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Older People in a Community Gospel Choir: Musical Engagement and Social Connection

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Abstract

This research explores the role of community music in the lives of older Australians. This qualitative case study investigated the meanings and understandings ascribed by participants to their musical engagement in the South of the River Community Gospel Choir. This mixed a cappella SATB choir was formed in 2002 in Melbourne. The choir began with a repertoire of African-American Gospel music and South African Freedom Songs. With time their musical choices have transitioned to include more contemporary Australian composed works. The choir sings in diverse community settings such as high security prisons, palliative care, hospitals and the more common range of gigs such as community events, private events and folk festivals. Data were gathered from individual and focus group semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2016 with the members of the choir and with the Musical Director. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis and reported under the themes of Musical engagement and Social connection, Performing and Outreach. The findings confirmed the pivotal musical and social importance of the Music Director; the importance of performance opportunities that support both socialising and community outreach; and the role of ensemble membership in fostering and maintaining understandings of self-worth and self-esteem.

Keywords

Community Choir, Phenomenological Research, Music Engagement, Social Connection, Older People

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Older People in a Community Gospel Choir: Musical Engagement and Social Connection

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This research explores the role of community music in the lives of older Australians. This qualitative case study investigated the meanings and understandings ascribed by participants to their musical engagement in the South of the River Community Gospel Choir. This mixed a cappella SATB choir was formed in 2002 in Melbourne. The choir began with a repertoire of African-American Gospel music and South African Freedom Songs. With time their musical choices have transitioned to include more contemporary Australian composed works. The choir sings in diverse community settings such as high security prisons, palliative care, hospitals and the more common range of gigs such as community events, private events and folk festivals. Data were gathered from individual and focus group semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2016 with the members of the choir and with the Musical Director. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis and reported under the themes of Musical engagement and Social connection, Performing and Outreach. The findings confirmed the pivotal musical and social importance of the Music Director; the importance of performance opportunities that support both socialising and community outreach; and the role of ensemble membership in fostering and maintaining understandings of self-worth and self-esteem. Keywords: Community Choir, Phenomenological Research, Music Engagement, Social Connection, Older People

Introduction

Globally large numbers of older people participate in singing and in choirs. Current research confirms that engaging in arts activities such as choirs and vocal ensembles contributes to a sense of well-being amongst older people (Fung & Lehmberg, 2016; Lee, Davidson Krause, 2016). It is noted that there is “currently a paucity of prospective research from the participant perspective” (Skingley, Martin, & Clift, 2015, p. 1) and this present qualitative study gives voice to participants and addresses a gap in the research through an Australian lens. Active participation in a choir offers older people opportunities to share music making both within the group and in the wider community, and provides fulfilling leisure activities (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Skingley & Bungay, 2010). There is general consensus amongst researchers that choir membership can offer participants a sense of purpose, belonging, and community. Participation provides opportunities for collaboration and building social cohesion, the development of a sense of individual autonomy and empowerment, and personal feeling of being valued by the immediate and wider community (Creech et al., 2014; Jacob, Guptill, & Sumsion, 2009; Specker, 2014). Being a member of a choir can facilitate the forming and maintenance of friendships that offer social support and the formation of group identity (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016).

Many older adults want to remain active and engaged and seek learning opportunities for personal satisfaction and growth (Gilmour, 2012; Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2013; Wiesmann & Hannich, 2008). Research has found that music engagement can aid life-long learning (Cruce & Hillman, 2012; Hays & Minichiello, 2005a; Lee, 2013; Southcott, 2014; Talmage et al., 2015). Lifelong learners seek opportunities for aesthetic and cognitive growth, personal development, and community engagement which can all be found in community singing groups. Individual members of a community choir become part of a larger group or collective and through their engagement form “spaces for the social self and civic engagement to emerge” (Arai & Pedlar, 2003, p. 188). There is a reciprocal relationship between social cohesion and social outcomes and as “individuals invest in their own cultural and human capital and participate in various types of cultural events and activities, they also appear to increase the social capital within their communities” (Jeannotte, 2003, p. 46). Singing in community choir is an effective way to develop personal and musical agency that can foster shared activity that responds to social justice, community involvement and outreach (Joseph, 2015). Building on the research literature and addressing the gap in both Australian studies and those that concern secular gospel choirs, we posed the following research question: How do older Australians understand their experiences as members of a gospel community choir?

