Singing in later life: the anatomy of a community choir
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Previous research has highlighted the individual and social benefits of participation in arts activities for physical, psychological and social wellbeing. However, less is known about the transformative community aspects of the arts and very few studies have investigated arts participation over a substantial period. This paper reports a case study of an older people's choir over a four-year period, involving interviews, focus groups, observations and a World Café participatory discussion. In support of previous literature, choir members highlighted many individual and interpersonal benefits of being part of the choir. They also emphasised the importance of developing social relationships within a supportive community, and the importance of musical achievement was central to the ongoing development of the choir. Our analysis identified five main themes: personal investment and reward; inclusive community; always evolving yet fundamentally unchanged; a desire to connect; and leadership and organisation. Considering these with reference to Seligman's PERMA framework from positive psychology (2011), it is apparent that social relationships, meaning and accomplishment are particularly emphasised as reasons why older people find singing in a community choir so beneficial for wellbeing. Sustainability is a major concern, and factors such as an expert music leader to support this are identified.

Contemporary industrialised society presents multiple challenges to health and wellbeing, including stress, pace of life, and social isolation. In addition, the rapidly ageing population brings a specific range of social and health challenges (Koutsogeorgou et al., 2014; United Nations, 2010). Ageing affects both mental and physical health, which put strain on both the health and the social care systems (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2013). Declining physical health, the increased prevalence of conditions such as dementia, Parkinson's disease, increases in social isolation and loneliness and a large population of older people living in care homes are all challenges that need effective remedies to help older people engage in 'successful ageing' (Skingley, Clift, Coulton & Rodriguez, 2011).

As we shall show, the arts, music in particular, and singing specifically, can provide powerful and cost-effective ways of meeting these challenges. Engagement in creative and cultural activities makes the highest contribution to older people's wellbeing (Age UK, 2017). Singing is a particularly accessible musical activity. Few specialist resources are required beyond a singing leader, and basic technical skills can be rapidly mastered. The past few decades have seen an explosion of singing groups specifically for older participants, such as Silver Song Clubs and the Golden Oldies. Concurrently research exploring the effects of singing on physical, mental and social wellbeing has proliferated (e.g., White, 2009; Clift, Nichol, Raisbeck, Whitmore & Morrison, 2010; Reagon, Gale, Enright, Mann & van Deursen, 2016).

From a physical health perspective, small to moderate effects of singing have been found in healthy adults: choral singing (compared to solo singing or swimming) leads to reduced self-reported tension and increased hedonic tone (Valentine & Evans, 2001); choral singing (compared to listening to choral music) to increases in positive affect and secretory

immunoglobulin (Kreutz, Bongard, Rohrmann, Hodapp & Grebe, 2004); and adult and older singers (compared to non-singers) show higher levels of perceived physical health (Johnson, Louhivuori & Siljander, 2017; Vaag, Saksvik, Milch, Theorell & Bjerkeset, 2014). Singing can be beneficial for those suffering from conditions such as Parkinson's disease (Abell, Baird & Chalmers, 2016; Di Benedetto et al., 2009; Stegemöller, Radig, Hibbing, Wingate & Sapienza, 2017), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (Morrison et al., 2013), irritable bowel syndrome (Grape, Wikström, Ekman, Hasson & Theorell, 2010) and pain (Hopper, Curtis, Hodge & Simm, 2016). Physical benefits are also often reported in qualitative studies, including its energizing capacity and benefits for breathing, posture, voice quality and lung capacity (Abell et al., 2016; Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Clift & Hancox, 2001).

The psychological benefits of singing have also been clearly demonstrated. Singing enhances quality of life, satisfaction, emotional wellbeing, personal growth, and mood (Clift et al., 2010b; Hallam & Creech, 2016; Pérez-Aldeguer & Leganés, 2014), and choir members typically report improvements in physical and mental health (Cohen et al., 2006; Teater & Baldwin, 2012) and psychological wellbeing (Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016). Singing generates positive emotions like joy and energy, and helps reduce negative emotions like stress (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Judd & Pooley, 2014). Those with health conditions experience cognitive and psychological benefits, including improved mood and concentration and reduced stress, as a result of singing (e.g. for people with dementia; Bannan & Montgomery-Smith, 2008; Davidson & Fedele, 2011; for cancer carers and patients; Fancourt et al., 2016).

The social dimensions and benefits of singing are also important. The group is often referred to when talking about perceived benefits of singing (e.g. Judd & Pooley, 2014), and Pearce, Launay and Dunbar (2015) found singing enabled faster social bonding than other creative activities. Group singing fosters a range of social outcomes including enhanced social support, positive relationships and reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness (Bailey & Davidson, 2002, 2005; Clift & Morrison, 2011; Pérez-Aldeguer & Leganés, 2014; Teater & Baldwin, 2012). Participation in group singing can be transformative for individuals and community mobilization, particularly for marginalised communities (e.g. Dingle, Brander, Ballantyne & Baker, 2013), which might explain why choral singing is more beneficial than solo singing (Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016; Valentine & Evans, 2001).

