

The impact of lockdown on the experience of choral singers in community choirs

Kagari Shibazaki ¹ and Nigel A. Marshall ²

¹ University of Huddersfield, ² University of Sussex

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Abstract

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The social aspects of choral singing appear to contribute in a significant way towards its popularity as a community activity, with numerous studies reporting on the positive social, health and psychological benefits to be gained from partaking in community singing. Previous studies, for example, have listed increased levels of wellbeing and positive changes to lifestyle, along with decreased feelings of social isolation and levels of depression as being amongst the possible benefits to be gained from weekly singing sessions (Sanal, & Gorsev, 2014). Similarly, Joseph & Southcott, (2015, 2018) found that having a desire to feel less isolated, a need to interact more with others, expanding a social or spiritual identity, meeting with like-minded people, and achieving something greater than can be achieved alone to be popular motivations for joining community choirs. Given the idea that friendship, social interaction and companionship often appear to be considered either more important, or at least as important as the singing and musical participation, this project explores the experiences of adults who sing on a regular basis with a community choir during an extended period of lockdown.

The study involved collecting data through an on-line instrument from adult members of seven community choirs in different parts of England. Initial findings suggest that the main factors attracting singers to join a choir appear to be the social aspects, enjoyment, and the aesthetic experience, together with the joy and achievement gained from taking part in a joint activity. As a result of the lockdown, participants appeared to reflect deeply and re-evaluate the meaning of the choir in their life, its contribution to their musical identity and in some cases, had experiences akin to bereavement. Among the positive benefits of lockdown were increased opportunities to be creative and to experiment, to learn more about individual voices and the role they play in the music, and to increase support for the sustainable nature of the positive wellbeing that singing together can produce.

Keywords: community choirs, singing, COVID-19, wellbeing, lockdown

1. Background

Community choirs are individual and distinct collectives, and whilst both professional and community choirs may share in the common aim of producing good quality music, there are a number of very specific differences to be found between them. For example, members of a community choir attend because they wish to do so, and unlike members of a professional choir, they are not paid to sing (Kemp, 2013). In this respect, members of a community choir can be defined as ‘volunteers’ as they take part in

an ‘*uncoerced activity that creates public good through a structured setting*’ (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014, p.194), and therefore membership may also spread beyond musical and social motivations and be associated with notions of civil engagement and participation in present day society.

People become members of community choirs for a whole host of reasons, and numerous studies have given testament to the wide range of positive benefits to be gained from belonging (Moss et al., 2018; Pearce et al., 2015, 2016; Reagon et.al., 2016; White, 2009). For example, Conway & Hodgman (2008) found that membership of intergenerational choirs removed age barriers and modified some of the stereotypical attitudes which existed within a community, while a number of studies involving homeless people and individuals in prison found that engagement in a community choir was frequently an effective way to increase confidence and self-respect, and to improve social skills (Bailey & Davidson, 2002, 2005; Cohen, 2012). Singing in a choir involves both cognitive and physical components, and can bring a wide range of health benefits to those who take part (Johnson et al., 2015; Menec, 2003).

The positive benefits associated with singing have been clearly identified in a number of previous studies (Durrant, 1993; Irons et al., 2019; Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016). Dingle et al. (2014) have suggested that these benefits can be grouped according to three main themes, namely (i) *personal impacts*: including emotional, spiritual and positive- self experiences; (ii) *social impacts*: including social interactions within and between the choir, the other members and the audience, in addition to higher levels of social functioning; and (iii) the more physical, functional outcomes, including benefits to health and lifestyle. Clift & Hancox (2001) extended this model to include a total of six dimensions of positive benefit. These are (i) feelings of general well-being and relaxation, (ii) breathing and posture, (iii) social, (iv) spiritual, (v) emotional and (vi) benefits to the heart and immune system. Additional findings from their study included that woman, appeared to be significantly more likely to experience increased feelings of well-being and relaxation than men, and that younger people were more likely to report on the social benefits of singing rather than the musical or the physical.

