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Empowering Who? A critical examination of 'giving voice' in group singing contexts

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Abstract

Research in the fields of music education and community music suggests that group singing can foster a sense of empowerment through the notion of 'giving voice' to singers. The use of the term 'giving voice' is closely aligned with theories of empowerment, particularly in music education and community music literature. Empowerment is also critiqued, however, as being haphazardly thrown around as 'a magical phrase capable of exorcising demons' (Weissberg 1999: 2). The notion of 'giving voice' has created tensions in my thinking through empowerment. I argue that 'voice' cannot be 'given' within music education and community music practices but may, instead, be developed through group musical engagements that facilitate the recognition, critique, and resistance of oppressive power structures, and the subsequent development of self-empowerment. My discomfort with the notion of 'giving voice' is tied to the possibility, within group singing contexts both in informal and formal music learning environments, of the capacity for one's voice to be effectively silenced by structures and practices inherent within the choral environment. My paper, which draws on literature I explored during my Doctoral studies, as well as the findings from my dissertation research, critically examines the ways in which empowerment is theorized in relation to traditional choral practices, as well as group singing contexts facilitated for stigmatized and marginalized populations. It is intended as a provocation for reflection and discussion among music education and community music practitioners.

Introduction

There is extensive research in the fields of music education and community music that points to group singing as an empowering practice, particularly among studies that involve stigmatized individuals. Participants experience stigmatization and/or marginalization to varying degrees, due to their personal and social circumstances. These studies explore the group singing experiences of bereaved individuals (Gosine & Travasso 2018; Wilkerson & DiMaio 2013), members of the LGBTQ+ community (Balén 2017; Latimer 2008), sexual abuse survivors (MacIntosh 2003), incarcerated youth and adults (Palidofsky 2010), homeless adults (Rio 2005) and people whose cognitive and/or physical health is impaired (Merrick & Maguire 2017). Often missing from these studies, however, is a critical view of empowerment addressing the ways in which participants' identities are stigmatized through dominant and oppressive social discourses. Additionally, many studies involving group singing with individuals who experience stigma and marginalization lack the acknowledgement and critique of power imbalances inherent within the musical environments being examined. My Doctoral research examined the ways in which community was built, and self-

empowerment developed, among involuntarily childless women who sing together (Curtis 2023). When articulating my theoretical framework, through the analysis of music education and community music literature, I grappled with the notion of empowerment as related to group singing engagement.

Despite the notion of *giving voice* that is often discussed in music education and community music literature (Higgins 2012), there is a dearth of critical engagement with the potential impact of power imbalance on individuals' ability to use their voices freely. Singing is a vulnerable act (Welch 2005) and, as such, critical and reflexive practice is imperative when facilitating group singing, particularly with vulnerable populations. As Ellsworth (1989) discusses, empowerment and the notion of giving voice—within learning environments, specifically—must be critically examined. In her article, 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy,' the author states that:

> current understandings and uses of 'critical,' 'empowerment,' 'student voice,' and 'dialogue' are only surface manifestations of deeper contradictions involving pedagogies, both traditional and critical. (Ellsworth 1989: 320)

In my Doctoral research, I critique the empowering nature of group singing, in part, through Ellsworth's (1989) examination of critical pedagogy. Through the acknowledgement of the 'partial, multiple, and contradictory' (Ellsworth 1989: 312) nature of individual voices, I recognize the purpose of exploring the experiences of stigmatized and marginalized individuals as the 'expansion' of one's 'own understandings of their oppression and strength, sharing common experiences […] building solidarity […] and political strategizing' (Ellsworth 1989: 312). I have come to understand this process, through Freire's (2018) notion of consciousness raising, as the development of self-empowerment.

This paper critically examines the ways in which empowerment is theorized in relation to traditional choral practices, as well as group singing contexts facilitated for stigmatized and marginalized populations. As such, I explore the notion of empowerment as it relates to power imbalances inherent within music education and community music practice. Additionally, I discuss the problematic use of the terms 'giving voice' and 'safe space' within music education and community music literature. Lastly, I offer an in-depth explanation of the notion of self-empowerment, as it relates to theories of community and solidarity within group singing engagements involving individuals who experience marginalization and stigmatization.

