



The effects of group singing on personal and community well-being

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Abstract

This thesis aimed to explore the correlation between group singing and personal as well as community well-being. It focused on emotional, cognitive, social, and physical aspects of well-being. Additionally, participants emphasized the significance of its spiritual dimension. The research sought to raise awareness of the well-being aspects of singing and emphasize the potential of arts-based events in promoting the development of a healthy community.

For this thesis qualitative research was conducted with five participants of the six-month singing course held mostly biweekly. The target group were private individuals aged 18 and above, coming from diverse backgrounds and without professional musical education. Data collection involved open interviews which were recorded, transcribed, and later analysed.

The results proved that group singing has a beneficial effect on personal aspects of well-being, consequently contributing to the community's well-being. All five participants expressed a positive influence on their emotional and social well-being, emphasizing terms such as joy, togetherness, trust and support. Cognitive and physical dimensions of well-being were less evident, while the spiritual dimension was characterized by sensations of peace, balance and a sense of belonging to something greater. Furthermore, participants unanimously agreed that the benefits of group singing could be extended within their communities. These findings align with an existing knowledge base, confirming the positive effects of group singing on overall well-being.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Group singing, singing, well-being, music pedagogy, music and well-being

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1 Introduction

Mankind has slowly but surely forgotten that art is given with equal right to all men as a gift of God, that a serious involvement of some form of art is as necessary to us as our daily bread.

Werbeck-Swärdström

Since the ancient time, music has been an important part of every human culture, and the very first way of making music was through singing. We are born with the singing voice, and what a luxury – our own body is our instrument. Already the ancient myths and legends depict the importance of the voice, as the one of the Greek God Orpheus, who is able to enter the Underworld protected by his beautiful singing; or Väinämöinen, a central figure of Finnish national epic Kalevala, who creates the world and perform miracles through the power of his singing voice. Singing is an innate part of human beings, available and accessible to everyone. We use our voices daily through verbal communication, nevertheless, we tend to take that for granted, and give not much attention to its true power.

I have always been drawn to integrating my dual study paths in psychology and music. This thesis discusses the impact of group singing on personal and community well-being. Singing is nowadays mostly viewed as an expression of art, while its well-being benefits receive considerably less attention. As author Menuhin states music is our oldest form of expression, older than language or art; it begins with the voice, and with our overwhelming need to reach out to others (Menuhin & Davis, 1979). The need to reach to others is a need of sharing, feeling accepted, feeling at ease within our community, and feeling at ease in using our own voice – all important parts of well-being.

This qualitative research was conducted with the participants of the singing course *Free Your Voice* which I conducted in Spring 2022 in the city of Helsinki. The participants were 6-12 adults over 18 years old, both Finnish locals and individuals from other countries residing in Helsinki. The data collection was done through open online interviews conducted in English language with five most regular attendees of the course. The research aimed to understand distinct aspects of well-being through different question topics regarding their physical health, mood, cognition, communication and social aspects. Data analysis has been made by comparing their answers and defying the common key points. Consequently, further development on the topic has been considered.

1.1 Motivation

Motivation for this topic arose out of my personal, study and work experience, through which I came to notice that many adults nowadays consider themselves as no-singers. It seems that singing has become an art reserved only for talented and professional individuals, disappearing from our spontaneous everyday activities. This realization that most of the adults never sing is not only sad because they do not use the precious birth-given tool for freeing their emotions, but it is also potentially unfavorable for the future generations and for the community development. As philosopher Rudolf Steiner said: "If there were more singing, and especially more correct singing, there would be, among other things, less crime in the world" (Steiner, as cited in *Journal of Anthroposophy*, 1981, p. 46).

Thankfully, it seems that music therapy has a significant rise nowadays and it has been recognized as a valuable approach in healing certain illnesses. I would like to take a step backwards and think that possibly some illnesses might be prevented if we would nurture this sensitive part in ourselves, harmonic connection with others and if we would learn how to listen to our own voice better, as well as the voice of others.

For this reason, I am especially driven to raise the interest about singing within nonprofessionals, meaning also those who would never consider good enough to join the choir or music schools. By no means this study is based on a belief that everyone should become performers, but hopes that everyone could have a chance to feel the benefits of using their own unique singing voice. Creating space where one could experience the use of their voice again could be a great tool for reconnection and well-being enhancement, as well as a possibility of creating a more trustful and joyful community.

1.2 Previous studies

Many studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have been conducted on the benefits of singing on overall health, few of which will be described below. However, there is one significant limitation in researching singing's influence on well-being, and that is the lack of a common definition of well-being. Different studies have used different models and scales to define health and well-being. Moreover, research are often limited on a single variable or target group, such as, for example, elderly.

The research conducted by Clift and Hancox (2010) addressed the limitations of smaller-scale studies and developed an extensive international survey involving choir singers to investigate the well-being advantages of choir singing. This study applied the World Health Organization's (WHO) health definition and used an established cross-national tool for evaluating health-related quality of life. The findings revealed that the majority of participants experienced that singing positively affected their well-being. Participants attested to the positive effects of choir singing even during challenging times such as grief, health issues, family problems, or mental health concerns. Furthermore, they recognized the advantages of focused concentration, controlled deep breathing, social support, cognitive stimulation, regular commitment, and a sense of accomplishment. Looking ahead, I support their perspective that "More efforts are needed to expand community opportunities for involvement in singing, and to educate adults about the value of such engagement on a musical, personal, and social level, as well as for the potential benefits it may bring to well-being and health" (Clift & Hancox, 2010, p.94). This research not only affirmed the favorable effects of singing but also uncovered an important limitation: a considerable number of participants possessed established musical backgrounds. This tells us that prior musical experience is deterrent of the decision to joining the choir. I agree with their remark that to profit from singing opportunities in adult life, we must nurture its foundations from early childhood. Taking their limitation into account, I will explore the impact of group singing on the well-being of individuals without prior professional musical education.