More specifically, further studies have reported on how individual levels of physical wellbeing tend to increase significantly following participation in a choral activity (e.g. Kirsch et al., 2013; Teater & Baldwin, 2014), with further work identifying improved breathing, posture, voice quality and lung capacity as benefitting significantly from choral activity (Abell et al., 2016; Stegemöller et al., 2017). In terms of the emotional and social benefits, previous research has reported that singing in community choirs promoted positive changes in mood (Unwin, Kenny & Davies, 2002), generated increased levels of social connection and cohesion (Pearce et al., 2016; Southcott & Joseph, 2015), promoted a sense of personal and group fulfilment (Sanal & Gorsev, 2014), decreased levels of anxiety, and increased levels of self-confidence and overall wellbeing (Hillman, 2002). Wigram & Bonde, (2019) for example, demonstrated that the increased number of friendships and social interactions which membership of a community choir facilitated frequently led to reduced feelings of isolation, reduced levels of depression, a broadening of individual identity, and increased motivation to make positive life-style changes (see also Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014).

Although Durrant & Himonedes described singing as a ‘human need’ (1998, p.17), it has also been reported that the high levels of social interaction gained through community choir membership can often be as important to members as the musical and singing aspects (Durrant, 2005). Hence, given the idea that friendship, social interaction and companionship often appear to be considered either more important or at least as important as the singing and musical participation (Joseph & Southcott, 2015), this project explores the experiences and feelings of adults who sing on a regular basis with one of a number of community choirs during an extended period of enforced social isolation. While many professional music ensembles have been able to play and perform together in a virtual environment, this technical capacity has not been readily available to most of those who take part in local community choral groups, hence this project sought to understand better how the enforced period of isolation impacted, if at all, on community choirs and their members.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing period of isolation brought about by the necessary lockdown confined people to their homes, prevented them from going to work and from interacting in almost all social settings. The list of health issues which people experienced, brought on by this prolonged period of isolation was significant and concerning (Kumar et al., 2020). Those people living with already existing specific health conditions such as cancer (Spence, 2020), alcohol dependency (Jayakumar, 2020), visual impairment (Jackson et al., 2021), and diabetes (Joensen et al., 2020), have been subject to increased levels of anxiety as the requirement to isolate created severe challenges to their everyday living. Furthermore, a growing number of studies have started to highlight the impact of isolation on mental health (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). For example, recent reports have identified increases in levels of stress, depression, and insomnia (Torales, 2020) along with higher levels of aggression against the self and others (Abramson, 2020; Malik & Naemm, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, this recent period of prolonged isolation has forced people to make major changes to the way they live (WHO, 2020). Enforced isolation has naturally resulted in reduced levels of social contact and removed many of the opportunities which people usually have for interacting with others in a range of social contexts. This in itself has been a cause for concern amongst health workers, with some medical professionals arguing that taking action to combat the '*deleterious health effects of social isolation*' are just as important as finding ways to prevent the virus from spreading (Eghtesadi, 2020). Yet, although studies on the impact of the virus are still emerging, a number of authors have already identified how musical activities can be beneficial in very specific contexts (Giordano et al., 2020; Mastnak, 2020; Murell et al., 2020). Certainly, the need for populations to come together and 'sing' was best highlighted in Italy where people joined together to sing from their own balconies; an act which clearly demonstrated "*the spontaneity of sharing and bonding emotions through singing (and music) of different individuals*" (Corvo et al., 2020).

Given that much of the previous literature has stressed the importance of the 'social' within the community choir, sometimes even overshadowing the 'musical', this study sought to better understand the impact of the extended period of isolation brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic on individuals who sing in community choirs. As such, our 3 research questions were:

- i) What benefits do participants in community choirs gain from their membership?
- ii) To what extent have community choir members been affected by the absence of choral participation brought on by the period of isolation?
- iii) To what extent have the opinions of community choir members been affected by the period of enforced isolation?

