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‘I am someone, I am not invisible’: Exploring the experience of participating in choirs for singers affected by homelessness in Rio de Janeiro.

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‘I am someone, I am not invisible’: Exploring the experience of participating in choirs for singers affected by homelessness in Rio de Janeiro.

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Abstract

Personal testimonies about the positive impact of joining a choir abound, with people actively seeking them out to connect with others, improve wellbeing and self-medicate. There has also been an explosion of research around choirs, with growing evidence that participation may improve the quality of life of singers; bringing psychological, social, emotional and cognitive benefits. This study explores the experience of homeless choirs performing during the Cultural Olympiad in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. It seeks to understand the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings of choir members and leaders and the role the group plays in the life of the singer. The research was conducted while travelling as a delegate with the International Arts and Homelessness Movement, *With One Voice*, who supported the growth of eleven choirs in Rio. A phenomenological approach was adopted, observing singers at rehearsals, performances and beyond the music-making space. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with choir members and two with choir leaders. The research gives a window into how participating in these choirs, may increase visibility and recognition and shift the singers sense of identity.



Introduction

You can barely open the paper, turn on the TV or walk past a community notice board in the UK without hearing about choirs and the benefit of singing with others. The claims are broad: from one hour of singing together preventing the return of cancerous tumours (Spencer, 2016), to singing making you smarter, healthier, happier and more creative (De Jong, 2015). Group singing has become rooted in the social fabric of our communities in Britain and professionals are now referring individuals to choirs to help address specific health needs (Hards, 2017). But what is it about singing with others that makes it potentially transformational? It is an innate and highly accessible means of self-expression which links us back to our primary form of intimacy and communication as a baby (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). Singing with others is cohesive, we connect through being synchronised and temporally aligned (Overy, 2012): ‘music provides, in other words, an intensive way of literally being together in time’ (DeNora, 2015, p. 3). Choirs can enhance social bonding (Weinstein, Launay, Eiluned, Dunbar, & Stewart, 2016; Welch, 2005), and help foster new meaningful relationships (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Iliya, 2011; Silber, 2005), with singers feeling less alone and isolated (Clift & Morrison, 2011). This reinforces a sense of belonging, and supports vulnerable singers to engage with society and leads to feelings of normalcy (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Iliya, 2011).

There has been a surge in academic literature in the last fifteen years around community singing with a focus on the therapeutic and well-being benefits. Research shows it may improve mood (Grape, Sandgren, Hansson, Ericson, & Theorell, 2002; Kreutz, Bongard, Rohrmann, Hodapp, & Grebe, 2004), support good mental health (Clift & Morrison, 2011), enhance feelings of joy (Clements-Cortes, 2013) and increase the self-esteem of participants (Von Lob, Camic, & Clift, 2010).



Homelessness

The experience of homelessness is more than being denied adequate housing that meets a cultural minimum criterion. The lack of a home is synonymous with the absence of security, stability and personal legitimacy (Stebbing, 2017) and where privacy is often denied ('Guidelines for Conducting Research with People who are Homeless,' n.d.). People who have been homeless may have experienced violence, trauma and abuse and are routinely marginalized and exploited ('Guidelines for Conducting Research with People who are Homeless,' n.d.). It is associated with economic deprivation (Iliya, 2011), poor health, emotional problems and low self-esteem (Bailey & Davidson, 2003; Iliya 2011). People with lived experience of homelessness may encounter social difficulties, experience loneliness and struggle to form successful relationships (Bailey & Davidson 2003; Boal-Palheiros, 2017).

The research participants in this study gave a rich insight into the challenges of life on the streets in Rio. They explored the physical difficulties; the violence and brutality from both the state and others on the street and feelings of extreme hunger. Interviewees talked about the relational aspects; feelings of 'rupture' from their families, being isolated and alone and feeling unable to trust others. There was also an identity element, feeling invisible and like they no longer existed and were not part of reality. Interestingly some interviewees disassociated themselves from their current homeless identity, making a distinction between themselves and these 'others' who were seen as unfortunate, lazy, needy, unmotivated and unreliable. Nery a research participant said, 'I'm not that type of person', giving some indication of the stigma associated with homelessness.

Research exploring wellbeing with homeless participants, found that people actively search for opportunities to find connections with others and to feel 'human' and 'normal' (Thomas, Gray & McGinty, 2012, p.790). Might choir participation then be a particularly



pertinent practice for people experiencing homelessness? There has been some research in this field conducted by Bailey and Davidson (2002, 2003, 2005), with two choirs in Canada. They identified four areas where choir participation brought positive effects: therapeutic benefits, reciprocity with the audience, group process effect and increased mental engagement. A handful of other studies have looked at groups with participants with lived experience of homelessness and some form of group singing (Dingle, Brander, Ballantyne, & Baker, 2012; Iliya, 2011). Boal-Palheiros's paper (2017) with Som da Rua in Portugal, builds a strong argument that group singing enhances feelings of belonging and brings a group identity for their singers.