Involvement in group singing thus has the potential to bring physical and psychological benefits and to address many of the challenges identified earlier for ageing populations, including combatting loneliness, depression and social exclusion. However, little is still known about the processes and mechanisms involved (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). How much singing is necessary to generate improvements? Immediate and short-term effects are well established. Studies show enhancements in physical and psychological health within a single experimental session (e.g. Kreutz et al., 2004) and between 3 to 6 months (Coulton, Clift, Skingley &

Rodriguez, 2015; Grape et al., 2010; Särkamö et al., 2016a). Intervention studies have offered singing opportunities which are by definition time-limited (e.g. Vaag et al., 2014). A randomised control trial of singing for a general older population found significant reductions in anxiety and depression after a 3 month singing intervention but no effects at all 3 months after singing stopped (Coulton et al., 2015), and thus continued access to the singing activity seems important. Other studies have explored existing singing groups or groups of people who regularly sing without being able to account for time in their design (e.g. Clift et al., 2010), and research has not yet addressed the longitudinal aspects of being in a choir.

Engaging in a short term activity can forge rapid bonds (Pearce et al., 2016), and Coulton et al. (2015) noted four of their five experimental singing groups wanted to meet and sing after the end of the project, However, short-term interventions such as these do not often facilitate community building, which is vital for generating sustainable and authentic activities and benefits (Koutsogeorgou et al., 2014; Murray & Lamont, 2012). Taking a qualitative and critical social approach to research, we turn away from narrowly defined social indicators (cf. Davidson & Fedele, 2011) and short-term interventions to study community singing in context and over time, drawing on findings from Haslam, Cruwys and Haslam (2014) that group social engagement positively influenced cognitive function in older adults over extended time periods. Furthermore, we adopt Putland's (2008) view that approaching art as something of value in itself and not merely as a tool for social engagement allows us to understand how community art facilitates community wellbeing (Murray & Lamont, 2012).

To understand how music boosts positive mood and contributes to longer-term wellbeing, we apply a positive psychology framework (Seligman, 2011) which identifies types of positive influence known to be important. Seligman argues that balanced wellbeing results from a balance between five different components. The first hedonic state refers to positive emotions, and four eudaimonic states are also included: a sense of engagement or absorption with the activity itself (sometimes termed flow); social relationships; a search for meaning or connections beyond the individual, achieved through spirituality, or religion; and accomplishment, referring to the sense of achievement gained by completing a task.

This PERMA framework (illustrated in Figure 1) explains how long-term wellbeing is achieved through repeated experience of various positive emotions, and has been successfully used qualitatively to explore student performers' musical memories (Lamont, 2012) and professional musicians' experiences of wellbeing (Ascenso, Williamon & Perkins, 2016). There are no quantitatively validated measures of this framework as yet and our aim in this study is to explore qualitative experiences and meanings of music-making. Here PERMA provides an analytic guide to interpret participants' experiences of the benefits of singing in a choir. We adopted a qualitative mixed-methods approach, including individual interviewing, focus groups, observations, and a World Café participatory discussion, in a case study of a choir at two time

points (2009 and 2013). This longitudinal element is rare in research into arts interventions or community groups, and enabled us to consider the development and sustainability of the group and its integration into local communities. We examined the role of the choir in participants' lives, focusing on health and wellbeing while allowing space for other emergent issues. Qualitative methods allowed participants to tell their own stories about what they valued and, more importantly, why the choir was important to them in the context of retirement and growing older. We also explored how the choir developed from a funded council initiative into an independently sustainable self-governing group.
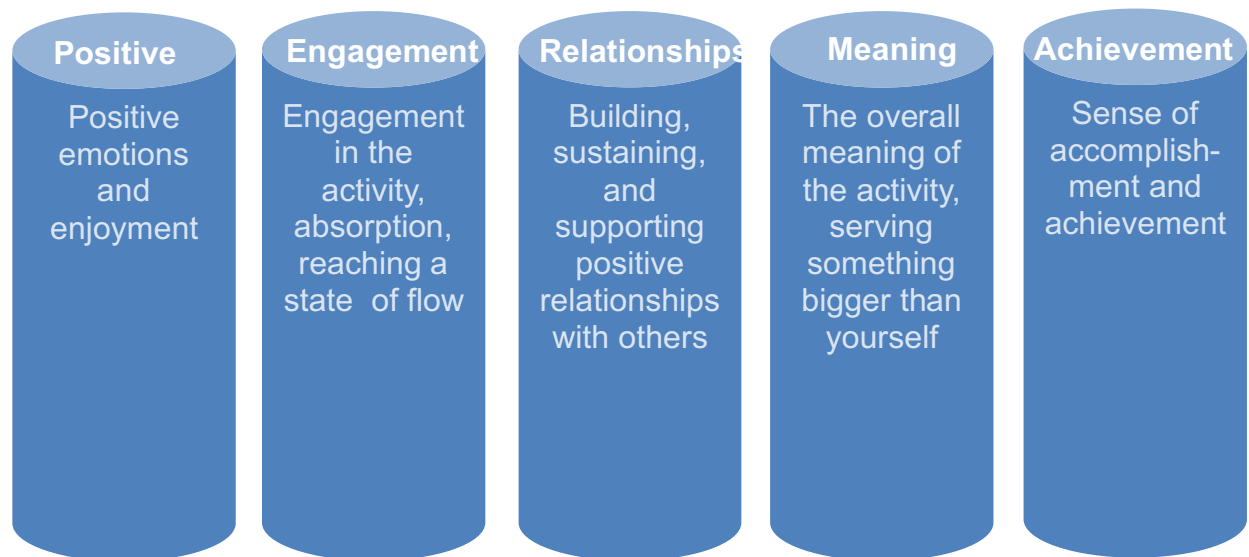
Positive	Engagement	Relationships	Meaning	Achievement
Positive emotions and enjoyment	Engagement in the activity, absorption, reaching a state of flow	Building, sustaining, and supporting positive relationships with others	The overall meaning of the activity, serving something bigger than yourself	Sense of accomplish-ment and achievement