The study by Sakano et al (2014) "Possible benefits of singing to the mental and physical condition of the elderly" studies the effects of singing on mental health and immunity. Health status and immunity were examined through saliva tests, oral condition, blood and swallowing functions. In ad-

dition, the participants compiled questionnaires regarding their mood before and after singing sessions. Levels of cortisol were measured, which increases in response to acute mental or physical stress. "Cortisol is a steroid hormone secreted from the zona fasciculata of the adrenal cortex and is most often studied in connection with stress. Moreover, cortisol affects the metabolic, immune, circulatory, and central nervous systems, and it is considered to be important for both mental and physical health" (Sakano et al, 2014 p. 6). Secretory immunoglobulin (sIgA) is another important part of immunity system which works as a defense in mucosal membranes against infection (Clift & Hancox, 2009). The results of this study showed a significant decrease in the cortisol and increase in secretory immunoglobulin levels after each singing session, while the questionnaires proved improvements in feeling refreshed, comfortable, light-hearted, relieved, and relaxed. This leads us to the conclusion that singing is correlated with good physical and mental health of the elderly. What I found very interesting is that the same effects were proven both by participants who expressed to like singing and those who did not like it, suggesting that there might be some universal law about the effects of singing on human beings.

The research by Pearce et al. (2015) recognizes the importance of social cohesion within a larger group, as a means of connecting simultaneously to many different individuals. The importance of positive social relationships is enhanced in maintaining strong mental and physical health. In this regard, singing has been explored as an activity that influences fast and strong social bonding. In their study, they investigated whether singing possesses unique qualities or if similar bonding outcomes can be achieved through other forms of artistic engagement. Two groups, participating in different hobby-like activities, were formed: one involved in singing, and the other in crafts and creative writing. The participants were unfamiliar with each other prior to the study. Over the course of seven months, their degree of closeness was assessed on three occasions. The findings revealed that singing did not lead to a higher level of closeness than other activities, nevertheless it facilitated faster bonding within the group. This knowledge can be applied to develop services that incorporate singing in professional or educational settings.

During the investigation, I came across numerous articles about the impact of music on well-being, with relatively fewer inquiries dedicated specifically to singing. Moreover, most of the research concerning singing tends to focus on professional or experienced vocalists, whereas the objective of this study is to encompass individuals irrespective of their prior singing experience. In the realm

of group singing research, the predominant focus gravitates towards choirs. However, choirs themselves may present limitations, being oriented towards performance and necessitating auditions, factors that might hold back non-professional singers from participation. Another point to consider is that many research are focused on some particular groups, as cancer patients or elderly, while the topic discussed in this thesis is not targeting a specific group of people. Nevertheless, diverse research as the ones described below, has empirically demonstrated the favorable effects of singing on well-being, encompassing enhancements in volunteerism, career performance, and stress reduction, among others.

Referenced articles such as the ones described above provide valuable evidence supporting the key concepts of the thesis; well-being has been mostly positively affected by group singing. However, it is important to acknowledge limitations such as small sample size, defined cultural context, short time period, and personal interpretations. These limitations should be considered while making conclusions and discussing further implications of this research.

2 Well-being

Wellbeing is a wide and multidimensional concept referring on overall health and harmony among important aspects of human lives. This term can be easily mistaken as the search for happiness, pleasure, and success, which is only a limiting perspective. Furthermore, it is not enough to describe it as an absence of illness. According to APA Dictionary of Psychology well-being is “a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life.” While in the words of Huppert;

It is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. Sustainable well-being does not require individuals to feel good all the time; the experience of painful emotions (e.g. disappointment, failure, grief) is a normal part of life, and being able to manage these negative or painful emotions is essential for long-term well-being. (...) The concept of functioning effectively (in a psychological sense) involves the development of one’s potential, having some control over one’s life, having a sense of purpose (e.g. working towards valued goals), and experiencing positive relationships” (Huppert, F.A., 2019, p.138)

From her statement I would underline that nobody is expected to feel good all the time, however it is important to feel that we can find sense in unfavorable situations and that we can manage to go through the hard times. There are numerous factors defying well-being and many different scales of its measurement, nevertheless, in my opinion, each person should develop a sense for his own well-being. We can ask ourselves, what is it that makes me *be well*? Although various dimensions of well-being are interlaced, for this research, we are going to focus on emotional, mental, physical, and social dimensions of well-being. What follows is a summary of these four dimensions.

2.1 Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being is an essential component of overall well-being, and it plays a critical role in maintaining and nurturing other aspects of one's well-being. For instance, when an individual does not experience inner emotional contentment, they may tend to withdraw from social interactions. "An impressive body of cross-sectional survey data shows that happy people: tend to function better in life than less happy people; are typically more productive and more socially engaged; and tend to have higher incomes" (Diener, 2000; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001, as cited in Huppert F.A.2009). It is reasonable to suggest that experiencing positive emotions can lead to improved performance, and this, in turn, can enhance our positive emotions. Nonetheless, emotional well-being does not encompass exclusively positive emotions. According to the National Institutes of Health emotional well-being is the "ability to successfully handle life's stressors and adapt to change and difficult times" (National Institutes of Health, 2018a).

In summary, emotional well-being can be depicted through positive mood, joy, feeling of contentment and calmness. A person with balanced emotional well-being tends to have a high level of self-esteem and self-confidence.

2.2 Mental well-being

Mental well-being comprehends cognitive functions, expansion of the knowledge and skills, clarity of ideas and creativity. These cognitive functions are all part of life-long learning. Through high levels of concentration, listening, attention, learning new material, memorizing lyrics and singing the cognitive development is stimulated in a joyful manner. Many studies, including Kang's (2017) agree that mood disorders, dementia and aphasia can be improved with group singing activities. Furthermore, learning in a positive state generates more ideas, creativity, and open mindedness.

Overcoming the difficulties of learning new harmonies, rhythms and words might give us a positive sense of achievement.