Background

The motivation for this research has emerged from my personal experience running a choir in Glasgow called Mission Voices supporting singers who have experienced homelessness ("Lodging House Mission," 2017). It also mirrors the growing interest of those seeking to increase worldwide arts opportunities for people affected by homelessness and create an international movement ("*With One Voice*", 2017). While my primary research focus is with homeless choirs and singing groups based in the UK, the opportunity to conduct research in Rio de Janeiro enabled me to step outside my comfortable and familiar culture. In Rio, I was able to reposition myself as an outsider, observing the field with fresh curiosity (Berger, 2013).

In July 2016, I travelled as a delegate with the International Arts and Homelessness Movement, *With One Voice* ("With One Voice," 2017), who had supported the development of eleven choirs in Rio for people experiencing homelessness. Each group was involved in a city-wide arts 'occupation' as part of the Cultural Olympiad. I spent a month with the choirs



at rehearsals and performances, sharing songs from my choirs in Scotland and seeing singers at food distribution points. I also helped train professionals working in the homeless sector to develop singing leading skills.

This study follows a humanistic ‘with not for’ approach (Freire, 2010), challenging previous research, which has been, largely ‘about’ and not ‘with’ vulnerable participants (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). To this end, interviewees chose whether to remain anonymous, select their own pseudonym or use their real names. They also decided whether their interview would be publicly available in a community archive in the UK, in keeping with Freire’s (2010) approach of giving voice to the marginalised and empowering them through the experience. The assumption that anonymity is protecting participants is challenged through this study (Moore, 2012), with people given an opportunity to own and author their own stories and insights about the choir. All seven interviewees gave consent for their real names and images to be used publicly and their transcripts to be made available in an archive. The choir members were particularly passionate about their experiences of homelessness and choir participation being heard and becoming publicly available.

This study explores the experience of participating in and leading choirs for singers who have experienced homelessness in Rio de Janeiro. It adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings from the perspective of the choir members and leaders and explores the role the group play in the life of the singer.

Method

All reasonable measures were put in place to ensure the participants gave free and informed consent. When a person indicated interest in being involved in the research, there



followed an informal chat with the support of a Brazilian translator, to ensure they were fully aware of the implications of participating. They were then given an information sheet in Brazilian Portuguese to read or it was read aloud by the translator. Before each interview, the information sheet was again discussed, until I felt certain it was fully understood. Time was then spent discussing the consent form, which was completed before the start of the interview. At each stage of this process, questions and concerns were invited. Translations were generally delivered in the third person throughout the interviews.

Data collection involved observations at rehearsals, performances and beyond the music-making space. Semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, were conducted with the support of the translator. A qualitative approach was taken, giving participants some control over the direction of the conversation and allowing their voices to be heard (Eubanks, 2009). The interview followed a very loose and exploratory line of questioning, responsive to what the interviewee felt was important (Willig, 2013). The choir members were asked to speak about their group from their own perspective: prompted with questions about recruitment, rehearsals, the choir leader, repertoire, performances and the impact of participating. They were also asked about their experience of being homeless. The group leaders were asked similar questions about the choir experience from their perspective, as well as the career path that led them to this work. Choir members travel costs were reimbursed and each was given 20 R\$ (£4), for being involved in the research. The five choir members were Carlos, Nery, Elizabete, Paulo and Joao; four singers were living on the streets and one in a hostel and each had been a choir member for no longer than three months. The two choir leaders were Rico and Thiago. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

This paper will be professionally translated into Brazilian Portuguese and a copy given to each of the participants.



Findings

This paper explores a key theme that has emerged from the data, revealing a new understanding of the choir experience which has not been considered in previous research in this field. Through being in the choir, the singers had opportunities to increase their visibility and recognition and shift their sense of identity.

The notion of becoming more visible emerges in part from the interactions with other people. Nery mentioned the perceptions of other residents in his hostel, saying ‘when the people from the choir walk in they go, oh so here come the elite squad, because we have become like the elite squad of the shelter’. Joao talked about other people living on the streets now noticing and chatting about the singers, saying people ‘look up to them’. This increased sense of visibility leads to a shift in the identity of the singer. They move from being ‘just vagabonds and bums and hobos eugh [indicating disgust]’ as Carlos described, to singers and performers; roles that bring recognition and command respect. The increase in visibility is perhaps best symbolised by the *Uma Só Voz* (With One Voice) pale blue t-shirts that the singers wore during public performances. The solid block of colour made a statement about belonging, group identity and visibility, making the singers the most significant visual focus in the room, and helping to ‘symbolically level out social differences’ (Boal-Palheiros, 2017, p. 74).