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for wellbeing (Seligman, 2011)

Methods

Participants

Participants were members of a community choir and those involved in organising, leading and supporting the choir at two time points: summer 2009 (Phase 1) and summer 2013 (Phase 2). The choir was set up in 2008 by Manchester city council as an ageing initiative, with a very open recruitment policy. Initially, members were recruited through visits by council staff to the local community and via advertisement in the media. As the choir evolved, more members were recruited through word of mouth and from performances targeted at groups and communities of older people. The choir met weekly for rehearsals, and performed several times a year in different venues. Repertoire included popular, classical and spiritual music from the UK and around the world. Most choir members had not engaged in music-making since childhood, almost exclusively at school.

All current choir participants were invited to take part in each phase. In Phase 1, 11 of the 28 members took part, aged 55-82 (2 male, 9 female). In Phase 2, 31 of the 40 members took part, aged (according to choir organisers' reports of minimum and maximum ages of those present) 58-78 (3 male, 28 female). The gender imbalance in the sample reflected that of the choir itself. The council staff member responsible for setting up the choir and the singing leader were also interviewed at both time points. Many choir members from Phase 1 were also participants in Phase 2, but due to the anonymous nature of the World Café discussions it was not possible to link individual data from the two time points, nor to give detailed demographic information on the group (see similar in other World Café studies, e.g. Fouché & Light, 2010).

Design

A case study was conducted of the choir at two periods four years apart. Phase 1, after a year of operation, comprised interviews and focus groups with choir members and an interview with the council staff member responsible for supporting the choir. Four years later, Phase 2 comprised individual interviews with key committee members and the singing leader as well as the same council staff member, and a World Café participatory discussion with a larger number of choir members. The World Café approach (Brown et al., 2007) is inspired by the principles of participatory research and designed to promote informal discussion. It is based on seven key principles: setting a suitable context, creating hospitable space, exploring important questions, encouraging contribution from all, cross-pollinating and connecting diverse perspectives, listening together for insights, and harvesting and sharing discoveries (Brown et al., 2007). These were implemented in the current study as described fully in the Procedure below.

Materials

Interviews and focus groups in Phase 1 followed a topic guide covering key questions such as participants' backgrounds in music, motivations for joining and perceived benefits from the choir, and what they hoped the choir might be able to achieve. The Phase 2 World Café focused on three key questions to be discussed by participants in small groups: "How do you feel after a choir rehearsal?", "Why do you feel the way you do after singing?" and "What are your hopes for the choir for the future?". In both phases organisers and committee members were interviewed using a schedule covering some of the same topics as for choir participants with more in-depth questions about organising and guiding the choir, the current state of the choir, sustainability and future development.

Procedure

In Phase 1 the first and third authors visited and observed a rehearsal to introduce the project and recruit participants, and information sheets were distributed. The third author then contacted all those participants who were willing to be interviewed and organised and conducted focus groups (in person) and individual interviews (in person or by telephone). The first author interviewed the council staff member responsible for establishing the choir. Consent forms were signed before each interview.

In Phase 2 the council staff member, the singing leader, and members of the organising committee were individually interviewed by the first author and a research assistant. Subsequently the fourth author and an assistant visited a rehearsal to explain the World Café and participants were given written information sheets. Two weeks later the World Café was held immediately after a choir rehearsal in the same building, facilitated by the first and fourth authors and an assistant. A comfortable room was set up with six small tables seating 4-6 participants covered with paper tablecloths, decorated with potted plants, and a Dictaphone in the centre of each table to record discussions for subsequent transcription. Refreshments were provided throughout. The World Café procedure was verbally explained and consent forms were signed. Each table chose a host from their participants to welcome others when conversation topics and group members changed. The first author then introduced each topic of conversation to the whole room, with supporting written information on menu cards ("Starter", "Main Course" and "Dessert") to facilitate involvement by those participants with memory or hearing difficulties. Participants were simply instructed to talk about the given topic in their groups and to make any notes or drawings they felt like on the tablecloths. Each discussion topic lasted for approximately 20 minutes, when all participants except table hosts were invited to move to have a fresh group for the next topic.