Empowerment

Empowerment has been critiqued as 'a magical phrase capable of exorcising demons' (Weissberg 1999: 2) and a 'benign term' (McLaughlin 2016: 56). Defined as both an activity and an outcome in sociological and healthcare literature, it is also critiqued by Adams (2008) as 'a narrow concept […] that reinforces the centrality of power embedded in masculine-dominated knowledge of sociology' (59). Critiques of the concept of empowerment build on its—often problematic—application through the facilitation of positive social and personal transformation, involving marginalized and oppressed groups and individuals, by those in positions of power. While the positive transformation of disempowered individuals or groups may be made manifest through empowerment, it is important to critique facilitated engagements in which empowerment is understood as something to be given. Thus, in situations where stigmatized and/or marginalized individuals and groups are 'presented as the problem, as that which requires modification' (McLaughlin 2016: 12), critical engagement with disempowering social and political policies and discourses is imperative.

An exploration of the ways in which the complexities of structural and relational forms of power are experienced by individuals, in multiple ways and at different times in our lives, is crucial to a critique of so-called empowering musical engagements (Adams 2008; Freire 2018; McLaughlin 2016; Weissberg 1999). Humphrey's (2020) critical discourse analysis of community music literature, published in Sound Sense UK's *Sounding Board* journals between 1990 and 2020, discusses the repositioning of discourse surrounding ownership, empowerment, and transformation. The author found that '[i]nstead of being used to describe the effects that engaging in music-making may…have on groups or communities, the discourse has now been repositioned towards a more individual and person-centred focus' (Humphrey 2020: 55). In line with Humphrey's (2020) findings, imperative to my Doctoral research (Curtis 2023), which took place both with and within the Childless Voices Choir, was the examination of the ways in which empowerment is theorized within the fields of music education and community music. In thinking through theories of power, I was confronted with the difficulty of defining empowerment as a collective action and self-empowerment as individual action, as I understood both as reliant on the other. A key component of my findings was the issue of power imbalance embedded within traditional choral practices, and the ways in which these imbalances are navigated by community music facilitators and/or researchers, particularly when working with stigmatized and/or marginalized individuals and groups.

Power Imbalance

While empowerment is often discussed in music education and community music literature as an outcome of group singing participation, I argue that it too often lacks critical examination of what it

means to *be* empowered. The nature of empowerment is multifaceted (Adams, 2008), and its ambiguous definition has evolved alongside the evolution of systems of power. According to McLaughlin (2016), 'The goal of empowerment is often seen as one that expresses a positive vision of the human subject, a process that can help unlock the human potential and thereby enable people to take more control over their lives' (124). The challenge of empowerment, then, lies in issues of power imbalance, whereby empowerment is easily mistaken as something given by the 'empowerers' (McLaughlin 2016: 124), rather than something taken by those whose identities are disempowered through oppressive discourses. In viewing empowerment as something to be given, an assumption is made wherein one person is positioned as powerless, and the other as possessing a level of power that demands respect, thus exacerbating the imbalance.

In their article, 'Showing the way, or getting in the way? Discussing power, influence and intervention in contemporary musical-social practices,' Ansdell, Brøske, Black, and Lee (2020) raise many important questions in relation to 'unquestioned professional assumptions' (137) about issues of power in participatory music practices. The authors ask:

> What are the implications of having expertise and authority as a music therapist/leader/teacher? What kind of power or influence do these roles involve, and what are the limits of our mandate within them to direct or control what happens to those people and situations we are professionally responsible for?...Is 'being in charge' good or bad (or both)? (What is the relationship between participatory music practices and the classical legacy of the orchestral conductor style of direction?). Is directing what happens musically to do with the interests of 'the music', the people or the institutions we work for? Are there perhaps darker aspects of power politics lurking beneath the seemingly benign practices of music therapy, community music and music education? (Ansdell, Brøske, Black, and Lee 2020: 137)

It is this kind of critical reflection that is imperative to facilitating spaces of musical engagement through which oppressive power imbalance may be acknowledged, critiqued, and resisted, thereby encouraging creative self-discovery and consciousness raising (Freire 2018) among participants.

In education literature, pedagogical environments are contested as sites of considerable power imbalance (Ellsworth 1989; Gore 2003). Ellsworth (1989) and Gore (2003) explore these sites from the perspectives of both critical and feminist pedagogy, finding within them a lack of meaningful engagement with the self as critical pedagogue. Educators who seek to empower students are criticized by Gore (2003) as 'overlooking the reflexivity which, rhetorically, is integral to critical practice' (339). Similarly, Ellsworth (1989) states that, 'while critical educators acknowledge the existence of unequal power relations in classrooms, they have made no systematic examination of

the barriers that this imbalance throws up to the kind of student expression and dialogue they prescribe' (309). Ellsworth (1989) also argues that 'key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, "empowerment," "student voice," "dialogue," and even the term "critical"—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination' (289).