2.3 Physical well-being

The physical part of well-being is the one regarding our physical bodies. It includes taking care that we are healthy, able to perform everyday activities without pain or heavy fatigue, and that we can recognize what our body needs. To keep ourselves healthy it is important to have a good immunity system, which may be reinforced by good quality food, physical exercise, healthy natural environment, and good sleep. One of the most important menace to our immunity system nowadays seems to be stress. According to Sakano et al, around 60% of people experience stress related to everyday activities and relationships. Daily stress brings higher risks of cerebrovascular and heart diseases, while depression related to stress and suicide cases are on the rise. In his study, the stress makers, cortisol and secretory immunoglobulin A, were examined before and after the singing sessions, proving a positive impact of group singing on the immunity of the participants (Sakano et al, 2014).

While reading about the relationship between singing and immunity system, hormone oxytocin emerged as another important factor. Carter et al (2020) describe it as a stress-coping molecule, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, especially defending in traumatic events and anxiety. It has an important role in childbirth and lactation (Carter et al, 2020), and is related to high levels of trust and social bonding (Kosfeld et al, 2005). In adults it is released during orgasms, and – singing! It is proved that choir singing increases salivary oxytocin and generates positive emotions (Kreutz, 2014; Kreutz et al., 2004 as cited in Keeler, 2015).

Furthermore, singing can lead to improved respiratory muscle strength and a more efficient breathing. Kang (2017) states that active involvement in singing has a positive impact on asthma, pulmonary diseases, Parkinson, or quadriplegia due to enhanced breathing activity. It also reduces snoring (Pai, 2008) and stuttering (Jones, 2015). Moreover, diaphragm, a muscle which actives in a correct singing technique, involved in breathing and maintenance of a good posture, is proved to be an important center for elaboration of emotions and reduction of a perception of pain (Bordoni, 2016).

Since the body is the instrument in singing, the sound resonates in the cavities, and the sound vibration has the potential to flow through the whole body, gently massaging and releasing the tensions. Therefore, it has a potential of deep body relaxation, with energizing effect and increased sense of arousal. Adopting a good singing posture could give as a sense of grounding, and balance.

The study conducted by Cohen et al. (2006) illustrated that 166 older choir participants experienced notably improved overall health and mood over the course of one year. This improvement led to a reduction in their doctor visits, medication usage, and accidents.

Lastly, singing increases the release of beta-endorphins (Weinstein et al, 2016), also called happiness hormones, which are natural pain relievers and stress reducers, working to uplift the mood, and have a crucial role in activating the sense of belonging (Dunbar et al, 2014).

2.4 Social and community well-being

Social well-being can be described as the process of creating and maintaining significant relationships with others and nurturing the feeling of belonging. It involves communication, support, respect of diversity, engagement and it can ultimately make us feel as visible and important part of the community. Community well-being on the other half is referring on the state of the community as a whole. Those two are interlaced and interconnected. Community well-being evaluates the general standard of living and social circumstances within a given community (Murthy, 2023) whereas personal social well-being is an individual's personal assessment of their social relationships and connections. Ideally, enhancements in personal social well-being can lead to an improvement in community well-being, and vice versa.

Throughout history, human beings lived in groups in order to develop and survive. Nowadays one could theoretically survive without engaging with others (e.g. remote work, food delivery) but the biological need of connecting is still present. Nevertheless, in 2018, only 16% of Americans reported to feel part of their community (Murthy, 2023).

We live in an era where connecting virtually to people from all around the world is easy, free and immediate. However, this incredible opportunity of virtual contact might as well give us only an illusion of being connected. Due to stressful daily lives and too many activities, one might find it

more comfortable to chat online or scroll on social media instead of making the effort of truly meeting and connecting with people in person. This may easily lead to isolation and feelings of loneliness. According to Official Statistic Finland, nearly 30 percent of people aged 16 or over experienced loneliness in 2022. During the same year in UK 49.63% of adults (25.99 million people) reported feeling lonely sometimes, often, or always (McClelland, 2023). Loneliness and social isolation heavily affect mental and physical health and are even proved to increase mortality (Murthy, 2023). These findings are showing us that social isolation shall be addressed as an urgent public concern.

Moreover, Murthy (2023) points out that social connection influences community standards, such as safety, resilience, or prosperity. Social well-being goes above individual's and relates to the well-being of the entire community. Nevertheless, individual willingness alone is not enough to foster it, thus, it is crucial to raise awareness about social well-being and establish programs aimed at nurturing it.

2.4.1 Group singing and social well-being

We connect to others through communication, and the primary way of communication in human beings is through voice. Already in the timbre of the voice one can hear a lot about the person's feelings and thoughts. Human emotions are reflected in the voice, therefore our voice and our psychological state mutually influence each other, as stated by the therapist Paul Newman. Under stress of any kind, our voice and body change, weakening the ability of natural expression. Therefore, reversing the process and working on the voice is one of the tools for overcoming difficulties and regaining psychological, physiological, and social well-being. (Newman, 1998.)

One way of nurturing the communication and social well-being is group singing, which has the potential to encourage formation of friendship and support, lower feeling of isolation and increase the participation in social, cultural and community activities. From the studies of Pearce et al (2015) we already saw that group singing can be a great ice breaker tool, initiating faster social bonding than other group activities. "Benefits of group singing for community mental health and well-being" research reveals that the community-based singing contributes to the development of social capital on individual, relational and community well-being. "Singing related benefits associated in the literature with community mental health include increased levels of social capital/civic

engagement, contributions of groups to community cohesiveness, and tolerance for diversity” (Chorus America, 2003; Putnam, 1995 as cited in Gridley, p. 6, 2011). In the study, nearly half of the respondents reported being more involved in community activities, having higher sense of safety and feeling comfortable with asking for support from their friends or family since joining the singing group. Furthermore, these findings suggest that “Singing in groups might encourage support seeking from various sources such that members are well supported in times of crisis. (...) Belonging to a singing group might also facilitate information exchange for various resources and sources of support such as that from government agencies.” (Gridley et al, 2011, p.18) In the same study, which had a substantial sample size, most participants assessed their life as being good or better to the rest of the local population.