2. Procedure, sample and analysis.

Ethical approval for the research was given by the lead author's institution before data collection began. Initially, e-mail contact was made with officers representing a range of community choirs throughout England and Wales with each officer passing on the invitation to their membership. The invitation contained details of the study purpose and set down the ethical criteria by which the study would be carried out. An on-line questionnaire was developed and piloted prior to being circulated. As a result of the pilot study (n=5), a number of minor clarifications were made to three of the questions. The questionnaire link was sent to the all choir members through their representative. As such, no personal data or identifying information was collected. The questionnaire included an initial landing page which again outlined the ethical criteria to which the study would adhere along with a request to confirm that all participants were over the age of 18 years. Participants were notified that by choosing to continue to the questionnaire, they were giving their informed consent to participate.

The on-line questionnaire contained 43 questions based in three themed categories namely i) health and wellbeing, ii) purpose, background and identity of participants, and iii) the impact of lockdown; that

is to say, the impact of the enforced period of isolation brought on by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Quantitative data was collected in 39 of the 43 questions which utilized a 5-point Likert Scale. Four further questions covered participants gender, age group, musical background and rationale for choir membership. Additionally, all participants who completed the on-line questionnaire were invited to submit any further qualitative data or comment via email to the research team. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Responses were obtained from participants (n=152) representing seven community choirs in England. Although the participating choirs included mixed and single sex groups, the final sample was not balanced for gender with responses from 46 males, 85 females and three participants who identified as non-binary. The research design followed an adapted 'explanatory', mixed method approach (Creswell, 2003) in which the quantitative data was collected via the on-line questionnaire and analysis of the responses was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Nine individual participants, from four of the choirs then opted to provide more detailed qualitative data via email. Therefore, in terms of data analysis procedure, the quantitative data was treated as the 'priority' data (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and was analysed first leading to a series of initial conclusions. These conclusions then formed the framework of analysis for the qualitative data analysis in that responses from the additional qualitative data were selected in those cases where the thoughts and ideas either augmented, supported or further explained the conclusions proposed by the analysis of the quantitative data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overview

93.2% of the respondents reported feeling that being a member of their community choir improved their overall level of wellbeing, with 86.1% noting a reduction in their levels of stress and anxiety and 67.4% reported feeling better able to cope with the week following participation in the choir; similarly, 61.7% reported feeling more confident in themselves. In common with previous studies, participants expressed a wide range of reasons as to why they joined the choir, including developing a new interest and new skill (73% and 63% respectively), the opportunity to increase friendships (48%), and having the opportunity to achieve something greater than themselves (74%). However, by far the most significant reasons related simply to wanting to sing (92%), and having a long-term love of music (90%). A further 90.8 % of respondents reported feeling a great sense of personal achievement following a session of singing with their choir and 37% reported experiencing and feeling more spiritual. 60% of participants reported feeling a sense of having contributed something to society. 47% felt that singing made them more tolerant of others, 65.4% felt they became more outgoing socially as a result of belonging to their choir and 95% felt strongly that choir membership improved their overall health. The additional qualitative data provided further support for these findings with several of the participants noting increased levels of energy, lasting improvements to mood, removal of worry and causes of stress, and feelings of achievement. For example:

'I sometimes feel like not going to choir - in bad weather or heavy day at work, but it is so positive, I come away feeling I can't wait for next week to come quick enough' (P4)

Of specific interest was that the positive effect of the choir did not seem to diminish during the period of lockdown. That is, although participants were clear about how much they missed the choir, they became increasingly animated and positive when they described it. This effect was best summarized as follows:

'I quite often sit and think about pieces I struggled with – WE struggled with but I think about how we laughed about it and in the end we did it – we were very proud... just thinking about it NOW ...gets to me' (P2)

It appeared that what we could term as ‘the holding power’ of belonging to the choir continued throughout the period of isolation and memories of particular events, struggles with certain passages and the communal achievement were easily brought to mind and influenced the participants’ current mood, feelings of self-achievement and fulfilment, and self-worth (Coulton et al., 2015). We discuss this issue further at a later point in the paper.