Similar to Ellsworth (1989) and Gore's (2003) critiques of power imbalance in the classroom, the group singing space is critiqued in community music and music education literature as one in which power imbalance traditionally prevails. Within the literature, both traditional in-person, and non-traditional online group singing contexts, are critiqued (Daffern et al. 2021; Forshaw 2018; O'Toole 2005). The notion of a uniform vision is discussed as often achieved through self-surveillance by choir members through surveillance of each other (O'Toole 2005). This vision is most often internalized and communicated to the group by the director/facilitator, and brought to fruition by the singers' vocal performance. Herein, the singers become instruments of the director's/facilitator's power, made manifest through physical gesture. My discomfort with the idea of the director/facilitator utilizing singers' voices (and bodies) as instruments of their power is linked to the notion of *giving voice*.

Giving Voice

The use of the term giving voice is closely aligned with theories of empowerment, particularly in music education and community music literature (Higgins 2012). However, the concept of giving voice is one that has created tensions in my thinking through the notion of empowerment. I posit that voice cannot be given within music education and community music practices but that self-empowerment may, instead, be developed through group musical engagements, by facilitating the recognition, critique and resistance of oppressive power structures. My discomfort with the notion of giving voice is also tied to the possibility, within group singing contexts, of the capacity for one's voice to be effectively silenced by oppressive structures and practices inherent within both formal and informal music learning environments (Daffern 2021; Ellsworth 1989; Forshaw 2018; O'Toole 2005). Despite these environments being fraught with issues of power imbalance, the act of collective singing is discussed in music education and community music literature as facilitating identity transformation through communal acts of resistance, in relation to dominant oppressive social discourses (Balén 2017; Curtis 2023; Gosine & Travasso 2018; Trevarthen 2002). It is not enough, therefore, to espouse critical and feminist pedagogies as a route to empowerment. Educators who seek, authentically, to enable student voice in educative spaces must practice

'humility, skepticism and self-criticism' (Gore 2003: 345) so that their own positionalities—and the power embedded within those positionalities—are continuously acknowledged and critiqued.

In relation to informal educative spaces, and community music practice specifically, Higgins (2012) states that 'the work of community musicians attempts to provoke discourse, stimulate active participation, and enable a sense of "voice," both for individuals and those complicit groups of communities of which they are a part' (136). When viewed through the lens of empowerment theory, however, I argue that community music practice must be 'purposeful and critical' (Adams 2008: 16). Community music practitioners must work towards a critical and reflexive pedagogy, if they are to facilitate a space wherein the voices of those they work with are enabled. It is imperative that the facilitator/educator continuously reflect upon their own positionality and inherent biases that emerge through their experience (or lack thereof) with the challenges faced by those they are working with in a musical capacity, particularly when their intentions are rooted in the desire to empower those they work with through the use of an inherently vulnerable voice.

Camlin (2015) discusses a 'dialogic approach to pedagogy' (235) that I feel resonates with the argument that empowerment and voice are not something to be given to those engaging in group singing contexts. The author states that:

> implicit within this approach is a fundamental shift in the pedagogical role of the teacher away from the 'fount of all knowledge' and towards a more distributed way of 'knowing', where the knowledge, skills, ideas and input of everyone in the group is potentially equally as valid as that of the teacher (Camlin 2015: 239).

In relation to oppressive power imbalances inherent in traditional choral contexts, Camlin's (2015) approach is one which has the potential to reinvent and redefine these practices, particularly as most group singing contexts require some form of leadership to be facilitated in a meaningful and impactful way. This is not to say, however, that this is an easy approach to facilitate:

> Being willing to sacrifice one's own position of perceived authority in the service of a learning environment where individuals are expected to have the resources and agency to come up with their own solutions takes some courage, but is ultimately necessary if 'dialogic space' is to be opened. Dialogic approaches to education may only really develop once a practitioner is more confident not just in their own subject knowledge, but also in their capacity to move beyond it to more humanistic ways of supporting learners' more rounded development as people. And knowing when to assert a more monologic perspective that will provoke and challenge co-participants to be more critical of their assumptions is an equally sensitive skill (Camlin 2015: 239).

Through engaging with the literature on choral and group singing, as well as unpacking my own experiences as both a choral singer and choral director, I am drawn to O'Toole's (2005) critique of choral practices, particularly as I think through the notion of group singing as a potentially empowering experience. The author discusses power imbalances within traditional (western) choral practices as having been normalized to where 'this "normalizing" process masks the fact that typical choir practices and discourses are fraught with power relations that serve specific interests and intentionally create silences and gaps' (O'Toole 2005: 2). In contrast to O'Toole's (2005) discussion on the potential for silencing through traditional choral practices and discourses, Balén (2017) refers to group singing facilitation as 'a compelling way for many to organize for social change' (110). The author discusses the development of safe musical spaces as encouraging and supporting positive social change, particularly among those 'who are denied full social recognition and value' (Balén 2017: 15).