Choir Leader

The choir leader plays a key part in increasing the visibility of the singers. Rico, one of the choir leaders says of performances, ‘so you didn’t even notice them on the streets and...you get them to be visible, to be the main event’. The choir leader’s role might be seen as that of a gate keeper or guardian, responsible for presenting and safely re-introducing singers to the public. At an official Olympiad concert, Rico held the hands of some of his



singers as he led them into the stage for a performance. He then asked each of the singers to introduce themselves to the audience by name and waited unhurriedly while each took the time to speak. In this way he literally led them back to society, giving each singer the opportunity to be seen and be heard. Nery spoke of how the relationship with the leader plays a role in shifting a sense of self, when he said, ‘I was like a mongrel horse and then Rico taught me the skills and showed me that I can be an Arabian horse’.

Repertoire

The repertoire choices were a highly important issue amongst all interviewees. The lyrics enabled the singers to tell their own story, to have their voice heard and their life experience validated (Boal-Palheiros, 2017). The choir leaders were very mindful about the lyric choices, with Rico saying they should reflect what the singers ‘feel, it tells my story’ and Thiago saying the lyrics should help the singers to connect ‘with their own lives’. In two popular choir songs, *Semente do Amanhã* (Seed of Tomorrow), the choir sang, ‘don’t be afraid, this time will pass, don’t fall into despair, don’t stop dreaming’, and in *Fé na Vida* (Faith in Life), they sang ‘I just want to be happy, walk peacefully... and be proud and have the awareness that the poor has its place’. The ‘message’, as Paulo described it, embedded in the song, shares the singers’ experience of their homeless struggle and life aspirations and can, ‘help them see the future’, Thiago said. The lyrics then are a vehicle for the singers to make themselves visible; Rico says, they are a way, ‘you can reveal yourself’. This is further reinforced at public performances, where the audience hear and validate the experiences sung through the lyrics.

Performances

Nery describes performances as ‘a shop window where we are showing ourselves’. They create an opportunity for the singers to challenge feelings of invisibility: ‘hang on



people are actually seeing us', said Elizabete. The singers are recognised and respected not only for the 'message' they bring in the lyrics, but also for their musical skills, leading to feelings of normalcy and being 'treated just like everyone else'. This musical identity is positively received and reinforced through the response of audiences, where standing ovations were the norm. Here perhaps, the stigma of the singers' homeless identity is challenged. Carlos vividly describes the experience of a performance:

When we were singing lots of people were crying and in his head what he thought was, people are looking at us and thinking, so many good people lost in this world; and that's why he thinks it really touches people, it moves people. They go, wow they're homeless but they're talented, they're just like everyone else.

This last reflection links into the idea that the performances play a role in connecting and educating society about homelessness, helping to shift misconceptions and reduce fear.

Negative aspect of visibility

The increase in visibility experienced by singers is in fact a barrier for others joining the choir. Carlos highlighted that:

People have judicial problems because some people on the streets are running away from their families or running away from the drug lords and their community, so they don't want to be exposed, they don't want their name to be out there.

So, while the exposure at performances and through the media is a high point for the interviewees, it appears to prevent others from participating.

Discussion

This qualitative study was designed to explore the experience of being members and



leaders of choirs set up for singers affected by homelessness in Rio and the role the choir plays in the life of the singer. One recurring theme is that participation brings increased visibility and recognition and a shifting sense of identity. This was experienced through singers talking to their homeless peers, the relationship with the choir leader, the choice of lyrics and interactions with audiences at public performances. Elizabete identified this, saying, ‘I am someone, I am not invisible; I am someone in life’ and Paulo said, ‘you feel like you exist’.

Through music making with others and performing, a new musical identity is adopted (MacDonald & Meill, 2002): as a singer, as a music-group member and as a performer. Singers can challenge the socially imposed homeless ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1963) and any notion of a ‘damaged self’ (Magee, 2002), by embracing their musical self. Nery might be said to actively do so by posting photos of the places he has performed with the choir on social media, in-order to ‘re-write his story for this period of life’. This musical identity is also publicly validated by audiences through their positive and emotional response at performances. These events bring opportunities for audiences and people with lived experience of homelessness to engage in meaningful interactions, which MacDonald and Meill (2002) argue, may lead to new possibilities for the singer beyond the choir. This could be what Elizabete refers to when she talks of the impact of participating:

You start seeing yourself again as someone who can pursue a job, pursue a place for yourself, you can lead your own life.

Conclusion

The findings from this study give a new understanding about choirs set up for singers experiencing homelessness. However, conducting a study in a language not known by the



researcher and working through a translator, does raise inevitable issues around authenticity and reliability. The translated accounts have already undergone a process of interpretation and filtering before they are heard by the researcher. Also working through a translator leads to some questions around consent and whether the participants truly were aware of the implications of participating in the research. The findings will bring a deeper international understanding of the experience of participating in group singing activities for people who have experienced homelessness. They may also help support organisations looking to develop this work, helping to legitimise the creation of new groups and support the continued search for funding.

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