After the three discussions, a plenary Town Hall Meeting was held and participants shared responses to the final topic about future hopes for the choir with the entire group. (The other two topics were not shared more widely due to time and energy limitations.) Participants were thanked for their time and reminded of the procedures to withdraw data. The World Café lasted about 3 hours including lunch and a comfort break. One participant was unwilling to be quoted directly and her contributions were included in analysis but not quoted here.

Analysis

Audio recordings from interviews, focus groups and World Café discussions were transcribed and analysed inductively using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, the conceptual framework of PERMA was used to guide a second step of analysis at the level of bringing together themes (see MacFarlane & O'Reilly-de-Brún, 2012). The analysis was

conducted by the first, third and fourth authors, with themes and subthemes being checked and cross-checked throughout the analysis. All participants were happy for their first names and the name of the choir, Golden Voices, to be used in dissemination of the findings.

Results

The results are presented telescopically beginning with individual features identified by the choir members, shifting outwards to discuss social aspects of choir membership, and further outwards to connections with other choirs and singers. Finally we explore the choir's connections with other communities and its own audiences, which has previously received little attention. Differences between the two time points are considered and the key components of the theoretical framework are highlighted throughout.

<u>Personal investment and reward: engagement, accomplishment and positive emotions</u>

The first theme concerned individual commitment and hard work, reflecting high levels of engagement with the activity, and was apparent in both phases.   Members' involvement consisted of attending weekly rehearsals, learning a wide range of songs in multiple languages, and performing at venues in and around the city. Beyond this, most members strove to involve themselves as much as possible through putting effort into singing and also by suggesting performance venues and repertoire and joining the organising committee. One member stated "we work very hard but I enjoy it" (Phase 2, World Café, Group 6, line 11).   The physicality of involvement in regular rehearsals was central:

> if you do that 'Siyahamba' you feel as though you've had a workout!
> [laughs]
> You don't need to go the gym!
> We don't need exercise, do we, when we're going to sing 'Siyahamba'. It keeps us all uplifted, doesn't it? (Phase 2 World Café, Group 6, lines 45-49)

Alongside commitment, participants reported high levels of pleasure and enjoyment. Rehearsals were described by some as 'the highlight of my week', with one group rating their mood as 9 or 10 out of 10 on choir days (World Café, Group 1, line 24).   Phrases such as 'It's purely for us, we do it for our pleasure' (Group 1 line 29) and 'I feel a bit elated' (Group 3 line 9) accord with the positive emotions component of Seligman's (2011) balanced wellbeing (Figure 2). There was an emphasis on the compulsion to sing: 'it's like a drug, a wonderful drug' (Group 4, line 126). This focus on pleasure during rehearsals also led to some unanticipated negative moods: one member described leaving rehearsals feeling 'flat, because I enjoyed it so much' (Group 2, line 5), and another said he felt 'frustrated at times if I feel like I haven't given it my best'

(Group 2, line 27). These moments of low mood served as an incentive to look forward to choir rehearsals and to perform better.
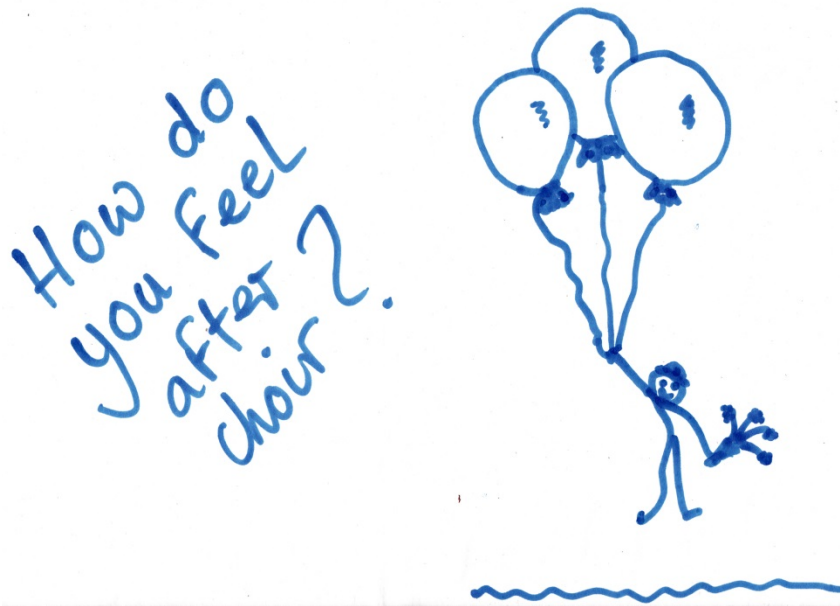

Figure 2: Doodle from World Café Phase 2 (Group 4) about how you feel after choir

This theme thus relates to engagement and subsequent accomplishment: participants were motivated to work hard to pursue particular goals and achieve good results (reflecting the intrinsic value of the activity), which in turn generated positive emotions.