'Safe space'

I grapple with the notion of safe space, particularly within group singing environments, as I argue that safety is experienced differently by everyone and, thus, difficult—if not impossible—to facilitate. As evidenced in the literature (Balén 2017; Curtis 2023; Gosine & Travasso 2018; Latimer 2008; Merrick & Maguire 2017; Palidofsky 2010; Rio 2005; Wilkerson & DiMaio 2013), sensitive and potentially triggering topics often emerge through social and musical interactions that take place within the musical space. Additionally, the inherent oppressive power imbalances discussed above, if not acknowledged, critiqued and addressed, can impact one's experience of safety. In relation to my Doctoral research (Curtis 2023), I was conscious of the complex nature of involuntary childlessness (Gold, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017) as a potential barrier to feelings of safety within the social and musical environment of the Childless Voices (Our Healing Voice 2023) singing sessions, and the song writing and recording project we undertook, as it was inevitable that sensitive and potentially triggering topics would emerge through the social and musical interactions that took place.

Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) provide a more nuanced understanding of safe space through their discussion of possibilities for reimagining the learning environment as a space in which courage is required, 'rather than the illusion of safety' (284). According to the authors, student voices are less likely to be silenced within a 'brave space,' facilitating the emergence of an empowered voice through 'genuine dialogue regarding […] challenging and controversial issues' (Flensner & Von der Lippe 2019: 284). In relation to challenging and controversial issues, I turn to Palidofsky's (2010) work with incarcerated female youth in the Fabulous Females program.

Palidofsky's (2010) intention for the program was to provide 'a safe environment for girls to reveal past traumatic experiences, often of extreme physical and sexual abuse, helping them connect their emotional reactions to subsequent negative choices and incarceration' (121) through 'the art of song and musical theatre' (122). The notions of safe space and an empowered voice are carefully and meaningfully addressed through the trauma-informed practice that Palidofsky (2010) employs in the facilitation of creative and collaborative musical engagements. Through these judiciously navigated interactions, the girls with whom she works use their voices to effect positive transformation of their stigmatized identities, developing self-empowerment through the acknowledgement, critique and resistance of their past traumatic experiences.

Facilitating the Development of Self-empowerment

While empowerment may function as an individualized concept, it is closely linked with group functionality by Adams (2008), who states that 'empowerment is about taking control, achieving self-direction, seeking inclusiveness rooted in connectedness with the experiences of other people. It concerns individual achievement and social action. One aspect feeds another' (18). This argument is similarly expressed by Stein (1997), who states that 'the strength and cohesiveness of the group is a key component in the process of empowerment' (62). The challenge, then, is to develop *self*-empowerment through the recognition, critique and resistance of disempowering discourses, both individually and collectively.

Adams (2008) describes self-empowerment as an act and outcome of the self, rooted in one's capacity to equip herself 'with the knowledge, skills and resources to identify, interpret and achieve control over aspects of [her] personal […] development' (91). Self-empowerment is taken not given, although, as Freire (2018) suggests, liberation from marginalizing forces is not achieved alone. According to Freire (2018), consciousness raising is a praxis that requires gaining an in-depth understanding of the world, including social and political contradictions. It is the development of a critical consciousness that involves acting against oppression. Humphrey (2020) states that, '[t]hrough building the conceptual dimensions of ownership, empowerment and transformation, it could be argued that at the intersection of these three concepts lies the idea of liberation' (45). For Freire (2018), 'it is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves' (64). As described above, Palidofsky's (2010) work with a musical theatre group for incarcerated female sexual abuse and rape survivors speaks to the work of Adams (2008), Freire (2018), and Humphrey (2020) in that, through transforming one's traumatic experiences into musical narrative, the girls involved in

the group were able to express and advocate for themselves and, in some cases, transform their lived realities as youth offenders.

Adams (2008) states that self-empowerment 'is based on the assumption that people themselves can make a decisive contribution to the self-set goal of realizing their own potential and making the most of relationships with other people' (90). I argue here that facilitated spaces where solidarity and community can be built are critical to the realization of such critiques and the potential empowerment that may ensue.

