

Evaluating the benefits of inclusive community singing group towards well-being: narratives of diverse community members attending an inclusive singing group.

Abstract

Background: Community singing is becoming more popular in many parts of the world owing to its health and well-being benefits. There is a growing body of research suggesting biopsychosocial benefits for participants taking part in community singing. This study was set to evaluate the benefits of an inclusive community singing group towards well-being.

Methodology: The study employed an exploratory qualitative study (EQS) approach. Semi-structured questions were used to elicit participants' experiences on the impact of an inclusive community singing group towards well-being. A thematic approach underpinned by the four phases of The Silences Framework was used to analyse the data.

Results: Following data analysis, the study found that Heron café community singing group made the research participants feel connected with others, [improve physical their well-being](#), learn new skills, [give to others \(Development of volunteering spirit\)](#) and [feel pleasure](#).

Conclusion: The study concluded that inclusive community singing plays a pivotal role in enhancing the health and well-being of communities.

Keywords: [Mental-health](#), [Well-being](#), [Singing](#), [Community](#)

Introduction and Background

Current industrialised communities present multiple challenges to health and well-being, including stress, the pace of life, and social isolation (Kingma, 2018). People with a range of needs face great challenges in connecting with others due to confinement in their homes (Haney, 2018). Such a situation can bring loneliness, stress, and anxiety. People with chronic or life-limiting conditions normally struggle to find inclusive supported physical activities. Such people may sometimes benefit from community-wide initiatives like sports, singing or any other physical activities. Thus, community singing may be seen as a possible inclusive physical activity especially if it encompasses dance and movements (Zeilig et al, 2019).

Community singing for people with different conditions has become increasingly popular in many parts of the world (Hyland Lee & Mills, 2015). There is evidence suggesting biopsychosocial benefits for participants taking part in community singing. Coming to such groups can also be a challenge for people with life-limiting conditions owing to stigma and discrimination emanating from the wider community.

However, many of the singing groups for people with chronic and life-limiting conditions are centred around a specific illness or diagnosis, for example, the highly regarded Alzheimer's Society initiative "Singing for the Brain". These groups are very popular and provide a valued service to people with dementia and their carers (Osman, Tischler & Schneider, 2016). There is evidence that if these groups can include other individuals i.e., who may not be living with dementia they may present a positive value to the attendees due to its diversity hence may be viewed as inclusive by the participants (Moss, Lynch & O'Donoghue, 2019). The creation of inclusive activity, community groups require tolerance, inclusivity, and empathy to reach out to individuals with stigmatised conditions.

Inclusive community groups can be a source of learning new skills for the diverse groups of people involved, especially those with life-limiting conditions. However, although community groups for different activities are common, very few of them are inclusive of people with life-limiting conditions. Thus, many individuals with life-limiting conditions have struggled to learn new manipulative skills, including social skills (Engler et al, 2020). When inclusive groups are present diverse members can benefit from a wide range of opportunities to learn new skills, which may be critical in their journey to develop new skills and improve their independence.

Inclusive community singing may have a strong factor in developing a spirit of togetherness and helping one another (Vaillancourt, 2018). Such a relationship can be developed by continuous meeting together and sharing good times through singing and interaction. Lonely individuals can develop a good friendship with new people they meet, leading to strong permanent bonds. In light of the above assertions, this study explored the impact of inclusive community singing groups on the [well-being](#) of diverse community members.

Research setting

‘The Heron Music Café for Well-being’ (Heron Café) was established by the charity ‘Musicworks Midlands’ located in Nottingham, UK. The singing group is situated in a community pub that was already established as a community hub hosting various activities and events. The charity’s core purpose is to promote the use of music to improve quality of life, enrich and unite people, and has a history of producing books, music, and learning resources in this area. The Heron Café was borne out of a community need to reduce stigma and isolation associated with mental ill- health. It also enhances community cohesion, inclusion and social capital. The Heron Café at a micro-level brings together small groups of dissimilar people and employ specially trained community musicians to facilitate working together to achieve the shared goal of inclusive singing and music-making, based on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954). The key principles of the Heron Café are that all participants have equal participatory status in spite of their diversity in health condition, social situation, age, or other characteristics. All the participants were aged 18 years or above.