Group singing interventions offer individuals not only the opportunity to converse, forge friendships, share, and collaborate but also immerse themselves in a genuine social process while rehearsing. Participants must be present in their individual roles while harmonizing with others, offering support, giving and receiving guidance, and, most significantly, actively listening. These dynamics mirror the dimensions of a harmonic society. When singing together in a group, the collective voice transcends the sum of its individual parts, acquiring its distinct, independent identity. This sense of being part of something larger while maintaining one's unique role mirrors what individuals should ideally experience in a healthy community. Consequently, I believe that a single session of group singing rehearsal can offer a profound insight into the essence of social well-being.

Lastly, singing contributes to social identity, it unifies and bonds people from the same land or similar destiny. According to Norton (2016) various human groups or entire generations possess shared songs. Every region has his own popular music, which, a part of its celebrative function, holds a very important role of empowering people, giving them courage, a chance to lament, to protest and to grief. Despite difficult living conditions, through music we can sense the inner liberation.

3 Objectives

"In the olden days, everybody sang. You were expected to sing as well as talk. It was a mark of the cultured man to sing." Leonard Bernstein

I believe we can all agree that nowadays in Western culture not everybody is expected to sing as well as talk. On the contrary, from my experience it seems that only talented individuals and professionals are expected to sing, while others should limit themselves to being listeners. Singing, and arts in general, might appear undervalued in the competitive, materialistic, and stressful life. Furthermore, impeccable performances and competitions overwhelming our screens supported by technological development, may create unnecessary pressure of needing to sound well, or better – perfect. As Small states:

Our present-day concert life whether ‘classical’ or ‘popular,’ in which the ‘talented’ few are empowered to produce music for the ‘untalented’ majority, is based on a falsehood. It means that our powers of music making for ourselves have been hijacked and the majority of people robbed of the musicality that is theirs by right of birth. (Small, *Musicking*, p. 8)

It is important to remember one doesn't have to join group singing lessons only in order to become a professional performer, just as we do not go to sport classes to become professional athletes, but because it makes us feel good, and because it is our right to use our birth given instrument.

3.1 Research problem

The main research problem of this thesis is that singing is not present enough among non-professionals. I came to notice through my work that an average adult feels that he *cannot* sing. When I hear this, I must disagree, because I strongly believe in the words of the renowned Swedish opera singer Valborg Werbeck-Svårdström (1938) that *everybody has a singing voice*. Not all the singing has to be on a level of a performance, but all singing should feel comfortable. As Small (1998) suggests we should change the focus from *How do we sing* into *Why do we sing*. It is my hope that creating more space, opportunities and focus on group singing could prove the “non-singers” that they can actually sing and enjoy the benefits of singing just as anyone else.

3.2 Research goals

The adopted perspective of the thesis is one of holistic exploration of individuals experiences, emphasizing the connection between singing as an artistic expression, personal well-being, and community engagement. The concept of well-being is explored through experiences of its physical, emotional, mental and social elements. By employing these concepts, the thesis intends to provide an understanding of the effects of the singing course on participants, exploring the potential of arts-based events in enhancing well-being.

The primal aim of this work is to investigate the relationship between group singing, as facilitated by the Free Your Voice course, and individual and community well-being. Through the analysis of participant experiences collected through interviews, it aims to explore the multifaceted impact of group singing on emotional, physical, mental health and social connections. The benefits of this research might expand beyond individual participants and be relevant for everyone's personal, working, leisure time or educational environment. Expanding the consciousness of the benefits of such artistic activities could encourage their wider implementation. This research contributes to the sector's knowledge base, enhancing the expansion of programs that encourage holistic well-being through artistic engagement. Through acknowledgement and prioritization of the connection between singing and well-being, we could make a ground for the improvement of the whole society.

3.3 Research questions

1. How does participation in group singing course influence participants' emotional well-being?
2. In what way does engagement in the singing course relate to participants' physical health?
3. Does the participation in a singing group encourage social connection?
4. To what degree does participation in the singing course influence participants' communication skills?
5. Do participants find group singing important for the well-being of the community?

6. If yes, in what ways can we encourage group singing in your society?

3.4 This research and working life

I believe that people perform better at work and other activities when they feel good, when they are confident and trustful towards others. Honest, non-violent communication is crucial in development of working life. Acknowledging that group singing can potentially improve social bonding, trust, reciprocal support, and freedom to use the voice, could bring up new tools for improving the working environment. Exploring the effects of singing on individual's well-being is important for advancing and cultivating a society which values heightened human sensitivity. This attempt aims to restore people's inherent right to use their voice in a group, potentially facilitating communication and interpersonal connections.

4 Implementation

4.1 Method

For this thesis qualitative research through open interviews has been conducted with the participants of the singing course *Free your voice* which I facilitated in Spring 2022. Four different well-being segments have been delineated through different question topics, while the last question was about the potential further implementation. Considered topics are physical health, mood, cognition, communication and social aspects. Data analysis has been made by comparing their answers and defying the key points they had in common. Further development on the topic will be considered.

This research can be classified as qualitative research. In the words of Merriam and Tisdell (2015) in their work *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, qualitative research is characterized by exploring and understanding human experiences, perceptions, and contexts in a holistic and contextual manner. This aligns with the approach I am adopting, which aims to explore the relationship between singing and well-being as experienced by participants of *the Free Your Voice* group singing course. Through interviews, observations and their analysis, I hope to capture

the elements and the subjective experiences that participants undergo during and after the singing course. Qualitative research is well-suited to exploring the nature of well-being, as it allows the exploration of personal stories, emotions, and changes over time.

In qualitative research, gathering data and analyzing it happens at the same time. Analysis starts right from the first interview, observation, or document review. As you come across new insights and ideas, they shape how you collect more data. This process continues, helping you refine your research questions and ultimately leading to trustworthy findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). An essential part of this research involves thoroughly examining the gathered data. I organized my own observations, notes, and comments into separate folders. Additionally, I engaged in reading of relevant literature during this process. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015) the research method that closely aligns with this approach is known as action research. It places participants at the center and emphasizes practical application and positive change. It's particularly useful for gaining insights into how group singing impacts participants' well-being and contributes to personal growth.