3.2 *Impact of lockdown*

Overall, the quantitative data suggested that the social aspects of singing together were more important than the purely musical. In the whole sample, 86% of respondents identified feeling a distinct sense of loss relating to the choir in general, whereas 91% reported missing the social aspects of the choir and 86% were really looking forward to the choir re-starting. Again, the relative values apparently placed on the social and the musical elements of choir membership were of significant interest. Whilst 39% of members felt their interest in music had increased and 40% felt their interest in singing had increased, 81% had stayed in social contact with other members. As a result, 60% had positively re-evaluated their need for belonging to their choir, 51% felt that the choir had become more important in their lives, and 48% felt that singing had become more important to them. Only 30% had listened to more music during the lockdown and 40% had either sung alone or sung in other contexts, e.g. along with the radio. Hence, on the basis of the quantitative data, it appears that, in agreement with previous studies, the social activities which accompany choir membership could initially be seen to be as, or more important than the musical element.

Qualitative data again supported the general idea that the positive impact of choir membership was somewhat unique and hard to replace. The period of lockdown provided a stimulus for reflection by highlighting what was missing. Individuals noted that singing alone, or listening to more music did not achieve the same ends. 87% of participants in the survey reported not having looked for, or wished to develop an alternative activity to the choir and none of the participants reported having done so.

‘It’s an all in one isn’t it – choir – you get it all... a good sing and a good chat.. good exercise and even tea in the middle.. and the concerts are good in the community – what else can do that!’ (P1)

In a number of instances, some of the choirs had arranged to sing together online. One reported advantage of this, was that each individual singer could not necessarily be heard, and this was seen as being advantageous in a number of ways. One participant described how this had enabled them to become more ‘experimental’ in the way they sang and so as a consequence they had learned more about their own abilities and their voice. Similarly, a second participant reported that:

‘I was able to sing whichever part I wanted...not the one I have to sing, which is usually alto... but what I wanted... I could sing tenor if I wanted to ! (P4)

Another participant spoke of how she had sung soprano for years and in one sense she had ‘heard’ other parts being sung. However, during the singing online, she had begun to join in with the other parts during periods when the soprano part was resting. This enabled her to experience other parts in a different way; an activity that caused her to state:

‘I am now far more aware of how the various parts fit in and what they do and how it all fits together’ (P1)

This type of response could account for the reported increase in musicality, as highlighted by the quantitative data. In short, the period of lockdown enabled, and encouraged some individuals to

become more creative and to learn about their own vocal abilities and techniques and the structure of the musical pieces they engaged with. From this perspective, the online singing during the period of isolation could be said to have provided a real ‘music education’.

The correlation analyses revealed a strong positive association between feeling less stress and experiencing an increased ability to cope after the choir session ($r=.602$). In addition, the more socially outgoing the participants felt after participating in the choir, the more they tended to report feeling confident ($r=.613$), more tolerant ($r=.529$), and more respectful of others ($r=.514$). There were also strong positive correlations between the participants’ sense of achievement and their feeling more respectful ($r=.655$), and more tolerant ($r=.605$). Finally, the more that participants felt the choir was important to them, the more they tended to find increased levels of meaning in the choir ($r=.620$). These results suggest that the period of lockdown enabled participants to reflect on the meaning and value of the choir in their lives, with the social and health (physical and mental) elements of choir membership appearing to be more important than the musical ones.

It is probably important at this point to highlight the fact that although the descriptive results might suggest that participants may find the social factors to be more important than the musical ones, we would probably argue that the music is acting as the vehicle through which the social factors become more ‘effective’. Previous studies have recorded how singing, and in particular group singing, tends to increase feelings of social closeness (Keeler et al., 2015; Welch et al., 2014), which can probably be explained through changes in body chemistry. Listening to and partaking in musical activity brings about clearly measurable changes in body chemistry, including increased levels of oxytocin and decreased levels of cortisol and amylase (Chandra & Levitin, 2013; Kreutz et al., 2004; Marshall & Shibazaki, 2017; Oishi et al., 2017). Oxytocin in particular is associated with decreased levels of stress and anxiety, and associated with promoting increased relaxation and social bonding (Heinrichs et al., 2003). Therefore, purely from the perspective of body chemistry, it could be expected that participants might report decreased levels of anxiety and stress, together with a corresponding increase in levels of wellbeing, tolerance, relaxation, social engagement and closeness. What is interesting here is that the positive effect of singing, or the memory of it and the meaning attributed to it appear to have remained fairly constant throughout the prolonged period of isolation. This was an un-expected finding. Social identity theory argues that belonging to a group with a strong identity, structure and the opportunity to unite behind a common and meaningful purpose, can impact in a positive way on our physical and mental health (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Additionally, Haslam et al., (2009) noted that even minor changes to a group can impact negatively on our overall wellbeing and threaten our social identity. Therefore, it might be expected that the enforced major changes brought about by the period of social isolation would have a negative impact on the social identity of the choir members. However, in the final analysis, we found no real evidence that this had taken place, with only 8% of the participants reported experiencing any decrease in their level of interest and commitment to the choir.