This research is situated in Australia where the Australian Government prioritizes the promotion and maintenance of good health and well-being for all. It is noted that in Australia average life expectancies have increased markedly over recent decades with people now expected to live longer and healthier lives, and remain active in the community (Australian Government, 2016). Over the past two decades the proportion of the Australian population aged 65+ has increased from 11.9 per cent to 15 per cent. It is expected that this trend will continue (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). There is a significant projected increase in the number of people aged 65+ and aged 85+. When compared to many OECD countries, Australia requires “major shifts in cultural expectations and attitudes about ageing ... to respond constructively, at both an individual and population level” (Australian Government, 2016). Successful and “productive ageing recognises the contribution of older people to economic, social and cultural growth and helps build a sustainable community” (Davis, Crothers, Grant, Young & Smith, 2012, p. 338). It is envisaged that a healthy Australian aged population can contribute actively to “the life of the nation through participation in the labor market or through voluntary work” (Australian Government, 2016). Researchers have found that active engagement in music making (such as community choirs) can contribute to the overall well-being of mature adults (Hays & Minichiello, 2005b; Veblen, 2007; Joseph & Southcott, 2015).

This case study is part of a larger ongoing joint research project *Engaging with the Arts by Older Australians*. Our participants are all members of a community choir in Melbourne, Australia. By reporting on an Australian ensemble, we address a gap in local scholarship and contribute to global research, particularly by exploring participant understandings of engagement in community gospel singing. On a local and national level, this research informs those with oversight of the provision of facilities and programs that support community well-being and enhances quality of life. Further give voice to older people who have much to contribute to their community but who often find themselves marginalized.

The South of the River Community Gospel Choir

South of the River Community Gospel Choir is a mixed a cappella SATB community choir formed in 2002. The choir celebrates “diversity and harmony through a shared passion for singing” (South of the River Community Gospel Choir, 2016). Membership of the choir is via audition and at any time there are about 35 members. There is no expectation that choir members can read music or sight read. The choir rehearses on Tuesday nights at the Armadale

Baptist Church and there is a fee of \$10 per week (Acappellacentral, 2016). According to the Musical Director (MD), the fee covers the “rent of the venue, public liability, a few subscriptions to things, and a bit of administration cost for people who open up and get tea and coffee and then my fee.” Choir member are aged between 18 and 70+ and there is an organizing committee. The choir was founded by the MD a well-known singer songwriter and performer in Melbourne. Annemarie Sharry remains the Music Director (MD) of the choir. The vision statement for the choir states “Singing for enjoyment, sense of ensemble, and to perform within the community” (Choirs of Melbourne, 2016).

The musical repertoire of the ensemble encompasses traditional African American gospel music, world music and original Australian compositions. These musical styles have become more popular in Australia and now attract “considerable interest from singers, listeners and choir directors outside its originating culture” (Legg & Philpott, 2015, p. 199). The choir performs about 6 to 8 concerts per year and their performance costume is black with a preferred colour. The choir has performed in numerous Melbourne and Victorian events. Many of these are community events and festivals including the Port Fairy Folk Festival; St Kilda Festival; Eltham Jazz and Blues Festival; Queenscliff Music Festival; Apollo Bay Music Festival; Williamstown Music Festival; Dandenong Ranges Music Festival and others (South of the River Community Gospel Choir, 2016). In 2006 the choir was a finalist in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Classic FM national choir competition (National Library of Australia, 2016). The choir performs in a diverse range of venues such as the Melbourne Town Hall, Crown Casino's Grand Palladium Ballroom, Grape Grazing in the Yarra Valley, and numerous Melbourne pubs and community events. The choir has collaborated with a range of artists and composers, and has recorded two CDs (2003 and 2006).

Both authors are practicing musicians and music educators with long engagement with community music making, both instrumental and choral. Over the past decade, we have researched a number of diverse community arts groups with older members both together and singly. Through this qualitative research we hope to give voice to our participants and share their understandings with those who may facilitate further arts engagement for older people active in community. In a country built of ongoing waves of migration such as Australia, it is imperative that there be opportunities for shared engagement in the arts to support the maintenance and transmission of cultural heritage, celebration of diversity and inclusion, and recognition of how much the arts can support social engagement.

Methodology

This qualitative case study explores choir members' understandings of ensemble membership and explores their perceptions, experiences and lifeworlds (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015). This research is hermeneutic thus it involves interpretation by the researchers of the understandings of the participants about the phenomenon and its social context (Allan, Eatough, & Ungar, 2016; Giorgi & Giorgi 2003). In December 2015, after gaining Ethical Approval from the Human Ethics Committees of both Deakin University and Monash University, the South of the River Community Gospel Choir was contacted to seek permission to interview older members (65+) in a focus group for about an hour. With agreement the interview occurred in March 2016. At the time of interview there were about ten potential participants in this age group, six of whom volunteered to take part.

