

Harmony in the community:

Group perspectives on the health benefits of singing

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ABSTRACT

Singing has been linked to a wide variety of individual level health benefits, but less is known about the possible community level benefits. This study was designed to provide a better understanding of both individual and community health benefits of group singing as well as the challenges that community singing groups face. The aim was to expand on previous studies by exploring the perspectives of particular demographic groups such as those with disabilities. Focus groups were conducted with 44 participants of five different Victorian singing groups: a Sing Australia choir, a community singing group, a multicultural choir, a singing group for women with disabilities and a men's singing group. The findings suggested themes that centred around physical health, wellbeing, social, and community benefits and challenges. Participants also reported high levels of engagement in community activities. The findings have implications for singing groups and community arts policy initiatives.

The arts are believed to play an important role in the development of individuals and the broader society (Hillman 2002). Utilising the arts to promote social goals outside of conventional arts spaces is widespread and includes community arts projects in schools, prisons, hospitals and the streets (Hamilton, Hinks & Petticrew 2003). The 'arts in health' field in Australia emerged from the community arts field in the 1970s, and now encompasses a broad range of practice incorporating concepts such as community wellbeing and healthy society, (Clifford & Kaspar 2003). Over and above the well-established relationship between community arts practice and personal wellbeing (VicHealth 2002), the arts have been co-opted to assist with objectives such as building social capital, facilitating social inclusion and promoting public health (Hamilton, Hinks & Petticrew 2003). However, many of the previous studies exploring the link between the arts and health tended to focus on therapeutic relationships rather than broader wellness promotion and illness prevention objectives (Hamilton, Hinks & Petticrew 2003).

This study is concerned with one type of community arts practice: group singing. Singing has been linked to many individual benefits, and forms a major part of music therapy practice with different client groups (Hunter 1999). Group singing has become the most common community arts activity in Victoria and is popular across Australia (Community Music Victoria 2006). It has been linked to a wide variety of individual level benefits including physical health, wellbeing, and increased confidence. Yet there is a scarcity of research exploring community level benefits of group singing. The aim of this study was to explore both the individual and community level health benefits of singing in groups, from the shared perspectives of group members themselves.

The study was conducted in conjunction with research commissioned by VicHealth (Gridley, Astbury, Aguirre, & Sharples, in press) that utilised surveys to examine both individual and community level benefits of group singing. The VicHealth study relied on quantitative data that left some unanswered questions, and the range of participants was limited, with the majority being relatively affluent Anglo-Celtic Australian women. The current study aimed to build on that study and address its gaps by exploring group singing through different perspectives. More specifically, the aims of this research were to:

- explore the individual and community level health impacts of participating in a community singing group, with a view to shed light on the trends that emerged from the surveys in Gridley et al.'s study
- canvas the perspectives of particular demographic groups that were under-represented in the survey responses, for example: those with disabilities and from less affluent communities.
- explore any challenges or problems associated with singing groups.

METHOD

Focus groups were conducted with five different community singing groups at their usual place of practice either before or after their usual rehearsal time. There were a total of 44 participants, (20 male and 24 female) with an estimated age range from 20 to 70 years old. The focus group size varied from 3 to 14 participants. One focus group was conducted with members of an all male singing group, another with a singing group for women with disabilities, one was conducted with a multicultural-focused choir and two with general mixed gender community choirs.

The study utilised semi-structured focus groups interviews. The formulation of questions was guided by previous research into individual and community level benefits of the arts and community singing. The main areas of inquiry related to the personal and community benefits of singing, the 'downsides' of group singing, and how singing groups compared to other activities. With semi-structured interviews or focus groups the questions serve as a guide rather than to dictate the focus group process (Smith & Osborn 2008)

The focus group data was analysed thematically. Thematic analysis has a long history particularly in the field of health psychology, and is an ideal method for qualitative researchers within an applied or practical domain (Brown & Locke 2008). Thematic analysis aims to 'stay true to the raw data, and its meaning' (Jaffe & Yardley 2004, p. 67) instead of focusing on the frequency of codes or themes.