4.2 Target group

The target group were individuals from 18-84 years old, including all genres, with different backgrounds and from different professional fields, who were willing to take part in *Free Your Voice* singing course. It was not required to have any previous experience, and there was no audition, therefore both professional singers and complete beginners were welcome. This inclusive target group encompasses individuals from diverse backgrounds who share an interest in exploring the singing benefits. The participants of the course should reflect a small part of the population of the Helsinki area, which included both Finnish and foreign citizens.

The announcement about the course was shared to citizens of Helsinki area. The marketing was made through flyers and social media one month before the beginning of the course. There were 6-12 participants at each course, of which 5 most regular participants made part of this research. Data was collected through one-hour long interviews conducted through zoom platform at the end of a six-month course held on two-weeks basis. The open-ended questions covered multi-faceted elements of well-being, such as emotional, physical, mental, and social aspect, which pro-

vided rich and contextualized answers. Interviews were held in English language, which all five participants use fluently, however, we cannot be sure if the use of a foreign language influenced on participant's expression in any way.

4.3 Ethicality

As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner. During this research the researcher was aware of his own possible effect on the participants, with the intention of nurturing the safe space for sharing while at the same time keeping a neutral and objective attitude. Participants were invited to the interview through an invitation letter, which contained the details about the structure of the interview and an insight about the research. The participation to the interview was voluntary and participants had the right to abstain from answering certain questions. The interviews were anonymous, and participants were treated with respect and sensitivity. The interview was recorded and afterwards literally transcribed. The research followed the guidelines of the authors through protection of subjects from harm, the right to privacy and the notion of informed consent.

5 Free your voice singing course

In the following chapter I will introduce the content of *Free Your Voice* singing course, which I personally facilitated and from where the research data was collected.

The singing course was based in the city of Helsinki and was open to everyone above 18 years old, with or without musical background. It was held on approximately two weeks basic from January until June of 2022. The number of participants varied from 6 - 12 at the time, some joined regularly while some occasionally. The course was held in English with a possibility of translation when it was necessary, the participants were both from Finland as well as from foreign countries. Each session included two hours on Saturday and two and a half on Sunday morning. Participants were greeted with coffee, tea and snacks, having a moment to settle and share. Then we sat in a circle and had a chance to share thoughts to the whole group, usually connected to their experiences with the voice.

Five participants who attended the course most regularly were anonymously interviewed for the research. They were four women and one man from 35 to 57 years old, employed in different professions. Interviewed participants had no previous musical education, but they had unprofessional musical experiences in the past. All participants use English fluently, even though it is not their mother tongue.

What followed were vocal exercises based on the “School of Uncovering the Voice” method, developed by Valborg Werbeck-Svårdström in the beginning of the 20th century. Mrs. Valborg was a renowned Swedish opera singer, who lost her voice due to hectic touring schedules and an inappropriate voice technique. From complete silence she brought her voice back through a series of self-discovered exercises. Across 12-year collaboration with Rudolf Steiner she then developed a holistic and therapeutical voice schooling, called ‘School of Uncovering the Voice’. Through the exercises in a safe and warm environment, participants were guided in removing the tensions, deepening the breathing and rising the awareness of the listening. The attention is not brought to the outside – to the result, approval, performance, but to the inside – to the process, discovery and connection. Therefore, everybody’s contribution is welcome, and the pace of the development is strictly individual. The goal is to open and liberate one’s voice in a concentrated and joyful manner, while allowing the emotional blockages to dissolve. In words of Freinkel (2015, p.163) “A person’s inner state is mirrored in the voice by the way they use the vocal tract. Psychological wounds or dissociative splitting inhibit our freedom to sing. Conversely, singing may heal and integrate these wounds. “ In the last part of each course participants learned easy folk songs from all over the world, arranged in two or three voices. The focus was on the voice and well-being, therefore there was no public performance.

6 Participant’s experiences

In the following chapter a synthesis from the interviews will be discussed, divided according to well-being sections.

6.1 Experience of emotional well-being

This course was for some of the participants the first experience of singing in a group, or in general singing in front of others. Therefore, some of them mentioned feelings of nervousness and insecurity upon the beginning of the course.

Epecially in the first workshops I was very excited and a little bit afraid to go because my connection to my voice is not yet very comfortable, but already after the first exercises, I got very relaxed and calm. (Participant A)

Another participant used a metaphor of a heavy load full of work and private issues with which she would join the course, which didn't make it easy to sit peacefully and concentrate. Nevertheless, as the exercises progressed, she felt the heavy load disappearing and she could relax and focus. Afterwards she felt uplifted and ready to deal with the problems. This process repeated and it became much easier for her to take a step back from the spiral of problems and focus on solutions.

Afterwards I felt more relaxed and cheerful and more motivated to find a solution for these feelings, situations or anything, also from another point of view. (Participant B)

When talking about the mood, one term consistently emerged in all five interviews, and that's the uplifting feeling of joy. Even if that period was emotionally challenging for some of the participants, all five of them expressed to feel mostly joyful, uplifted and energized during and after the course. However, not always the uplifting feelings prevailed, one participant stated that she once felt the deepest sadness just after the session. In the recent period she had gone through challenging changes in life and she stated that ... *you can then grief and experience this sadness and it is very healing*. From my stand, grieving is not always welcome in our society, one is often expected to get to his feet as soon as possible. Therefore, my hypothesis is that a deep and intimate connection with others through singing allowed this participant to feel safe enough to face the grief. Another participant said that sometimes some exercise made her feel upset, but in a therapeutic way, she felt that something what was already inside of her finally came to surface. These confessions might confirm how delicate the singing process is, and what a therapeutical potential the group singing has.