The authors prepared the questions that were asked by the Research Assistant (RA). The RA has undertaken many of the studies in this ongoing project. She is an experienced qualitative interviewer who is of a similar age to the older participants interviewed which we have found encourages the sharing of insights. The group interviewed comprised all that volunteered to be part of the study. Six participants met with the RA at a mutually convenient

time and place. The questions first sought details about the participants, their involvement with the choir, and their understandings of group membership. The questions included: Tell me about your musical background? Why did you decide to join this group? Why have you stayed? How do you learn a new song? What do you think are the benefits of membership of the choir? Interestingly participants spoke over each other and completed each other's sentences, revealing a familiarity and shared understanding concomitant with ongoing social engagement. No focus group participant asked to be interviewed individually. Similar questions were posed to the MD of the ensemble in a sixty-minute telephone interview in May 2016 conducted by both authors. A few questions were solely asked of the MD such as How do you teach a song? How would you describe the choir's ethos? How do you select repertoire? Participants were given the opportunity to confirm their interview transcript's accuracy. Contextualising data were gathered from documentary sources such as the official website.

Interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is an inductive approach that seeks to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experience (Allan et al., 2016; Smith & Osborn, 2015). The key elements of IPA are: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Kirkham, Smith, & Havsteen-Franklin, 2015). Using a phenomenological approach researchers develop descriptions of the essences of experiences (Creswell, 2013). IPA is idiographic as it explores individual understandings of experienced phenomena (Wagstaff et al., 2014). IPA recognises that the "process of understanding someone else's life world or experience(s) is inevitably influenced by the researchers own 'experiences, values and pre-understandings'" (Rodham, Fox, & Duran, 2015, p. 60). This approach is thus a double hermeneutic process in which researchers seek to understand the participants' subjective experiences whilst trying to explore the underlying meaning of the phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are considered the most efficacious data collection strategy (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008). We analysed data from the interviews. Initially we both independently listened to the tape before transcribing the interview together. We then independently read and re-read the transcript noting emergent themes in a margin. Next we discussed the emergent themes and then began to group them into categories. We jointly decided on which groupings to prioritise and which unrelated matters to discard (Joseph, 2014). The findings are illustrated by direct quotations (Tzanidaki & Reynolds, 2011). The interviewed choir members are not identified but the conductor has agreed to be named.

Findings

The findings are presented under two overarching themes. The first, Musical engagement has three sub-themes: Music learning, Repertoire, and Moving to the music. The second theme Social connection, performing and outreach contains five sub-themes: Social connection, Performing, The "pub crawl," Festivals and other events, and Outreach.

The interviewees all agreed that, "music is life" and it "is something you don't grow out of." Music accompanies all life stages and it is a huge part of their identity. The interviewees were all older and with hindsight one explained, "I live for music – it's something I do, it's something that's in me, I've had it all my life." Another interviewee noted the connection between music and self-identity when they explained that, "music gives you strength to create your personality." As a retiree one participant noted that "music can fill a gap" in later life. Further, another suggested that it provided "an additional sense of confidence." More specifically music engagement was noted as helping with breathing, memory, and with an overall sense of well-being. One participant felt that this was very much the case, "I heard on the radio that going singing is as good as a workout – my well-being is enhanced by the feeling that I never have to go the gym because I'm singing." Another

interviewee explained that music engagement helped her stay focused. She explained that she had been distracted by recent deaths in her family. She joined three years ago and although her father-in-law died the first year and her father died in the second she has found that she finds singing in the choir offers

a real release and a lot of those songs really ministered to me, really fed my soul, and we do sing a lot of songs about death and [about] meeting your father again and meeting your mother again, those sort of things. It was very positive for me in that way.

From the participants' statements, music engagement offered a range of positive benefits both for their sense of self, resolution of personal understandings, and ability to engage with others socially.

Interviewees spoke about joining the choir for various reasons. For several it took a bit of persuasion, one person said that they only joined "after a bit of browbeating" from the MD. Another person explained that, she had attended "every single gig, always in the audience for the first five years" but eventually was persuaded by another choir member, so in the sixth year she joined. It appears that once initial reservations were overcome or circumstances became possible, members joined and have stayed. The MD identified three reasons why people remain in the group. She put these in a prioritized list: "I think that social contact with other choir members almost trumps the music side of things, followed second by being musical and singing in a group. Thirdly, the opportunity to perform – it's as much a social thing as well as a musical outlet."

