed environment with like-minded people where I can make new friends, while being myself and hopefully have a laugh too has been wonderful." (Bebe, case study, November 2019). A common theme present here is the importance of being around like-minded people and this sense of community that has improved these members' confidence. Finally, another member described the choir as part of her faith:

> I never understood my mum and her faith. I know it supported her through some terrible times. But I never got it; I never felt part of it. But now I understand she felt part of that, and this LGBTQ+ choir is my faith. It keeps me going, it is my faith. It keeps me feeling like I am part of something that accepts me. And that is so empowering. It really is. (Joy, interview, December 2019)

This participant has been part of the choir since it started. I have seen her change throughout my time of knowing her; she was very shy, introverted and would often stay in the background, gravitating towards the back row during sessions. Throughout her time of being at choir, I have witnessed a profound change in her confidence, the way she holds herself and

the way that she speaks about her identity. She eventually started sitting in the front row, began to integrate more into the social aspects of the choir and eventually found the confidence to become a key volunteer for the choir helping with registers, enrolments, welcoming people as they arrive at choir as well as organizing choir events. The transformation of this person has been significant, and she has noted to me on numerous occasions that Colours of the Rainbow has played a leading role in her recovery journey.

[INSERT Image 6: Colours of the Rainbow Choir Performing *Through the Storm* at the York LGBT Forum AGM HERE]

Colours of the Rainbow choir has been running for two years and during this time the members have collaborated on releasing a charity single, a music video and are currently in the process of creating a second single as well as having performed at several events. Through participant case studies which have been briefly explored above, the choir has continued to receive funding from York Mind due to its track record of successfully improving the lives of LGBTQ+ people in York. Most notably, the choir has shown to empower its members, improve their confidence, self-worth, self-esteem and improve their general sense of well-being. It is interesting to note from the case studies that much of the positive effects of the choir seem to derive from a feeling of acceptance as well as being around like-minded people. Coming together to share experiences of being LGBTQ+, to sing about these experiences whether explicit to the LGBTQ+ community or more general and creating a space of safety and acceptance has contributed to a process of emotional healing for many of the choir members. Sharing a common identity and coming together through music that resonates with the group has played a vital role in the positive effects Colours of the Rainbow has had on the lives of LGBTQ+ people in York.

Through the Storm lyrics:

1969

Stonewall gave birth to Pride

Long before I was born

They marched out to brave the storm

A candle lit for all those lost

We won't be something we're not

This is us this is you and me

This is our identity

If we make it through the storm

If we make it to the dawn

I promise you we'll be alright

Just hold out for the sunrise

I know there's dark clouds up ahead

I will be here if you need a friend

Everyone knows, everyone knows

After a storm comes a rainbow

[INSERT Image 7: Cover of the charity single 'Through the Storm' HERE]

Final comments

A considerable body of research on the potential value of group singing for well-being and health has accumulated since 2000. Surveys of large number of choir members, often with many years of experience of regular singing, have clearly shown that singers perceive a wide variety of benefits – in terms of psychological and social well-being, and even benefits for aspects of physical health – especially for older people who have experience of acute or chronic mental and physical health problems. There is also now a substantial literature exploring the value of establishing singing groups for people with existing physical health problems, who may have had little or no regular experience of singing since childhood. If people, with problems such as COPD, Parkinson's or dementia, chose to engage with singing,

often supported by a partner, the evidence again shows that the experience can be a very positive one, psychologically and socially, and may even lead people to feel that they can better manage their physical health challenges, with an improved quality of life.

Surveys and controlled experimental studies have their place, but there are also significant insights to be gained from qualitative studies which adopt a case study approach, which is sensitive to the concrete cultural, social, and personal circumstances of people engaged in singing groups. Such an approach is appropriately sensitive to the fact that discussion of the impacts of 'singing' in the abstract is meaningless. It is particular people, from different communities who come together at a suitable time and in a convenient place, with a support of a skilled musician, to sing a meaningful repertoire, with their own motivations and aims in mind. Perhaps there are some universal essential features making up a sense of personal, social, and physical 'well-being' but equally, the conditions for well-being, and character it takes, will surely vary for individuals from different cultural and social backgrounds. What we have aimed to show is that the experience of singing and its outcomes were different, in some respects subtly and strikingly, for women in prison; for older people experiencing isolation in the North West of England, or for people with a diversity of sexual and gender identities. But what they have in common is the joy, meaning and solidarity gained from claiming a collective voice through their own songs and choice of repertoire. Furthermore, reflecting the variety of ways that these experiences are fostered/connected through community singing, illuminates the many ways that stories of singing can help us understand the environmental, individual and interpersonal factors that contribute to these positive well-being experiences.

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Acknowledgements

Catherine Birch would like to express huge appreciation to Rachel Conlon, and everyone involved in the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project. You are an incredible and inspirational group of women, and it is a privilege to work with you.

Ruth Currie would like to thank Kathryn MacDonald and Anna Daly for their commitment to collaborative inquiry and partnership, and all the Seagull Café singers for their voices and participation.

Wayne Dawson would like to thank Jake Furby for supporting me in setting the choir up as well as Dorothy Hodgkinson for helping to enable to choir to continue through development work. A massive thank you to York LGBT Forum for welcoming the choir as part of one of the charities projects as well as York St. John University, York Mind and Two Ridings for funding/supporting the choir, ensuring the continuation of the group.

[i] The Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care have been designed based on the knowledge of common responses to traumatic experience: safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and choice (Harris & Fallot, 2001, cited in Covington, 2016).

[ii] More Music is a community music and music education charity in the UK who 'seeks to build confidence and spirit in individuals and communities through the arts, especially music' (More Music, 2021).

[iii] In the UK, Social Prescribing can be broadly understood as interventions that aim to reduce pressure on health services by focusing on social determinants of health, most commonly in partnership with voluntary sectors, often seeking to combat people's challenging mental health experiences. Particularly activity "addressing mental, psychosocial or socioeconomic issues, and enhancing well-being and social exclusion' (Chatterjee *et* al., 2018, p. 98).

[iv] Action Research in this context is understood as a methodology for practitioner-led change, where questions and approaches to exploring practice are informed through practice and motivated by change priorities that practitioners identify within their context (Cohen *et al.*, 2010).