Inclusive community – meaning and social relationships

The sense of community was emphasised and underlined throughout. The choir was open to all, as Jules, the singing leader, explained:

> Absolutely completely anybody can come and anybody can sing. You know it doesn't matter what your background is or your experience, this is a community choir - if you walk in the door you're in. It doesn't matter how you sing or what kind of voice you've got (Jules, Phase 2 interview, lines 45-50).

One way of fostering inclusiveness was through musical co-operation and support. This was an important characteristic from the outset, and many who had been anxious about attending were pleasantly surprised to find a supportive atmosphere. Stronger singers supported weaker ones during rehearsals:

What I do is sort of lean and Gwen will tell you, I'll tell her 'I'll lean on you' because I think she can read a bit of music where I can't and I'll lean on her, not physically, but I'm listening to her voice and as soon as I know she's going up and I can read a bit of the music and the chords, I'll go up as well (June, Phase 1 interview, lines 801-808).

June's description highlights how inclusiveness and community were bound together even at the beginning. Another member, Joan, explained that 'when you're in a group unless everybody was singing badly it wouldn't matter, because you can always hide a certain number' (Phase 1, interview, lines 193-5). In the World Café it was noted how far the choir had developed in terms of skill and thus being supportive:

From a newcomer I can see because of how good you are you've made it easy for people to join, because it's easy for me because you're so strong I can join in whereas if everyone was struggling I've got no chance (Phase 2 World Café, Group 3, line 60-62).

Another dimension of inclusive community was bringing together disparate individuals. Lowe (2000) described the ability of art to act as a unifier, and fostering collective identity and creating meaning as a unique feature of different kinds of community art projects. The choir had grown from seven to over 40 members over five years, and even after the first year Joan mentioned the collective musical 'team':

You get to know more people obviously and also different people you know, people from different walks of life, erm, and then there's, I suppose, it's a sort of team thing isn't it, you know. Because you've got to work as a team, you know, you can't be going off and doing your own thing (Joan, Phase 1 interview, lines 173-177).

From Phase 1 it was apparent that some original members already knew other members, due to the community focus of initial recruitment from local areas and community housing schemes. In Phase 2 the choir's reach had stretched far beyond this, with members living all over the city (some in sheltered housing, others independently). New recruits joined through friends, found the choir on the internet, or had witnessed an inspiring performance. The choir had become a distinct community itself, leading to wider social connections. Some members in Phase 2 talked about having choir 'buddies' and a collective responsibility for the group, for instance informing others if they could not attend. This resonates with the related concepts of meaning and of social relationships as essential determinants of wellbeing.

Over time the choir had established a strong collective community identity which also aimed to be inclusive and diverse. This was evident in the pride taken in regular performances around the city, the expanding repertoire of songs from around the world, and uploaded videos of performances. Due to the initial local community recruitment members were mostly women and

from white backgrounds. In the World Café, discussions included extending inclusion and embracing diversity. One group emphasised how they would like to see more men in the choir, and during the Town Hall discussion on ambitions for the future others suggested Involving more people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

<u>Always evolving yet fundamentally unchanged – accomplishment and meaning</u>

The third theme of change and identity was particularly prominent in Phase 2 as it related to development of the choir over time, highlighting elements holding the choir together and those connecting the choir to others. Regarding ability and skill, it was clear from observations, interviews and discussions that the choir had made substantial progress. Jules reflected on the musical achievements of the choir, their musicality, confidence, and the ability to 'stand on a public stage alongside other more formal choirs and more experienced choirs and be as good' (Jules, Phase 2 interview, lines 79-82). This reflects a clear sense of accomplishment which was also recognised by longstanding members. One original member highlighted the consistency of positive emotions in rehearsals but noted 'how different the choir is now', largely because of such improvements:

> I think now the performances are catching up with the enjoyment. It was enjoyable at first but you didn't get a lot of satisfaction from what you were singing, but now we are a very very good choir" (Phase 2 World Café, Group 3, lines 44-55).

During the World Café discussions about hopes and ambitions, grand aspirations clearly emerged. 'Bigger and better' was used by many to describe future aims. Discussions included a wide array of potential future ventures, including trips to the US, a choir exchange with Europe, and TV appearances. Alongside this however was the recurring desire to 'stay the same'. The feeling that the choir was a unique group with its own ethos, ways of working, and sense of community was very strong.