FINDINGS

First, a short profile of each group interviewed is provided to highlight their particular qualities, and the results of the thematic analysis are then presented. Pseudonyms are used for participants' names and the groups themselves are not named. The exception is the Sing Australia choir, as there are a many Sing Australia choirs in Australia, thus the choir is still not fully identifiable and some of the group's attributes are specific to the Sing Australia model.

SINGING GROUP PROFILES

Sing Australia choir

'And it is all about having fun; if you were a professional performance choir you would be treated differently'.

Sing Australia is made up of 28 singing groups in Victoria and over 140 groups around Australia (Sing Australia 2009). All of the choirs have the same songbooks and members can participate in any of the other Sing Australia choirs around the country. This focus group was conducted prior to their rehearsal, with six participants (two men/four women).

The group members mentioned several times throughout the focus group that there was 'no pressure' with their group, and they emphasised the lack of competition. They stated that their aim was to 'enjoy themselves', to 'relax', 'sing without pressure' and 'to bring it out of the showers'. While they commented that the age range of the choir was quite broad, the focus group participants were mostly over sixty and retired.

Men's singing group

'It's just nice for a change to have a bunch of guys really.'

The second focus group involved ten participants in an all male singing group after their rehearsal. The men appeared to be quite diverse, with ages ranging from mid 20s to retirement age and residing in a broad range of locations across Melbourne. They discussed the importance and benefits of having no women in the group:

Michael: I think one of the first things that come through is that sense of power with your voices, so you don't have to, often when you are singing with a mixed group men have to hold back, whereas we can really beef it out, and you just fill this space, and it is a feeling of power, not power in the sense of over-riding someone else but power in combining together to make this really big entity.

Jeff: ... In a mixed choir, you're often allocated to the lower parts where you might not really have a low voice so it especially allows you to use your full range.

Multicultural choir

'I think everyone is a support for everyone'.

This was the largest focus group with 14 participants (four men/ten women) and was conducted prior to their rehearsal. We expected this singing group to be quite diverse ethnically but instead they were mostly English speaking Anglo-Celtic Australians who focused on singing songs in different languages. As the members explained, that can be both a challenge but also a highlight for some members:

Fiona: It is a little bit different here because it is more challenging than just singing in English, for example: if you sang in a Dutch choir you would just sing in your own native tongue, it's a bit more difficult here.

Marissa: It's daunting.

Mary: But at the same that's half the fun of it too.

Community singing group

'It makes you feel good about community'

The fourth focus group was with 11 participants (four men/seven women) of a community choir. They highlighted the importance of being based in an area that is seen as the 'poor cousin' of the district and how they feel the choir lifts that image.

The choir appeared to encourage inclusiveness amongst its members. One member described how the 'little ways' that other choir members assisted him made a difference, such as buying him a shirt and giving him scones to take

home. The choir conductor stated that she imagines that there is a bucket at the entrance of rehearsals and that everyone drops their worries at the front and then picks them up at the end if they want to. She insisted that she didn't want to turn rehearsals into 'pity parties'.

Women with disabilities singing group

'We always get this lovely feeling and every time I am singing or happy or about what I am doing. We say thank you to the fans and we love them.'

The fifth focus group was conducted with three members of a small singing group for women with disabilities that ranged from physical disabilities to intellectual disabilities. A major goal of their singing group is:

... raising awareness about the fact that we all have a disability and we don't really care and it is not about our disability, it is what we can do. Each of us do it differently but it doesn't matter which way you do something as long as you are getting out there and doing it. (Evelyn)

This group emphasised their enjoyment by frequently using words like 'fun', and 'happiness' and as one member noted 'we are always happy'. Another recurring theme throughout the focus group was how they support each other with learning and performing the actual songs.

THE THEMES

Five master themes were derived from the thematic analysis to capture the essential concepts and characteristics of the text and to link them with theoretical concepts and terminology as presented in Table I. Most of the broader themes were directly related to the focus group questions. However, many of the themes such as humour and feeling 'energised' were not related to specific questions or terms that were used.