Singing is far from being only an entertainment, it has a power to touch and bring forth emotions that might have been stuck in person's being for a long time. The vibration produced by the sound stream has the power of shaking up the blocked energy making it flow again. As described by Freinkel;

Uncovering this vocal consciousness requires vulnerability and exposing of the singer's inner self. This vulnerability is initially frightening, but if the singer is able to be vulnerable and sing from a place of inner authenticity, the singer grows in strength, inner power, and deeper embodiment as his or her psychological defenses are released. Freinkel (2015, p. 164)

Participants also mentioned the feeling of lightness, calm and self-confidence, as we can read through their reflections:

Finding more confidence with my own voice has helped me to know myself better and make important decisions. (Participant A)

Through singing I feel the connection to my emotions, that I have a connection to my feelings that I can allow myself to express, that I am not closed. (Participant D)

Positivity is also maybe the force of singing, we need joy, freedom and creativity and every human needs helpers to their life. It's a nectar, life essence. (Participant C)

I could not imagine being on a theater stage without these exercises. I have no fear of the stage now, it is really fun. (Participant C)

6.2 Experiences of physical well-being

Physical well-being is the most challenging part to research in this qualitative study, since it is based only on participant's own personal observations and subjective experience.

However, participants similarly expressed to feel more present in the body, feeling the stream also in their lower body making them feel more stable. Better posture and blood stream, heartbeat regulation, overall muscle relaxation and greater awareness of the body posture were mentioned a few times. During singing, participants experienced physical equilibrium and lightness. They also noticed feeling less tired and more energized after the singing sessions. Participants noticed that regular singing encounters facilitated better voice production in their daily activities, the voice was more lifted, carried and they were not losing it even after prolonged use. In some participants the sleep quality improved, even though we cannot confirm that it is influenced solely by the singing course.

Regarding perceived stress levels, most of the participants agreed that the group singing encounters were stress relieving. One participant noted that there might have been days when she didn't talk to anyone, so, she says, at least she was able to express herself through songs, using her voice in this way she felt very relieving. Also, participants noted that it felt relieving to be able to sometimes let your voice out fully, loudly, in a culture veiled with shame and quiet. They found that the singing group was a place where they were not judged, criticized, or shushed for using their voice freely, which, they stated, felt very healing. Feelings of unity and joy which they experienced on the course usually stayed with them in the following days, allowing them to face every-day stressor with more lightness.

6.3 Experiences of mental well-being

Some participants mentioned that their singing experiences awoke memories from the past. Also, they mentioned the importance of creating new positive experiences in singing in order to recall them in future difficult moments, which I find very sensitive, mature and proactive. Two participants stated how glad they are to strengthen the concentration and memory in such a joyful way.

Participants noted that singing helps to enliven their thinking process, making it more clear and vivid. One participant shared her work experience with people suffering from dementia, who lost the connection with their daily lives, but could still vividly remember the songs which they sang with enthusiasm. This first-person experience helped her understand the universality and importance of music.

Lastly, participants agreed that the experience of being focused during the learning process and overcoming the difficulties with comforting results, helped them to activate similar attention and dedication in their work and daily activities.

6.4 Experiences of social well-being

Social aspect of the singing course was positively highlighted among all five interviewed participants. Fast social bonding, which was earlier mentioned in the study by Pearce et al, was visible also in this course. Participants who had little or no connection before the course, soon shared strong feeling and benefit of togetherness. They underlined feeling mutual support, feeling of safety, acceptance, harmony, communication and listening. Participants beautifully stated:

I think the immediate effect is that I walk through the world more openly, I am grounded in myself and more available for other people, I look them in the eyes, and speak more clearly which I sometimes struggle with, if I am alone too much then I will close too much into my own world. After singing together I feel warmth and connection. (Participant D)

This empowering exercises and connection with others made me feel more in my power, that I am enough, to accept myself as I am and also the others. (Participant E)

I feel I am not closed, I am connected, and I feel happy and light. (Participant D)

It kind of releases things that I am keeping inside, I can express literally with my voice, and this brings me calm. (Participant E)

Even more importantly, togetherness, harmony and support experienced on the course by most of the participants, was then brought into their daily lives, opening the possibility of creating a healthier approach to problem solving, collaboration and overall state of the local community.

From the beginning I felt I was in a safe environment, and everybody can be who they want to be. I feel if there are people who give me a safe space then it's easier for me to give something of me. (Participant B)

When I nourish myself then I have more energy to help others. (Participant D)

That's definitely something that helps, these things I think have an actual effect, like taking your space in the world, and those reminders, I think they are very powerful and that does affect communication. It makes it easier to express myself. (Participant D)

6.4.1 Listening

I believe that one of the most undervalued community tools is *listening*. As the sustainable developer expert Ernesto Sirolli, who worked for many years in Africa trying to help local communities simply stated: *You want to help somebody? Shut up, and listen!* Indeed, I believe we often tend to shift from listening to others into reacting immediately with our own opinions, leading to disbalance in communication and possibly harmful actions. The precious act of listening, both to ourselves, and others, is fundamental for a development of a community. This is how it was seen by the participants:

Group singing unites me more with others and it improves your skill to listen better to others. (Participant E)

It could be good also for people who are opposed to each other or have problems with each other, that would be amazing tool for conflict resolution. This could be encouraged also to companies and different work groups and schools. (Participant D)

Listening, awakening the senses to what is coming out of togetherness, feeling that we are not separate individuals suppressing others in order to reach our goals, but it's a common work – that's good music. (Participant C)

I was in the beginning too much focused on: I wanna do it right, I will do it right, sing right not to confuse others, but then I experienced it is better to listen to each other and to find together the right tone, and it's ok to get help and to help each other. (Participant B)

6.4.2 Communication

Trough group singing, one has a chance to practice the balance between giving and receiving, building the trust and support within the group. This usually leads to better communication among the participants, who can feel heard and trust all the voices are equally important.