Methodology

This research employed an exploratory qualitative study (EQS) approach. EQS is designed to explore the topic under consideration in order to understand it better rather than offer a final and conclusive solution to existing problems under investigation (Ameller et al., 2012). Furthermore, EQS has the potential to identify possible areas for further investigations. As such, EQS offers a useful understanding and overview of an existing issue from a new dimension and can provide useful data for future interventions.

Semi-structured questions were devised and used to elicit experiences on the impact of an inclusive community singing group towards [well-being](#). The literature informed the interview protocol on community singing groups from previous primary and secondary research studies,

including conceptual papers. To test the appropriateness of the interview schedule, three individuals accessing the Heron Café, inclusive community singing group were recruited to undertake a pilot interview. Following the completion of the three pilot interviews, none of the three individuals suggested any substantial changes to the interview schedule and was therefore adopted for use in the research study. The three researchers who conducted this study regularly attended the Heron café and were not new to the research participants prompting them to express themselves freely. Table 1 below shows the semi structure interview schedule.

Table 1 Interview Schedule

There are no right, or wrong answers and your data will always be kept confidential.

1. What made you join the Heron Café b) In your own words describe how you feel when you are at Heron café.

2. What do you enjoy/not enjoy about the Heron Café

3. What benefit/or not has it given you to attend the Heron Café

4. What can you suggest improving the Heron Café

In addition, if you are a Carer, volunteer, partner or friend of someone attending the Heron Café

5. Please tell us about their experience (same as above Q. 1-5)

a. What made them join the Heron Café

b. What do they enjoy/not enjoy about the Heron Café

Prompts music dancing socialising etc

c. What benefit/or not has it given them by attending the Heron Café

Prompts mentally, socially etc

d. What can you suggest on their behalf to improve the Heron Café

In giving your answers, please feel free to use your own words, tell us stories or give examples to make your points. (The more you tell us the better)

Fifteen research participants were interviewed. The participants included ten people with life limiting conditions and five people who volunteered on the project. In the first instance, letters and information sheets were sent to the managers of the Heron café inviting their members to take part in the research study. Only those interested in taking part in the research study had their names forwarded to the researchers to organise further meetings and interview sessions. The interviews were held in the venues where the inclusive community singing took place. Each interview lasted up to one hour.

The research participants had been in the Heron Café for more than one year. It was important to recruit a heterogeneous sample with respect to the cut-off time they started taking part in the inclusive community singing group to make sure that their experiences were explored under a uniform situation. The interviews were conducted by two researchers, a man, and a woman. This was important to enhance openness and sharing of silences among the research participants as some research participants were not comfortable to be interviewed by a researcher of the opposite sex. The Nottingham Trent University ethics body approved the research proposal. The research participants were given an information sheet to read and ask questions prior to participating in the research study. Furthermore, all the research participants had to give written consent, which granted them the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into NVivo to manage the data and enhance analysis (Zamawe, 2015). The data analysis was underpinned by the 4 phases of data analysis in The Silences Framework (Serrant-Green, 2011). See figure 1 below

Figure 1 The Silences Framework Analysis Phases



Source: (Serrant-Green, 2011)

Phase 1 of data analysis involved coding of data into broad categories by the researchers. At phase 2 of data analysis, the researchers took the categorised broad themes from phase 1 to the research participants for verification and confirmation as a true reflection of what they had said during the interviews. At this stage, the research participants had the opportunity to refute or confirm the constructed broad themes in line with their contribution at the interview. In phase 3 of data analysis, the data from phase 2 was taken to the collective voice group for validation and verification. A collective voice user group is a group of people who mirrored the research participants but did not take part in the research study. At this point, the user voice group validated and verified the data coined in phase 2. This was meant to critique the data using an associative eye. Finally, in phase 4, the researchers analysed the data in line with the contributions made in each phase to form the final output of the research study.

Results

Following data analysis, the study found that Heron café community singing group made the research participants to feel connected with others, improved physical [well-being](#), learn new skills, giving to others (Development of volunteering spirit) and feeling of pleasure.

1. Connect with others!

Participants felt that the Heron Café inclusive community singing group provided them with an opportunity to connect with diverse community members and found this to be both enjoyable and beneficial to their [well-being](#).