Initial themes	Master themes	
Physical health	'It's a full body experience'	
Cognitive/skills development		
Mental Health/Emotional	'It makes you feel alive'	
Mood		
Humour		
Uplifting/high		
Increased confidence		
Enjoyment		
Decreased stress/escape		
Providing a voice/empowerment		
Social capital indicators (fellowship, trust, participation, network/connections, shared norms/values, and learning)		'You become one voice'
Social connectedness		
Social inclusion		
Isolation/loneliness		
Friendship		
Diversity		
Community benefits	'Giving something back to the community'	
Volunteering		
Community involvement		
Cultural participation		
Downsides/problems	'Challenges to be met'	

Table 1: Master themes developed in the study

Theme one: 'it's a full body experience'

'It's a full body experience' relates to both physical health and cognitive benefits of singing as perceived by participants. All of the groups highlighted a wide variety of physical benefits associated with their community singing group. One of the more common themes related to lungs and breathing was reported in almost every group. Participants also mentioned that singing benefited their posture and overall fitness. Several participants reported current or recent health problems including a previous stroke and arthritis and explained how singing helped with their medical problems. 'I have lung disease and I haven't had any problems for the last two years'. (Celia, multicultural choir)

In addition to physical benefits, members also mentioned cognitive benefits, particularly when discussing language skills and singing in another language. Participants recognised that that physical health was often related to wider wellbeing. One participant suggested that 'if you are well in mind you are well in body', and another commented that the combined health benefits of the choir had helped her to lose weight. Another participant from the disability based singing group claimed the group had allowed her to get back into the community after she had a stroke. The following quote speaks for itself:

After a singing session, um it feels like there is a mental and physical invigoration. Right? It is a bit like if I went for a bike ride for an hour, you can go out feeling like you would like to kill some bastard and after an hour of intense physical effort you come back and your brain is completely reset, your brain is relaxed and you get a little bit of response like that from singing. I don't know whether it is an endorphin thing that happens, it's just that it is a physical thing singing and it is fairly intense sometimes and you certainly feel really renewed. (Gerry, men's singing group)

Theme two: 'It makes you feel alive'

Whilst there were a number of reported physical benefits, emotional health benefits were far more prevalent themes, and varied from decreased stress, providing an escape, feeling 'energised', increased confidence and enjoyment. It is not surprising that a sheer love of singing and music appeared to be the leading reason why participants decided to join singing groups, why they continued to attend practices and performances, and was what they enjoyed most about their group. Participants in all five groups explained similar 'uplifting' and 'high' experiences. Participants commented in all focus groups that they felt that group singing increased confidence. A number of participants discussed the confidence building aspect of singing solo parts in their singing groups.

Humour appeared to be a common element; participants joked and teased each other, and laughter was prevalent in all five focus groups. When asked 'what has encouraged you to keep coming back to this singing group?' one member responded 'laughter and singing'.

Participants also emphasised the stress relief and 'escape' associated with their singing group. A few claimed that due to the physical nature of singing they were unable to worry about other things whilst singing. They reported that singing had assisted them to sleep; to not worry about work, and that through bringing enjoyment to other people they were able to forget their own personal issues and problems.

Participants highlighted that singing can assist with mental health issues. One woman revealed that she experienced anxiety and depression and thought singing and the supportive group was beneficial for her mental health. Another commented on the experiences of a fellow member. 'And she was agoraphobic and she wouldn't even go to her letterbox but she made the effort because she loved the group'. (Fiona, multicultural choir)

Participants believed that community singing positively affected their mood, and that thinking about the group made them 'happy' and helped with 'mondayitis'; one man quoted a statement he had heard at another singing group:

... 'what you need to remember is that for some of us, and you don't know who but for some of the 30 people in the room this might be the only two hours in the week that is actually good for them, going well for them at the moment' and I've never forgotten that comment. (Gerry, men's singing group)

Theme three: 'You become one voice'

This theme encompasses friendship, social inclusion, social connectedness and social capital indicators, and appreciation for diversity. The singing groups appeared to foster both bridging and bonding social capital. In some ways, the singing groups appeared to bring people together who were very similar. But they also appeared to foster bridging social capital, as several participants referred to the benefit of having a diverse singing group:

But this is a node where you come together with people who are quite diverse, geographical areas, and different walks of lives and generations and I think that is really positive because it ties together people from those different areas that really wouldn't otherwise meet even though they might be part of the same community and kind of knits it together. (Max, Men's singing group)

There was also evidence of other social capital indicators as listed and discussed in Langston and Barrett's (2008) study of a Tasmanian choir, which were based on Putnam's (Putnam 1993, 2000) theories. Table II presents quotes from the focus group transcripts that exemplify each of these indicators.