I feel I was given a lot of confidence to accept my voice and tell my truth. (Participant A)

These powerful exercises and songs helped me to express myself more clearly and say when I disagree with something, like I can more easily set boundaries. (Participant E)

Through each other's we grow, not only by ourselves, one day I can give more and one day I can receive more than I can give, it's a question of balance. (Participant B)

This kind of community gives me good earth for my seeds to grow. (Participant B)

In group singing I have to be always awake in all my senses and listen well to others. (Participant C)

6.5 Spiritual well-being

"God respects me when I work, but he loves me when I sing" - Rabindranath Tagore

Through the interviews, one more dimension emerged which seemed highly important to the participants of the group singing course, and that is a spiritual dimension of well-being. Therefore, I decided to include it in the following section. Here is how one participant described it:

The first thing that comes to my mind is something spiritual. It is not so meaningful for me to sing by myself but harmonizing with others. The spiritual element is the beauty, and that music somehow connects something material with immaterial.

Music brings that other element that is for me mysterious, 'cause I don't know, it connects us to our own humanity but also to something higher.

Chambers dictionary defines the “spirit” as: the vital principle; the soul; a breath of wind; essence; chief quality; that which gives real meaning (MacDonald, 1972, as cited in Ross, 1995). A spiritual dimension encompasses a sense of contribution to something greater than us, a sense of transcendence beyond everyday reality, being in touch with what goes beyond proof and words, a sense of beauty and completeness, with or without organized religion (Stoewen, 2017). We can nurture it by being engaged in valued, meaningful, selfless activities, and it can give us a sense of purpose and fulfilment in life (Ross, 1995). In participants words:

Through music, I feel always that I am part of a bigger thing. (Participant D)

When I am singing it's like a meditation, it helps me to find inner balance in the moment. (Participant E)

Since ancient times singing was part of spiritual rituals, celebrations, and healing ceremonies, through sacred songs, hymns, mantras, spirituals, and chants. Singing is what marks the most important event in our lives, like birthdays, weddings, funerals, or religious holidays. It has been the way to find peace within us, to purify, to heal, to connect with others and the divine, to ease pain and find comfort, to praise, and to celebrate. In Finland, for example, known is the old tradition of lament singing (itkuvirsi), a way of processing the loss and grief through singing, known in other cultures as well. Freinkel (2015) affirms that singing opens the heart, integrates it with the mind, and clears the way for a mind-body awareness, offering the possibility of a spiritual experience.

It's about connection to me, when you sing you connect with a person that is in front of you, with nature, with spirit, with souls, with everything that is around you and you express the atmosphere and how you feel and you get closer to everything that surrounds you. (Participant B)

Maybe the core is that I feel that to me this group singing is not to become a singer but it shows that artistic practicing come to be a tool to the more human community. (Participant C)

I don't think I really understand what music really is, it is something different, on different level, maybe again for me is a spiritual thing and so singing is like spirit moving through you , you are expression of something else through you. (Participant D)

I myself have experienced moments of complete presence while singing, where I felt my own personal self was there only as a servant of something bigger. In these moments singing feels completely effortless, time dilutes, and once the song is over, I feel as if I just descended from heavens, sensitive, vibrating and grateful.

7 Results

Starting from the research problem of the common lack of singing among non-professionals, this thesis was aiming to find out the effects that group singing may have on personal and community well-being. Four dimensions of well-being have been explored through open questions; emotional, physical, mental and social. Community well-being was explained in relation to individual's social well-being. The results proved that group singing has beneficial effect on personal aspects of well-being, contributing consequently on the well-being of the community.

All participants expressed positive influence on their emotional well-being. Despite the nervousness at the beginning expressed by some participants, both their bodies and minds relaxed as the session progressed. All five participants highlighted the benefits of joyfulness that group singing evoked. Apart of joy, few participants reported experiencing more vulnerable emotions after the course, such as sadness or feeling upset, which they interpreted as a part of a healing process.

The second most notable effect appeared to be the enhancement of participants' social well-being. Participants expressed to feel harmony, togetherness, support and acceptance within the group, since the very beginning of the course. They acknowledged the significance of qualities such as listening, trust, and the willingness to accept help from others.

Regarding the communication, participants stated that they feel stronger connection to their inner voice and a greater sense of courage to establish personal boundaries. Moreover, the experience of communication in this kind of safe and nonjudgmental environment helped them become more open and articulate in their verbal expression.

Participants shared different views on the relationship with their local community. For most of participants the community constitutes of work, friends and family relationships. One participant

stated being actively involved in the neighborhood community, while one participant stated that in this period of life he/she doesn't feel as part of any community. They agreed that this kind of activity makes them feel as visible and significant contributors to a small community, and that the received benefits could be shared to their family, friends and workplaces.

The impact of group singing on physical well-being was not immediately evident, which is understandable in the context of qualitative research. Participants reported experiencing overall bodily relaxation, improved breathing, enhanced posture, and increased vocal endurance. Additionally, all participants unanimously agreed that group singing served as a means of stress relief.

There was less emphasis on mental well-being, suggesting that this aspect might not have been perceived as a primary focus or a matter requiring adjustment. What could influence this factor is the participants' age, which varied from 35 to 57, possibly indicating that concerns regarding cognitive well-being were not prominent. Two participants stated to feel glad for exercising the cognitive capacities such as memory and attention, in an enjoyable manner.

Another dimension that surfaced as a positive influence on well-being was spirituality. In some way, four participants made references to singing as a means of establishing a spiritual connection with something universal and greater, providing them with a sense of presence, peace, and equilibrium.

Additionally, participants reported that the advantages they gained from the group singing sessions could be readily integrated into their personal lives and extended to benefit their communities. They expressed gladness in learning songs that matched various emotional states, enabling them to choose and sing them in accordance with different occasions and their feelings.

7.1 Limitations of this study

The study's primary limitation is the limited number of participants. With only five individuals, the findings may not encompass the full spectrum of experiences and viewpoints concerning the impact of group singing.

Secondly, the individuals who agreed to participate in the study may have had a pre-existing interest or positive experiences with singing, which could introduce selection bias. This bias could make the findings less representative of the general population. Moreover, there is a potential interviewer's bias, even though efforts were made to minimize this influence.

Thirdly, the study's duration, both in terms of data collection and the course of the singing sessions, was relatively short. Long-term effects of group singing on well-being may not have been fully captured.