> I think one hope I have is, I know it's on the surface, I'd like to have a lot of changes but the basic things I don't want to ever change, and that's sort of the basic way that we're taught and the sort of music we do, all of that I would be devastated if any of that changed. So my hope is that things at that very basic level will always stay the same, taught in the same sort of way, doing the same sort of stuff because if it ever changed, it would just be...
> (Group 6, lines 302-310).

The idea that certain aspects such as the nature of rehearsals and songs should remain the same highlights members' core values. The choir strove to develop and to connect with others, but equally their identity and the nature of their rehearsals were valued.

<u>A desire to connect – building social relationships and meaning</u>

The fourth theme was also prominent in Phase 2, concerning longer-term elements of wellbeing as group members connected beyond their immediate circle. Having grown in confidence, musical ability and developed a strong identity, they were also able to make links with other musicians and their surrounding communities. This was partly achieved through repertoire, singing songs in different languages and from different cultures. Jules prompted these connections, but the choir responded enthusiastically.

> I think to sing multicultural songs because we live in a multicultural city, erm, to be aware of all the different communities in Manchester and refer to world events to be in touch so that you know that we are a part of something that's bigger. So you know at Christmas particularly when we were singing we sing a whole variety of Christmas songs, not necessarily Christian hymns, but even when we sing Christian hymns like *Silent Night* you know we talk about the peace process, and we refer to people in Syria or Jordan or places in non-Christian countries that are also struggling for peace. That, you know, the wider awareness, that wide belief system, because I have it and it becomes part of the identity of the choir (Jules, Phase 2 interview, lines 47-55).

This connection was also established through performing and connecting with various audiences. The choir regularly sang in sheltered accommodation, and those performances in particular were imbued with heightened emotion:

> We did a whole series of concerts and performances in those kind of places on behalf of the city council … the people in the residential accommodation, you know, they were in severe states of Alzheimer's and yet everybody participated, everybody sang, everybody danced or everybody put down the doll they were holding and listened and tapped their foot. Everybody came out of the ravages of where they were, back into who they were briefly, who they had been. It's very moving, we were all in tears after things like that, and it just shows you how powerful singing is. And these are older people and that's remarkable, but when they sing to people older than them who are in much less confident places it's astonishing. (Jules, Phase 2 interview, lines 138-147)

Here, engagement with the audience appears to be far more than simply audience participation, but reflects a deep social and community connection which provided an environment to facilitate meaningful connections through singing.

Conversations about performances in Phase 1 centred around venue layouts, practical and logistical elements, and confidence or lack thereof. In Phase 2 the theme of confidence was

largely absent, with discussion instead about preferences for new venues and audiences. The development in the confidence and cohesiveness of the choir as a group was also associated with a growing desire to connect to others in more varied locations (around the city, the country, and internationally) through singing. A drawing from the World Café (Figure 3) shows members wanted to take the choir beyond Manchester, with the image of the handcar indicating that the energy for doing so came from within.
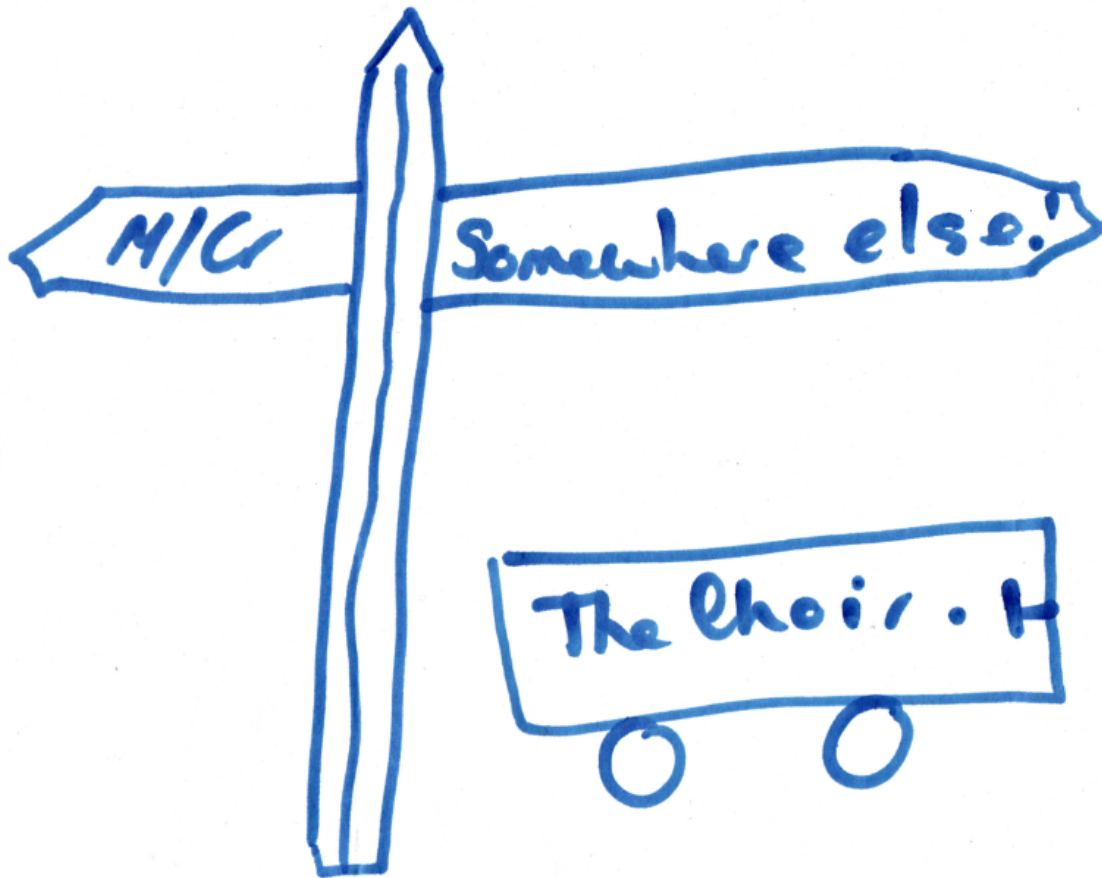