Social Capital Indicator	Quote
Fellowship	People help each other out- Simone, Sing Australia
Trust	We found too that when it comes to the crunch with having the concerts that everyone has put their hands up and turned up. No one has shied away and suddenly said 'I can't get up and perform in front of people'. - Lisa, Sing Australia
Network/connections	The choir master gives you a resume and got me a job.-Theresa, Multicultural choir
Shared norms/values	It's not very formal, here you can just do basically what you want to do. If you want a bit of that you can. There is no right or wrong. That's why it has the good sense, good feeling to it. -John, Men's singing group
Learning	You have to learn to listen and all of that sort of stuff, so it is not just about you it's about allowing other people to be heard as well. Sometimes you have to moderate the way you sing and all of that sort of stuff. Lots of learning with singing.- Richard, Men's singing group
Participation	It is team work and motivation, discipline, commitment. -Rhonda, Multicultural choir

Table 2: Social Capital Indicators

When asked about the personal benefits of singing in a group and in what ways their singing group supported its members, friendship was a very common response. The Sing Australia group acknowledged that there is a 'sense of caring for each other'. The men's singing group considered that friendships were closely related to singing, with one member stating that the conversations tended to be rich because the singing was rich. A large element of the friendship theme was based on supporting other members in ways that tended to vary for each group, from assisting each other with songs, to assisting with transport, baking food for rehearsals and broader emotional support. 'Yeh and if you are going through a rough patch, people contact you and give you a little chin up...' (Theresa, Multicultural choir).

The singing groups appeared to be quite socially diverse and inclusive as members commented that their group had assisted with isolation and loneliness. Diversity was a common theme, with participants noting that age and disability were less likely to be barriers for choir participation than for other activities:

People who perhaps um have a special need, can comfortably fit into a Sing Australia group, whereas they might not necessarily be able to participate in a sporting group, or the other areas where having like a book club or something like that where they have to have strong literacy skills. (Lisa, Sing Australia choir)

Participants also reported that they felt strong connections with other singing group members, and used phrases such as 'a sense of belonging' and 'connectedness to place and to community'. 'We are creating community that is actually doing something, we are doing something, we are getting people out and into the community and doing something they enjoy'. (Evelyn, women's disability based singing group)

The Sing Australia choir suggested that the sense of connection was dependent on group size and was more difficult with larger groups. The sense of connectedness also extended to other singing groups for the Sing Australia choir, as members participated in other choirs around Australia.

It was also apparent that for many of the singing group members, the singing group environment fostered empowerment. This tended to differ between the men and the women. Several women commented about the singing group being something they could do for themselves:

I never thought about joining a group or anything, I just come up to join this one because I really wanted something to do for myself, because I was always involved in raising my kids and running around with kids, and give them lessons and things like that and then when they had grown I said I want to do something for myself. (Simone, Sing Australia)

For the men, the singing group allowed them to have an opportunity to socialise in an all male environment:

So many community things are female dominated especially swimming lessons, you name it, committees of kindergartens, even choirs. The last choir I was in had 40 people and I think there were maybe 4 guys or 6 guys. It's just nice for a change to have a bunch of guys really. (Stuart)

Theme 4: 'Giving something back to the community'

This theme refers to the community level benefits of singing groups, including participation in other community activities and volunteering. Most of the focus groups reported singing at various places such as nursing homes, hospitals and various benefit concerts. They also suggested that singing, '...acts as a catalyst I think for gathering people from the community together and also taking back to the community the joy of music and singing'. (Lisa, Sing Australia)

It was also evident that singing groups can assist in educating the community. The women's disability based singing group aimed to raise public awareness and the men's group highlighted the importance of singing historic songs that related to their identity and history. The multicultural choir described the benefits of singing in multiple languages and suggested that it 'makes people feel like they belong' when they hear songs in their own language. They cited an example from their visit to a nursing home:

He was sitting there and had a bib on and was dribbling and looked miserable. And we sang all the songs and then when we sang the Irish song, you should have seen him, he was bawling his eyes out and he was pretending to have a beer, he was so happy. (Jodie)

One singing group based in an area associated with lower socio economic status claimed that their singing group 'makes you feel good about community', and 'lifts' the suburb and 'brings culture' to the area. Michael from the men's singing group believed that some community benefits were specific to singing groups:

Because it is not a sporting thing or it's not scouts and it's not Apex club or Rotary, it's actually about joining together for a creative purpose and I can't think of anything else that is like that. I mean all those organisations that I mentioned are positive and do positive things in the community but they don't come together in a creative sense to create something together that they put out there.

Participants were asked if they engaged with other community activities or volunteered. Every group had a number of participants who engaged in a variety of community activities such as other singing groups, women's groups, lifestyle clubs, arts activities, youth group, sports clubs and church. Members also listed a range of volunteer activities including: assisting with community gardens, Commonwealth Games, meals on wheels, air shows, counselling, committees, coaching sport, community centre, schools and more.

Group members were asked which activity came first, the singing group or other community involvement/volunteering. There was a mixture of responses and one participant from the community singing group responded that they all influence each other. As another participant stated, group members might discuss other community activities they are involved in and encourage others to join them. One person recalled that a dance class had started as a result of the singing group.

Theme 5: 'Challenges to be met'

All groups were asked 'Have there been any downsides of participating in the singing group'. This question elicited mostly responses of 'no' and required further prompting. One participant from the men's singing group explained 'They are not downsides but challenges to be met'. The challenges varied for each group. Two focus groups mentioned personality clashes. One participant mentioned a friend she had brought along to the singing group who didn't want to continue because she found it to be 'too political'. She expanded to say that her friend had found the attitude of one member quite 'off putting'. Some challenges may be gender specific as one man talked about a friend who had left another choir. And I asked him why and he said 'it was all a bit touchy feely for me'. (Gerry, Men's singing group)

For women with disabilities, the only difficulty they listed was sound issues at one performance, which affected them so much that they cried. The Sing Australia choir described their original problem of having really low participant numbers. One choir conductor also stated that she finds her age to be a challenge when working with some older choir members. But overall the focus groups struggled to name any negative associations with their singing experiences.

DISCUSSION

It is worth noting that unlike music therapy, the singing groups that participated in this study were not initially designed for health benefits. A major factor in participants attending their singing groups was their passion for music and singing itself. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that all of the singing groups provided a wide range of both individual and community level health benefits.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BENEFITS

There were two major types of individual-level benefits as captured by the themes 'It's a full body experience' and 'It makes you feel alive'. The first related to physical benefits such as improved breathing and cognitive benefits such as learning to sing in different languages. The second theme related to mental health benefits, and included humour, decreased stress, increased confidence, assisting with emotional issues, and positive changes in mood. Many participants explained that both physical and emotional health benefits were connected. Feeling 'energised', 'high' or 'uplifted' were very popular expressions amongst all five of the singing groups. This is consistent with reports from Clift and Hancox (2001). The finding may also be linked to physiological studies that found increased Immunoglobulin-A and decreased cortisol levels (Beck 2000; Kreutz et al. 2004) and increased positive arousal and improved heart rate with group singing (Valentine & Evans 2001).

The 'escape' element of group singing was common as many members observed the benefit of having the singing group as a place of refuge from their personal problems. This is similar to Clift et al.'s (2007) study in which a quarter of the participants mentioned problems in their lives. One of the singing groups talked about how several of its members all went through a divorce at the same time. For participants who are having problems with their relationships, the singing group may provide an escape and an opportunity to socialise with people outside of their immediate or problematic networks.

A number of the focus group participants who reported severe physical health problems explained how their singing group had assisted with those problems. This is comparable to previous research in the field of music therapy (e.g. Hillman 2002; Clift et al. 2007). It may also explain Gridley et al.'s (in press) finding that singing group participants' health self-ratings were not greater than the rates for the general population. As highlighted by the participants in this study, unlike sport one can participate in group singing at any level of health and fitness and at any age. Therefore, participants who are older, and have physical health problems may gravitate towards singing groups.