This is an interesting result which in one sense goes against the findings obtained by previous studies. For example, Pearce et al. (2017), carried out a longitudinal study of four singing classes over a period of seven months, ‘*comprising of two terms with a break in the middle*’ (p.498). The study explored the impact of the break on both the ‘collective’ and the ‘relational’ bonding which occurred within the four choirs. As Pearce (ibid) explained:

“social connections can be either relational, whereby an individual can define themselves in terms of their personal relationships with specific others (partners, relatives, friends), or social connections can be collective: to a group or social category rather than to individual group members.” (p. 497).

Findings from this longitudinal study suggested that following the ‘break’ in singing, the levels of ‘collective bonding’ felt by participants (that is feelings towards the common purpose and identity of the

group) increased, whereas the levels of ‘relational bonding’ felt by participants (that is the feelings towards individual people) decreased. This suggests that among these four choirs, the participants’ dominant association was to the shared purpose and identity of the group, rather than to each other. However, responses from the current study, evidenced first by the fact that 81% of participants had actively sought to remain in contact with each other during the lockdown period, and second by the fact that members overwhelmingly rejected the need to find an alternative outlet for their musical and singing interests and abilities, do not support this. The findings from the current study suggest that either both the collective and relational bonding within the choirs remained the same across the period of lockdown, or that the relational bonding was of more importance than the collective. If this finding is subsequently supported by further research work, it will provide support for the significant impact of community choir singing on the health and wellbeing of its members. Hence, perhaps this adds support to the idea that the positive engagement brought about through the relationships created through the choir, the meanings and memories associated with it and the sense of achievement gained through belonging and performing can indeed remain for significant periods of time and continue to contribute positively to our wellbeing, even during a significant period of isolation. This possible long-term impact of musical activity on wellbeing is an issue worthy of further research.

3.3 Lockdown and Positive Wellbeing

Two of our research questions were designed to explore the impact of the period of social isolation and the corresponding absence of choir singing on the overall levels of wellbeing and changing attitudes amongst our participants. In order to establish the relative level of wellbeing in participants, we applied the five elements of Seligman’s (2011) model of wellbeing to our data. This conceptual framework suggests that there are five components which contribute to our overall level of wellbeing, namely:

- Positive emotions
- Engaging thoroughly with the activity
- Building relationships
- Assigning meaning
- Sense of achievement

Activities which facilitate these components may impact significantly on our overall levels of wellbeing. We argue here that membership and engagement with a community choir might be the perfect activity for facilitating long term social and physical wellbeing by virtue of the fact that choir membership incorporates all five components of Seligman’s (2008) well-being framework. Evidence of positive emotions can be seen in the responses to the six questions relating directly to positive emotions, which were rated highly (i.e. strongly agree) by an average of 77.1% of the participants, with the qualitative data offering further support. Again, participants who supplied additional data spoke of the wish to re-start their rehearsals again and:

‘I can’t wait to get back that.... ‘buzz’... that it leaves you with... when you finish the singing’ (P3)

Engagement was illustrated in three main ways: first, through the commitment and dedication demonstrated by members in working through even the most difficult pieces of music; second, through their willingness to experiment and become more creative in their singing during the period of lockdown; and third, evidence of engagement with the choir as a living entity rather than just an enjoyable hobby. Respondents described the choir as: ‘developing’ and ‘evolving’ and one participant said:

‘It’s grown..... and we have grown with it... and we sort of ...feed off the energy we produce’ (P5)