Figure 3: Doodle from World Café (Group 5) about future directions of the choir

Leadership and organisation - meaning

In Phase 2 another prominent theme concerned leadership and organisation of the choir. Jules' energy, enthusiasm and passion were evident in rehearsals and in her description of her role. She had a very clear vision of what the choir should be, providing an inclusive agenda, multicultural repertoire and sensitive support for all.

Choir members themselves clearly appreciated Jules, commenting that she was a 'gem', 'brilliant, she gets you going', and 'Jules is the choir and the choir is Jules' (Phase 2 World Café, Group 6 lines 138-142). This group also expressed the negative aspect of this inspirational leadership role, noting 'Without Jules there is no choir' (lines 143-44). Choir members did not believe they could or even wanted to perform without Jules. Four years later this dependence was still present, and Tracey expressed her concern when asked about the future:

> Other than a couple of occasions, they've only ever really worked with Jules and so they've become quite reliant on her as an MD [musical director], and some of the members would say without Jules we wouldn't have this choir. And whilst there's a lot of me that agrees with that, there's a lot of other musical directors that they could grow to love just as much as they've loved Jules. But there'd be some members that would also say "I wouldn't want to be part of a choir that didn't involve Jules" so if anything happened to Jules, God forbid, you know, could that be the end of the choir, so that's something that I think they could do with thinking about (Tracey, council community engagement officer, Phase 2 interview, lines 358-366).

As the initiator Tracey had her own vision based on experience with other community engagement projects. She began by organising a community sing-a-long session and then recruiting choir members, rather than involving the singing leader from the outset. However, over time Tracey stepped back to let the choir find its own direction, providing support to set up a committee and organisational structures. Members had taken on responsibility for future developments, and were thus also responsible for managing interpersonal relationships. Karen, the treasurer, mentioned in Phase 2 a 'little bit of a fall out between some members which unfortunately you do get' and noted that she had stepped in to ensure the continued running of the choir for the benefit of herself and also others (Phase 2 interview, lines 32-34).

Finances were also mentioned frequently by choir members and organisers. After the first year of city council support, members had to provide their own financial resource. Having secured free rehearsal space through Age UK, a charity for older people, the only cost was for Jules, the singing leader, and individual members paid £3.50 per session attended. Keeping costs down was seen as essential for continued success:

> Getting the funding, I mean, there's also coming up that we might lose our room, our performing room, so if we can't get somewhere central, somewhere easy for people to get to, erm… I know a lot of people, we don't charge much but I know people would struggle if we said we had to put the cost up and we don't want to do that. We have to look forward to continuing performing because if we let the performance side of it go I don't think people would get the same satisfaction, so we need to be able to get that funding to get us to places. (Karen, Treasurer, Phase 2 interview, lines 108-114).

Public performance had become a central plank of fundraising activities, and a necessity rather than just an inspirational goal. This relates to the first theme of accomplishment through hard work, extending it through the notion of being able to connect with others, inspire the group, and raise much-needed funds.

Discussion

This study explored the benefits and underlying dynamics of choir participation by older people, and investigated how a choir might support and develop its priorities and activities over time. The five main themes - personal investment and reward; the inclusive community; always evolving yet fundamentally unchanged; a desire to connect; and leadership and organisation – confirm many findings from previous research on the benefits of group singing and music-making for older participants, with emphasis on both personal and social gains (Clift et al., 2010a, b; Dingle et al., 2013; Judd & Pooley, 2014; Perkins & Williamon, 2014; Teater & Baldwin, 2012). The novel theme emphasising the growing importance of accomplishment and achievement had not previously been found in the singing literature over shorter time-periods (e.g. Cohen et al., 2006), although is apparent in research exploring the effects of learning musical instruments on wellbeing (Perkins & Williamon, 2014).