The individual level benefits highlighted in this study are similar to previous findings. Additionally, it is worth noting that humour appeared to be a crucial element of all five singing groups. Humour does not appear to be explored in other studies of the individual benefits of singing groups. This benefit is a distinct feature of singing in groups that is unlikely to be associated with singing alone.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

The social benefits reported in the group discussions encompassed increased friendships, empowerment, greater appreciation for diversity and connection to broader community and their own history; singing groups were also considered more inclusive than other activities. Social capital theory provides a theoretical lens for many of the community level benefits discussed by the singing group members. As one participant explained, when you join a singing group you get an 'instant community'.

By focusing on a range of singing groups, this study allowed further insight into the ways that singing groups can benefit diverse populations. Each group noted the social benefits of their particular singing group and many members made mention of the ways that it assisted with isolation. As Matarasso (1997) observed, in the face of isolation friendships can not be underestimated, and the arts may also assist people to express their isolation.

Participants also provided examples of how they felt their singing group was empowering and provided them with a voice. The disability based singing group was most vocal about how their singing group 'gets us out there in the community' which supports Ruud's (1997) and the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (1999) claims that arts participation may help those who are at risk of social exclusion such as those with disabilities, older people and those from lower socio economic categories.

Each group expressed the importance and appreciation for diversity and inclusiveness amongst their group. Several participants noted the way in which their singing group had brought together a wide variety of people in terms of age, background and geographical location. This supports the Chorus America (2003) study in which participants reported their choir had resulted in them socialising with people who were unlike themselves.

The men's singing group focused on songs that they felt were relevant to their own identity. This is important as cultural traditions are tied to people's identities both as individuals and as communities (UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport 1999). The importance placed by the men on having songs that related to themselves and their history resonates with Putnam and Feldstein's (Putnam & Feldstein 2000) argument that singing groups can assist people to gain a better understanding and honour their own heritage.

COMMUNITY- LEVEL BENEFITS

The participants believed that they benefited their own communities and other communities in a variety of ways, by bringing happiness to others, drawing people together by singing in different languages, and educating the community.

Furthermore, the majority of participants in each singing group mentioned their involvement in wide variety of other community and volunteering activities. This is consistent with both Chorus America studies (2003, 2009) which suggested that singing group participants tend to be more involved in community activities. However, participants gave mixed responses about the direction of relationship between community singing and other community activities. The mixed response may also be indicative of the circular nature of social capital, whereby communities with higher

social capital tend to create singing groups or arts programs, and the programs in turn promote further evidence of social capital (Guetzkow 2002).

The results of the 2002 Victorian Population Health Survey (Department of Human Services 2003) provided evidence for the link between positive health outcomes and social networks. A community singing group is a perfect example of a potentially supportive network and as evident from this study, participation may lead to further community involvement. In addition, Victorian Population Health Survey found that people who participate regularly and those who can get help when needed tend to be healthier and have better perceptions of the communities they reside in.

The community based singing group in this study provides a clear example of how such perceptions might be changed. This study provided examples of the variety of ways in which participants support and help each other, including assisting each other with transport, music, clothing, food, emotional support, gaining employment and during illness. Singing group members have access to a supportive network, tend to participate in a variety of community activities, and can get help when they need it. It could be argued that a range of positive health outcomes are likely to flow from these social benefits.

CHALLENGES FACED BY SINGING GROUPS

This study moved beyond previous research focusing on the strengths and benefits of group singing to enquire about possible difficulties that singing groups might face. There were only a few challenges raised: personality differences, choice of material, technical issues, group size, gender concerns and conductor issues. Both the community choir and the multicultural choir mentioned problems associated with having 'someone negative' in their singing group.