Fourthly, even though all participants agreed on making the interview in a language which is not their mother tongue, we cannot be sure if this factor influenced them on expressing themselves in better or in worse.

Lastly, the study focused on individual experiences, but the effects of group singing on the community's well-being could be more complex and multifaceted, and might not be fully captured by individual interviews.

Considering the limitations, I suggest that further studies should be made with larger sample size, with random sampling of individuals with and without musical backgrounds and within a larger time period. To complement self-reported data, future studies could incorporate objective measures, such as physiological or psychological assessments. Expanding the focus to the community level by investigating the impact of group singing on collective well-being, social cohesion, and community development could offer a broader perspective on its effects. Combining qualitative approaches, such as interviews, with quantitative methods, like physiological measurements, could offer a more objective understanding of the topic.

8 Further implementations

This research offers a few valuable insights that could be taken into consideration in future implementations of similar group singing course, noticed both by me as the facilitator and interviewed participants.

Firstly, regularity. It is far more beneficial to engage in singing activities regularly than to sing intensively but infrequently. Maintaining a consistent singing routine allows the voice to develop gradually and gently, affording it the time needed to adapt and unlock its full potential. As noticed by the participants:

I have to do it regularly, take part in singing and groups, and if I do it regularly then it accumulates everything together and affects me in being more connected, open and rooted. (Participant C)

It keeps me up, that we regularly have this kind of singing course. (Participant E)

Secondly, inclusive and safe environment. In a professional choir it is necessary to have a certain level of musicality, auditions and professionalism. While professional choirs typically require a certain level of musicality, auditions, and professionalism, community singing, as observed in this research, values the contribution of every participant. Many participants in this kind of courses have little or no musical background, have experienced singing related trauma, or simply feel insecure or inexperienced. For this matter, it is extremely important to offer a safe and warm environment to the participants, making them feel welcome and valid. This involves appropriate physical space, professionalism of the facilitator and support of the whole group. Drawing from my experience, incorporating both formal and informal opportunities for verbal sharing, such as group circle and coffee breaks, has proven highly beneficial. This facilitates open communication and strengthens the sense of community among participants.

Additionally, offering songs from various culture, often in languages unfamiliar to all the participants, put both advanced and beginner singers in the same boat, working together in getting the right pronunciation. Folk songs, in particular, kindle interest for diversity through stories and melodies from other countries. In certain occasions during the course, foreign participants, who often struggle with the Finnish language, had a chance to show their skills while working on the songs from their homeland. This multifaceted approach brings warm environment:

From the beginning I felt I was in a safe environment, and everybody can be who they want to be. Especially you, I mean you are the teacher and everyone is orientating on you, and you brought

very accepting mentality into the group and to the room, so for me it was easy to adapt and to connect to this, to accept and bring it to others.

This environment helps me to accept myself as I am, and also the others. (Participant B)

Lastly, the choice of the repertoire. Given that the course was structured as two-day sessions held every other week, it was imperative to ensure that, at the conclusion of each session, participants left with a sense of accomplishment. Meaning that the songs shall be on that level that bring enough challenge but also easy enough for the group to learn them in this very short period and is able to enjoy the performance at the end of the day. The role of the facilitator is crucial at this point, needing to have enough experience, flexibility and intuition while preparing the material and leading the group. Other factor is the songs content. In my role as a facilitator, I usually suggest songs which often celebrate holidays, mark the changing of seasons, and nurture a sense of balance between melancholy and joy. Simple songs tend to linger in memory more easily, with participants continuing to hum and sing them even after the course is concluded. For many, recalling heartfelt lyrics during darker times can evoke feelings of safety and warmth similar to what they experienced during the course.

I like being here cause you always bring such a beautiful and soulful songs. (Participant B)

These beautiful songs that I really like, are so uplifting, beautiful, and some sad, and now I know how to sing them and depending on the mood I can sing them by myself. (Participant E)

8.1 Should group singing be encouraged in the society, and how?

All five participants agreed that group singing merits greater encouragement within society. When discussing on how to encourage it, their responses were unanimous: it all begins with early education. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that some participants had negative school-related experiences, such as shaming and categorizing. Therefore, when including more singing and music in schools, it is crucial to do it in a supportive, inclusive and gentle manner.

I think it starts in school, it would be good to do these exercises with them and encourage them to sing, without any shame, and without comparing. (Participant A)

I think it starts everything as a child, at the very beginning you get a routine on it and it feels more normal and the fear will be lower and lower as you integrate it in daily life. (Participant B)

In the kindergarten you are more free, no testing, and then there is a cut, in school you enter in categories and expectations. (Participant B)

We could take a look to other cultures and integrate their methods in our system, school or earlier, that it gets a brighter offer about music and singing, that it feels more natural. (Participant E)

8.2 Author's reflection

Wars, violence, environmental crises, and depression have not only marred our history but continue to cast a shadow over our daily lives. While I recognize the significance of scientific and technological advancements, I am strongly convinced that alongside this progress, there must be a focus on human inner development. It is, in my opinion, a matter of great urgency to create spaces, programs, and initiatives that nurture the human spirit. This is crucial so that all our actions spring from a place of benevolence, directed towards fellow humans, animals, and the natural world. The evolution of the human race cannot be discussed without considering the holistic well-being of individuals.

I agree with other participants of the *Free your voice* course held for this study, that this transformation begins with education. Instead of diminishing artistic programs in public schools, we should endorse them, sowing the seeds of love in children - a love for life, for one another, for the Earth. To me, this represents a valid investment in the future. And what better way to do this than through joyful singing! Moreover, group singing could be implemented in all other areas as well, workplace, community activities, hospitals, elderly homes etc. With good will the possibilities are endless. While writing this, the words of Charlie Chaplin surfaced to my memory:

“In this world there is room for everyone. And the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way. Greed has poisoned men’s souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost.” (Chaplin, 1940)

I wholeheartedly agree with his words, and I firmly believe that one of the primary paths towards greater humanity and compassion is, apart from other art forms, the delicate and beautiful art of singing.

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