Community

According to Delanty (2018), community can be differentiated as a sense of 'meaning and solidarity, recognition and collective identities' (4) felt by those within it (an idea), or as a 'social phenomenon' (4), whereby the community is viewed as a tangible reality. Higgins (2012) offers an expansion on the definition of community by focusing on the importance of diversity within a communal space; a definition that provides 'resistance to one unified and authoritative identity because the communality at the heart of community provides internal contradictions' (136). I was drawn to Higgins's (2012) notion of community without unity during my Doctoral studies because of the complexity of the experience of involuntary childlessness (Gold, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017). Likewise, for other marginalized individuals and groups, it is important to acknowledge that while one's situation may bear similarities to others in their community, they may not be unified by the circumstances leading to their marginalized positions. Jorgensen (1995) discusses community as potentially rooted, interconnected, feelingful, and empowering. Here, the author refers to the ways in which community may foster a sense of belonging, personal affirmation, and emotional connection that 'empowers one to find one's own voice and, by so speaking, act to change not only the community, but the world beyond' (75). Marginalized individuals who sing together as social outreach aspire to raise consciousness of the ideologies and structures that work to stigmatize their communities (Balén 2017; Gosine & Travasso 2018; Palidofsky 2010). I argue that group singing engagement is an act through which a sense of community may develop among and between performers and facilitators, particularly when musical engagements are aimed at raising consciousness of stigmatizing and/or marginalizing experiences.

Self-empowerment Through Solidarity

As a practice, self-empowerment can serve as a significant learning process requiring self-awareness, self-critique and reflexivity from the individual (Adams 2008). For Carr (2003),

'empowerment is praxis, a cyclical process of collective dialogue and social action that is meant to effect positive change' (18), wherein 'stages of empowerment are seen not as linear but as mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses' (13). Delanty (2018) and Freire (2018) discuss the desire to be free from oppressive social structures as reliant on solidarity. Equality and aspirations of freedom from oppression are not sufficient, however, to warrant solidarity within a marginalized group of individuals. I understand solidarity, through Delanty (2018) and Freire's (2018) discussions, as a means to freedom from oppression through the collective desire to transform an oppressive reality. Consequently, I make a case here that the struggle for redemption, the resistance of oppressive power structures and discourses, may be strengthened through solidarity experienced within a community of similarly circumstanced others.

Through my Doctoral research (Curtis 2023) with the Childless Voices Choir (Our Healing Voice 2023), I came to understand the development of self-empowerment, among the eleven involuntarily childless women I worked and sang with, as largely associated with the development of *affective* solidarity (Hemmings 2012). Hemmings's (2012) theory of affective solidarity recognizes that within a community of marginalized individuals, similarities in the oppressive power structures that shape their identities and experiences do not necessarily signify sameness of affect toward those structures, identities, and experiences. As such, although the women I worked with shared a common identity marker—being childless not by choice—they came to recognize and acknowledge that their childless circumstances emerged through a variety of complex personal journeys, including chronic health issues, medical infertility and social circumstances that created barriers to having children. Additionally, they recognized, critiqued and resisted the oppressive social discourses that framed their childless experiences, while at the same time acknowledging affective dissonance towards these experiences. Through the musical and social interactions that took place during weekly online singing sessions, as well as a song writing and recording project, solidarity was developed through a shared sense of community with similarly circumstanced others.

Concluding Thoughts

O'Toole (2005) states that problematic power imbalances are often embedded within traditional choral practices. However, the findings from my dissertation research show that problematic power dynamics between facilitators and singers may be navigated through acts of vulnerability and reflexive praxis (Curtis 2023). Many of the Childless Voices (Our Healing Voice 2023) singers I worked with perceived engagements between themselves and the facilitator as reciprocal, in that the flexible and thoughtful facilitation methods employed within the online singing sessions created a

space in which they felt 'comfortable' and 'safe' to express themselves both musically and socially, and to develop a sense of solidarity through these expressive moments (Curtis 2023).

Reciprocal musical and social engagements, between facilitators, educators, and participants, facilitate opportunities for experiencing community and solidarity among and between members of the group. Further, a sense of affective solidarity may be made manifest within groups of marginalized individuals through reflexive praxis that leads to consciousness-raising. Herein, the cyclical nature of reflexivity (Stein 1997) creates space for individuals to acknowledge, critique and resist oppressive musical and social practices experienced within the group singing environment, and take action accordingly. This can lead to a sense of self-empowerment which, for many involved in group singing activities, emerges through the development of their literal and figurative voices, and not as something bestowed upon them by those in positions of power.

This paper, which draws on literature I explored during my Doctoral studies, as well as the findings from my dissertation research, is a critical exploration of the ways in which empowerment is theorized in relation to traditional choral practices, as well as group singing contexts facilitated with and for stigmatized and marginalized populations. My intent in writing this paper is to provoke reflection and discussion among music education and community music practitioners relating to the need for more meaningful engagements with the notion of empowerment, particularly in relation to groups singing engagements with individuals who experience stigmatization and marginalization.

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