The two novel contributions of the current data are the application of an explanatory framework and the temporal and structural aspects of engagement with music. Firstly, the themes all connect to the elements of Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework for balanced wellbeing. Positive emotions were found to be fundamental to the enjoyment of the experience, achieved through engagement and the challenge of singing; connections to others through social interactions within and beyond the choir fostered social relationships on many levels, and enabled members to gain a sense of meaning alongside the accomplishment of learning and performing. Secondly, members of Golden Voices experienced long-lasting wellbeing from their singing activities since they were engaging over much longer time periods. While singing together may bond people more rapidly (Pearce et al., 2015), earlier findings also pointed to the lack of sustained benefits after singing stops (Coulton et al., 2015). We find here that sustained engagement leads to long-lasting relationships and meaning, supporting existing suggestions that singing together leads to deeper connections (e.g. Dingle et al., 2013) over a longer time period. Huta and Ryan (2010) suggested short-term pleasure and long-term meaning overlap to engender lasting wellbeing, and this is apparent here.

Moreover, most research into singing projects had investigated organised rather than self-organising groups. Our findings contribute new knowledge of the sustainability issues groups face. The research highlights the importance of 'project champions' and their influence on the initial success and long term sustainability of community interventions. In community development, project champions have been described as inspirational and driven individuals

whose support of a community venture is integral to its success (Zakocs, Tiwari, Vehige, & DeJong, 2008; Aoun, Shahid & Packer, 2013; Murray & Ziegler, 2015). The concept is also receiving attention in the health promotion field. For instance, O'Loughlin, Renaud, Richard, Gomez and Paradis (1998) explored factors correlating with the sustainability of 189 community heart promotion initiatives, finding a programme champion in a high percentage of sustainable initiatives. However, the current results imply that future planning is essential to avoid initiatives floundering when key figures are unable to continue their involvement.

In addition to a champion, the group itself must develop an identity. Previous research had highlighted cognitive and health benefits for older adults involved in high-quality social relationships (Haslam et al., 2013). The self-sustaining community of Golden Voices required some participants to take organising roles and all provided input into decisions about repertoire and activities. This reflects existing work highlighting that taking responsibility for the group and finding and engaging with activities meaningful for them are things that older people can and should do (Teater et al., 2015). Golden Voices also strove to connect with others beyond the choir and their own community through singing and performing. Members' ambitions to sing with others and to audiences who could engage and participate in performances demonstrated 'meaning' beyond the individual and group. Similar community projects may need to engender this same sense of meaning through social connections for those involved.

Most existing research emphasised the positive elements of singing, although there have been hints of less positive aspects: in a large survey Kreutz and Brunger (2012) found three influential sources of negative emotions within amateur choirs: conflicts with the choir leader, with other choir members, and disagreement over the type of singing. In contrast, Golden Voices had a very high level of commitment to their singing leader and the singing undertaken, with members suggesting repertoire. However, instances of less smooth inter-choir relations were found in Phase 2, alluding to prior disagreements and personality clashes that had been resolved. Furthermore, despite the clear enjoyment experienced during rehearsals, the presence of some negative emotion after singing is a new finding not previously reported. Positive psychology recognises the importance of separating out positive and negative affect (Ryff et al., 2006), and research has suggested that music-making (particularly performance) can also engender negative emotions (Beck, Cesario, Yousefi & Enamoto, 2000; Lamont, 2012). Providing structured activities which enable positive emotions and engagement through flow is important, particularly for older people who may experience a lack of structure in life (Collins, Sarkisian & Winner, 2008), but while moment-to-moment experiences are evidently important, it is also important to remember that for some, these can leave a flat feeling when they stop.

As with many investigations into community arts projects, the current research focused on one group of participants over time. This enables a close investigation through the repeated case study approach, but evidence is drawn from willing volunteers in a single setting (cf. Hallam &

Creech, 2016). The context of this choir is similar to many other singing groups, however, and the structural elements identified reflect those found in other community settings (Dingle et al., 2013; Murray & Ziegler, 2015). Mixed methods have provided different perspectives on the stages of the project; employing World Café methods at two or more time points would be a valuable addition. Future research could also fruitfully explore multiple sites over similar and longer time periods to identify any unique contextual features that particular communities bring, such as approaches which might be led more by singing experts than the community specialists. The surge of research on intergenerational practice (Kuhne & Melville, 2014) would suggest that singing groups could be set up involving participants of wide and varied age ranges to help build different kinds of cross-community relationships, and research could investigate their development and impact over time. The role of the singing leader and sustainability are key issues for future research which should be at the centre of all evaluations of community-based projects; Golden Voices provide some useful insights into challenges and ways of overcoming these.

In summary, this research has demonstrated the value of the positive psychology framework in explaining why choirs can promote levels of wellbeing in their participants over time, particularly highlighting the importance of accomplishment alongside the often-recognised influence of social relationships. We have presented empirical evidence supporting the contention that musical elements are as important as community ones in understanding how a choir functions for its members (Murray & Lamont, 2012), and provided suggestions for other community arts groups to embed within future projects.

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