Exploring the challenges also allowed insight into some of the gender specific issues for singing groups, and might help to explain the issue of 'missing males' in choirs (Demorest 2000). This finding and the other challenges listed may have implications for other singing groups, and could provide a basis for further exploration.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FOR SINGING GROUPS

Based on the challenges described by the singing groups in this study, there are a few areas that singing group organisers could focus on to retain members. Warm up exercises and group activities that appeal to both men and women could be included in mixed gender singing groups. It was also apparent that single sex singing groups provided an important opportunity for some participants. The question of whether equal gender numbers should be a goal for all mixed groups raises broader questions for singing in the dominant culture. Are men being discriminated against in this female-dominated activity, or is singing perhaps one area that is safe and sanctioned for women to participate in, while their access to more lucrative and culturally supported arenas such as sport remains restricted? It could be important for organisers to promptly handle situations where a singing group participant's behaviour may be considered negative, to ensure that other members do not feel uncomfortable and leave. Depending on the singing group's aim, group size is important both to ensure that it is not so small that participants want to leave but also not too big so that participants still feel that they have a sense of connectedness. Furthermore, more

experienced singing group participants may feel that they are not being challenged sufficiently if the singing material is not regularly updated.

Community Music Victoria (CMV), which provides a range of resources for singing groups, could also include fact sheets and information on group dynamics to assist with possible challenges that singing groups may face. CMV (2010) does provide training to community-based singing leaders in the area of group work which consists of difficult encounters within groups, dealing with intolerance, and giving and receiving constructive criticism. Instead of being a separate focus, perhaps these group elements could also be included in other singing-based workshops. The Brunswick Women's Choir (2006) provided a tool kit which may assist other community based singing groups. The toolkit consists of successes, difficulties and questions that might help singing groups to reflect on their own group. Lessons can also be drawn from the positive individual and community level benefits discussed in this study. For example, humour appears to be a beneficial element of singing groups particularly for new members. Also performances in community settings are possibly the most rewarding aspect for singing group members. Depending on the singing group philosophy, the choice of material can assist in educating the public, connecting to others and gaining a better understanding of a community's history and identity.

COMMUNITY ARTS POLICY INITIATIVES

This study has added to the weight of previous research that supports the notion that community singing may benefit whole communities as well as benefiting the physical health and wellbeing of individual participants. The findings also have implications for the field of health promotion by providing examples of how singing groups can assist with health promotion and encourage people to have better perceptions of their own communities. Singing groups can be particularly useful to people and groups at risk of social exclusion, and may also help to educate the public and promote greater appreciation and understanding of diversity. Singing groups can promote social capital in two possible ways, by acting as a type of bonding social capital bringing together people with shared interests, and by bringing together people who differ in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

The benefits to individuals and communities justify funding of a range of singing groups whether mixed gender community groups or special interest groups. It is worth noting that most of the singing groups interviewed were based around the notion of 'art for art's sake' rather than arts for health promotion benefits. Yet the groups still managed to contribute to positive individual and community level benefits. Support for singing group infrastructure of the kind provided by CMV would also be justified on the basis of this research.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The first limitation relates to the research method employed. The phenomenological approach of this study did not set out to 'prove' but focused on exploring meanings. Focus group interviews did provide benefits not available in individual interviews, such as witnessing the group dynamic and high level of agreement amongst members. However, it may have meant that people did not feel comfortable to discuss more personal issues or to express reservations about their group or leader. Future research could further explore the challenges of singing groups via

individual interviews to allow participants to feel comfortable to openly discuss any concerns, particularly for singing groups that struggle to retain members or have a history of conflict. Another focus could be following up people who have dropped out of singing groups.

This study set out to explore both individual and community level health impacts of group singing. By doing so, the study has added to the weight of previous studies and also begun to fill a gap in the literature. The individual level benefits include enhanced physical health, mental health, stress relief, mood, cognitive abilities, and lots of laughter. The social level benefits included social connectedness, social capital, inclusion, friendships and greater appreciation of diversity - and lots of laughter. In addition, singing group members tended to participate and volunteer in a wide range of activities and felt that their actual performances provided the most benefits to the community. Furthermore, disability, age, fitness and literacy do not appear to represent major barriers for participation in singing groups. This study is the first to address the challenges that singing groups face, with implications for singing groups themselves and for the field of health promotion. Social capital and health promotion theories were utilised to help make sense of the connection between individual and community level benefits. It seems fitting to leave the final words to Chris from the Sing Australia choir:

I mean we spoke a lot about individuals and a lot of that must ripple on to the communities because members are sort of happier and healthier, interested in what they are doing, it must have some ripple on effect for health services but is very hard to measure.

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