The importance of Relationships was amply illustrated through the number of individuals who kept in touch socially, sang together online and described the social aspects of the choir. Two participants spoke of the choir as being a social ‘leveller’; a place where you meet and build friendships with people from all class groups and all walks of life:

‘We are all singers...nothing more... I have been in touch with people I never otherwise would have met, let alone become good friends with’ (P1)

The importance of Meaning is probably best illustrated through the sustained musical and social identity of the choir, which members reported was preserved throughout the period of isolation. Similarly, the role of Achievement was illustrated by the importance which participants gave to their activities as ‘volunteers’ in taking part in an ‘*uncoerced activity that creates public good through a structured setting*’ (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014. p.194). The community choir enabled them to contribute to, and achieve something that was beyond the scope of what they could achieve as individuals. Our quantitative data suggested that 90.8% of participants felt an overall sense of achievement, with 60% noting the sense of contributing to something to society.

‘People know us in the area and we represent something about this place and we do our best for our area...it’s not just about doing something for ourselves’ (P4)

3.4 Gender differences

Although gender was not a set variable within the research design, there were number of interesting findings. A Kruskal Wallis test revealed a significant difference between males and females with regard to the overall reported level of wellbeing ($p = .035$). The reported mean rank for males was 56.88 with the mean rank for females being 71.43. Whilst this result concurs with that previously obtained by Clift & Hancox (2001), given the imbalance in male and female participants, this finding must be interpreted with caution. Results from the Kruskal Wallis tests suggest three more areas of interest which, although not reaching a level of significance in this study, provide an indication of further differences. Mean ranks for females were consistently higher in response to the statements relating to coping with the coming week, with mean rank for males of 55.49 and 69.17 for females ($p = .057$), and females appearing more likely to feel a ‘sense of loss’ resulting from the period of isolation than males, with mean ranks of 67.81 and 59.86 respectively. There was a trend that males appeared more likely than females to join the choir in order to ‘develop a new interest’. Again, although this finding was not significant ($p = .056$), mean ranks of 73.31 and 59.21 for males and females respectively indicated that in a more balanced sample, this might reach significance.

Finally, the data revealed that choir membership held significantly more meaning for those few participants who preferred to identify themselves as non- binary. While the number of participants in our present study was small, the level of significance was high, and as Davidson and Almeida (2014) argued, overarching trends in data can be identified even when based on a small data set. In our sample, most of the participants who identified as non-binary were significantly more likely to strongly agree with statements relating to increased levels of confidence, becoming significantly more outgoing socially, and feeling more able to cope with work following experiences with their choir. Similarly, almost all reported that keeping touch with friends during the lockdown period appeared to be significantly more important than for other respondents. Finally, almost all reported that whilst the importance of the choir had increased, this tended to be for social rather than musical reasons. Thus suggesting that choir membership can possibly enable self-actualisation, as well as fulfilling the emotional, and social needs as described by Tarrant et al. (2000). We therefore suggest that this may possibly be a fruitful avenue for further research.

4. Discussion

Our first research question asked what benefits participants gained from their membership of a community choir and, in common with previous studies, we found that reported benefits included increased levels of physical, social and mental wellbeing (Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016). Participants reported that choir membership improved their overall levels of wellbeing, as well as increasing their levels of confidence and self-esteem. Motivations to join included a wish to increase social interactions and enlarge a friendship circle, develop a new skill and sing with others in order to satisfy a love of music and to be involved in creating something greater than could be achieved alone (Wigram & Bonde, 2019). A sense of belonging and achievement was apparent alongside the idea of contributing something back to society. Second, the social aspect appeared to be a significant reason for joining and attending a choir. In common with Durrant, (2005), it seemed that the social aspects of choir membership were perceived to be of greater significance than the musical. However, we have suggested here that the ability of music to have a positive impact on feelings of social cohesion, may in fact be enhancing the way that the social element is experienced. In other words, the actual number and quality of social interactions and relationships existing within a community choir are not necessarily different from those taking place in other non-musical community settings, however they are experienced in a more meaningful and deeper way as a result of occurring in a musical context.