“I joined the Heron Cafe because I wanted to do something local and mix again with other people to help me with my [mental ill-health](#)... I have got more confidence by coming to the Cafe and I’ve have made some lovely friends that I look forward to seeing each time.”

Female, 54, Depression/Anxiety

“Very much enjoyed it and it has been great for everyone who came today. We support people with a range of support needs form complex to very independent and today had something for everyone. I can see how much the people we support enjoyed today by the actions, facial expression and comments”

Local care home manager, attending with residents

2. Improved physical well-being

Participants identified physical benefits from singing, such as improved breathing. Others found the café motivating them to get out and about, preventing loneliness, isolation, and decline in mental health and well-being.

“S. was using words I never heard before by S. Joining in, he volunteers interaction – this is rare for S. as usually staff direct interaction with instruction. Now if you ask him “what does S. like?” he says “Frank [Sinatra]. It’s extraordinary”.

Female, 36 Care manager for adult male with moderate learning disability and autism

“...I would like to add that I have missed the Cafe so much since we have been unable to attend because of the Coronavirus, and my mental health hasn’t been too good with not being able to go out as much. I hope we can get the Heron Cafe back again soon.”

Female, 54, Depression/Anxiety

3. Learn new skills

Participants gained new skills from attending the café. Some used it to advance their music skills whilst others saw it as a useful adjunct to the preschool curriculum. Learning through the singing group was diverse and unique to the circumstance of the participant.

“I have gained more confidence by attending the Cafe and have made some lovely friends which I look forward to seeing each time...Being in an inclusive group has helped me with my anxiety and given me some confidence.”

Female, 54, Depression/Anxiety

“I joined to learn how to run some of the sessions.”

Male, 25, Musician

4. Giving to others – Development of volunteering spirit

Participants reported that the café elicited a volunteering spirit from some community members. It was seen as an opportunity to give back. This peer support activity made individuals feel good in themselves, enhancing feelings of well-being amongst participants.

“I wanted to help organise and assist in this venture.”

Female, 70, Volunteer

“I now volunteer and love being able to help in some way. Giving tea, donating gifts for fundraising. I voice my appreciation of music works to others and hopefully spread the word” Female, 55, Participant and volunteer, Fibromyalgia and Bipolar disorder

5. Feeling of pleasure

Participants reported that the Heron Café inclusive community singing group induced deep feeling of pleasure and engagement amongst participants and connection to positive emotions. This enabled them to have an awareness of what was happening to their emotions. This gave them positive feelings and a sense of wellness.

“...joining in made me feel happy, and I’m sure it must have had the same effect on everyone else. I joined the online Cafe whilst working from home, and this lifted my spirits too!”

Female, 54, Care Manager

“I love music and realise the healing power of being united in song... enjoyment comes from the socialisation, fun, music, being among people who know me and the mindfulness of music...it’s calming”.

Female, 55, Participant and volunteer, Fibromyalgia and Bipolar disorder

Discussion

Meeting other people to talk, relax, sing can be beneficial for people living alone or with chronic conditions. Such meetings can create opportunities for connectivity for people who are normally secluded because of different situations. Connectivity comes with a lot of benefits for

the involved individuals (Tompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). The research participants felt that the Heron Café provided them with an opportunity to connect with diverse community members and found this to be both enjoyable and beneficial to their well-being. Inclusive community singing can be utilised to provide a meeting point for people from diverse backgrounds to socialise. It may act as an effective strategy for mitigating loneliness and other associated stressors. Therefore, the convenors of inclusive community singing may need to be well-versed with the different needs of individuals attending the initiative to make sure that their individual needs are catered for.

Community singing comes with a number of physical and psychosocial benefits to individuals undertaking it (Clift et al., 2010). Such benefits are important in improving the health and well-being of the attendees. Similarly, community singing has lasting health and well-being benefits that are beneficial to a wide range of social groups attending it. The research participants identified physical benefits from singing, such as improved breathing. Others found the café motivated them to get out and about, preventing loneliness, isolation, and decline in mental health and well-being. Undoubtedly, community singing can encourage mobility and social cohesion for community members affected by an array of chronic conditions. Therefore, various social groups must be encouraged to participate in inclusive community singing to realise the above-identified benefits. There is a growing body of knowledge citing social interaction and other activities as solutions for conditions like stress and other mental health problems moving away from strict medicalisation of [mental ill-health](#) (Jackson et al, 2021). Singing can therefore help in mitigating [mental ill-health](#) and stress as evidenced by the recently launched social prescribing initiatives to reduce medicinal prescriptions like tablets and oral medicine (Drinkwater, Wildman & Moffatt, 2019).