Our second research question asked about the extent to which community choir members had been affected by the absence of choral participation brought on by the period of isolation. Responses suggested that the lockdown had created an opportunity for reflection on the meaning and role of the choir within the lives of the participants, and in almost all cases, brought about a renewed sense of its importance. Beyond this, whilst the enforced break had created a sense of loss in some participants, there had also emerged a number of positives; namely the opportunity to sing and join together online. In those instances where choirs had engaged in ‘virtual’ singing, this experience contributed to increased levels of creativity and experimentation, with individual singers trying out new roles, different voices and opportunities for learning more about their own voices and musicality.

We further argue that the enforced period of lockdown highlighted that the positive impact of community choir singing appears to be durable, with the benefits being sustained throughout significant periods of absence. That is, the positive impact of choir membership appears to some extent to remain long after the actual activity has ceased, and we coupled this with the possible notion that the community choir setting enables both collective and relational bonding to take place in equal measures.

Our third research question asked about the extent to which the opinions of community choir members had been affected by the period of enforced isolation. Participants’ responses suggested that the period of lockdown and the opportunity to reflect on the role and the benefits of belonging to their choir had brought about little or no change in their opinions. 60% of participants acknowledged that they had re-evaluated the need, or the place of the choir in their life, and in most instances the importance of the choir and of singing had increased. As no personal or identifying data was collected for the participants, it was not possible to follow-up or to track changes in individuals over time. However, it would appear that for the majority of participants, the choir had always been important and remained so throughout the period of the lockdown. For those participants who carried out some form of reflection, the positive value and benefit of choir membership increased, with only 8% of participants feeling their commitment to the choir had in any way decreased.

Over and above the immediate responses to our research questions, the study identified a number of additional questions which could provide fruitful areas of future research. First, an in-depth study of the nature of the actual choir to which an individual chooses to belong (political, social, cultural etc.) could deepen our understanding of how individuals assign meaning to their membership and how this contributes to their identity. For example, we were particularly interested in the way in which participants who identified their gender as being ‘non-binary’ experienced their membership of the choir as being

especially meaningful. Hence, more detailed knowledge of how choirs may be able to satisfy the requirements of individual participants would make an important contribution, and help to move beyond our current understandings that choirs make us feel better and are socially important to us.

Second, we argue that in spite of the quantitative evidence to the contrary, the idea that the social aspects of belonging to a choir are equally or more important than the musical aspects is not necessarily accurate. We have suggested here that collective engagement in choral singing enhances feelings of wellbeing, and therefore there may not in fact be a predominance of the social over the musical aspects. In other words, engagement with music, and with singing in particular, might act as a catalyst that both facilitates and enhances the social interactions.

Third, in addition to the three themes proposed by Dingle et al. (2014), the six dimensions devised by Clift & Hancox (2001), and the five components of positive functioning proposed by Seligman (2008), we argue that the period of lockdown and, in particular the opportunity to sing together in virtual contexts, has enabled us to identify a further dimension of community choir membership; namely that of music education. This dimension provides participants with the opportunity to explore and learn about their own voice and to better understand the construction of the musical pieces they take part in.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the lockdown brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic on members of community choirs in England. The study provided further evidence for the positive and beneficial impact that singing together can have on our physical and mental wellbeing. Lockdown can be said to have provided an opportunity for reflection on choir membership, and has highlighted the importance of the social in the lives of the individuals who belong to choirs. We argued that the meaning and importance of choir membership appears to show resilience and is able to withstand significant periods of non- participation.

Overwhelmingly, the responses support the idea of singing as a unique, interesting and beneficial activity, which almost anyone can participate in. Singing in a community choir is enjoyable, and most of all it increases our levels of physical and mental wellbeing by facilitating creativity and enabling us to add meaning and enhance the social dimensions of our lives. As Pearce (2017) has argued:

“Since both relational and collective bonding may play roles in promoting health and well-being..... behaviours and activities that can facilitate the development of personal relationships on the one hand, and collective identities on the other, could yield substantial public health benefits” (p.497)

It would appear that membership of a community choir can achieve the development of both personal relationships and collective identities, and therefore its importance as a non-pharmacological activity in improving public health should be further explored and ultimately utilised to the full.

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