The benefit of interaction with other community members resulted in greater social confidence. This suggests that there are coping skills that are enhanced from participating in the group. Being part of an inclusive singing group produced mental stimulation, which happened as part of the overall learning process. This cognitive engagement in singing is seen as an important aid to lifting individuals out of their negative states, such as anxiety, and aiding them to make positive contributions to the group (Bailey & Davidson, 2005). The facilitation of an inclusive singing group is a skilled practice that requires careful considerations as music is a powerful tool (Young, 2009). Musician participants in the group gained skills, knowledge, and competencies that may enable them to contribute more to future sessions. The learning aspects

of the inclusive singing café not only had mood benefits but practical occupational skill enhancement as in the case of musicians and other volunteers who had dual status in the community singing group. Community singing groups have the potential to improve coping with [mental ill-health](#) symptoms not only for those participants who had life limiting conditions but also for those who came in as volunteers. Again, this should be seen as a useful tool in the process of developing social prescribing (Drinkwater, Wildman & Moffatt, 2019). It also presents a unique career pathway for musicians who are being upskilled to facilitate inclusive, community singing groups for well-being as opposed to primarily entertainment (Sharda et al, 2019). Community-based activities like singing, dancing, or playing games come with roles to organise and initiate ideas (Goh et al., 2009). The Heron Café engages participants in a variety of music-based activities alongside singing which may be seen as inclusive and beneficial to the different individuals with a range of conditions.

More importantly, community-based activities can be a source of selflessness and volunteering spirit for different individuals in the community (Narushima,2005). This can be enabled through a number of available roles in organising the initiatives thus promoting opportunities for selflessness and volunteering. The research participants reported that the inclusive community singing evoked a volunteering spirit in some community members. It was seen as an opportunity to give back. Peer support activity made individuals feel good in themselves, enhancing feelings of well-being amongst participants. Community singing has the potential to inculcate a spirit of volunteering which may be central in supporting health promotion initiatives in communities. In carrying out all these voluntary roles during community initiatives, individuals may have the opportunity to develop leadership skills, grow their networks, gain a sense of shared identity and belonging and increase well-being as alluded to earlier on, which may be essential in life (Gray and Stevenson, 2020)

Contribution of the paper to the existing body of knowledge

The study found that an inclusive singing group may induce a sense of belonging for members with life limiting conditions and mitigate the impact of stigma and discrimination. Participants with dual status in the group for example being a volunteer and a member of the singing group benefitted on two-fold a) They managed to improve their trade skills i.e., becoming a skilful musician through constant performance. b) Improving their mental well-being through interaction with other group members (It is also important to note that musicians in this singing group were paid for their services through the supporting fund for the project)

Implication for practice

There is a need for professionals working with communities to encourage inclusive community activities like music for health and well-being benefit. There is evidence to suggest the growing use of nonmedical interventions in mental ill-health (Dubinsky, et al, 2019) Professionals involved in Social prescribing may need to consider prescribing inclusive community-based events like music to enhance the mental well-being of communities. Health professionals may also consider utilisation of non-medicinal interventions to run alongside medicinal intervention.

Limitations of the study

This research only considered participants from the English east Midlands region. [More comprehensive research including other regions of England may enhance comparison and generalisation of the impact of community inclusive singing groups on the health and well-being of participants.](#) The study utilised a qualitative approach to evaluate the impact of an inclusive community singing group. In future, research utilising a mixed method may enhance exploration of issues from different epistemological and ontological positions while demonstrating clear efficacy of the intervention.

Conclusion

Music plays a pivotal role in enhancing the health and well-being of communities. It goes beyond the therapeutic impact to cater to other social values like volunteering, community cohesion and inclusion. Health professionals must value the impact of inclusive community-based music as a method of enhancing well-being.

Funding

No funding was provided for this study.

Acknowledgement

Our sincere thanks go to all members of the Heron singing café who took part in this study.

Conflict of interest declaration

All authors declare no conflict of interest

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