Musical engagement

As in all community ensembles the personality and musical expertise of the director is pivotal. The choir members found the MD to be very inclusive, very giving, patient, organized and has "a good sense of humour." The interviewees described her as straightforward as "you know where you are so 'what you see is what you get'." As one interviewee asserted, musically the MD has "very high standards without being performance orientated." It was felt that she did not put people under pressure but had high expectations. There was general affirmation that the MD has a "very good ear and her sense of time are both excellent" and further "she can sing all the parts." The pivotal role of the MD is crucial to the ongoing success of the choir.

Music learning

Choir members bring with them a range of prior experiences of music learning and engagement, and different musical abilities. For example, one interviewee is a semi-professional musician playing guitar and percussion. Another is a trained piano teacher who has played for her church for seventeen years. Yet another is a "self-taught basic guitarist [who learnt] chords as a teenager and I have play badly ever since." The MD did admit that on occasion there might be "aurally challenged people in the choir." The first hurdle they encounter is the process of joining and all interviewed choir members spoke about the importance of the low key and informal audition process. The MD may ask one of the established choir members "to have a listen to new people to see if they can move, or they're in time or they can hold a note." Audition is not the general practice of the MD. She explained, "if someone approaches and wants to join the choir, I ask them what experience they've had. If they've been in other choirs or they've learnt instruments and things, I usually just say 'yep,

you're in.'" This apparently informal recruitment process is underscored by musical judgements both by the MD and the other choir members.

Once members have joined the choir, most songs are taught by rote. One interviewee described the process: the MD "will play it on piano, simple as that," another added "or give you a recording," and yet a third continued "or sing the part." They all agreed that "she's really good the way she teaches each section bit by bit through the song." It was stated that the MD

goes very quickly, she always keeps on going, going; before you've even properly got it she'll go on to the altos and sings the part and gets them all to sing back to her and you just wing it even if you didn't get it in the first place.

As this is an a cappella choir, blending the voices is important. As one participant stated, "if you understand harmony, when you sing a part like tenor or alto or soprano you're used to picking out your part" The MD is an experienced teacher of singing who has worked in a variety of settings. She chooses songs that are appealing to her. She selected a cappella because it "just appealed rhythmically to me so you can create something rhythmic and melodic without having to use instruments, and the beauty of the a cappella choir is that you can then have instruments that just kind of back you up." She chose African-American Gospel music because "it's still a Western style of music in terms of the harmony. The harmonies are quite simple, but the rhythm is exciting. So you put those two together and they're relatively easy to teach." By selecting this genre of music, the MD can be inclusive and opportunities for musical learning and growth. For example, the repetitive rhythmic patterns of musical phrases allow participants time to hear their own parts and sing different harmonic lines.

The MD thinks that gospel singing appeals to the members of the choir because "most of them have grown up with a Western tradition of music and harmony and popular music, and this gives them something that really appeals." As an added element, "we always have a percussionist in the group who plays African drums and some hand percussion and [laugh] that seems to be exciting as well." The MD arranges music as necessary. Occasionally she asks colleagues or uses something that is already arranged, but on other times "we kind of arrange it on the fly in the choir. So just try things out and other people come up with ideas so ... we do collaborate a little bit." Again, the apparent informality of these practices is underscored by the considerable musicianship and teacherly skills of the MD.

Repertoire

According to the MD, "the repertoire is big. We have what I'd call our greatest hits [which comprises] nine to ten songs that we could easily do without really any rehearsal." Following their preferences for African-American Gospel music they include South African Freedom songs. South of the River presents "Soul Train" which is a spectacular gospel and soul celebration that includes a number of other groups and some guest artists. For the most recent Soul Train in 2016 they mostly selected songs from the hundred or so in their repertoire. These songs include "a Whitney Houston song called 'Your love is my love'" ... a Curtis Mayfield tune, 'People get ready', [and] a Michael Jackson song, 'Will you be there?'" One choir member spoke about a particular song in the repertoire that "breaks us all up – it's called 'Sister my sister' [written by Australian composer Sue Johnstone] – and when we start singing that it is a very emotional, very emotive song." Another participant clarified that this song has been sung by the choir for thirteen years although "it's not gospel but it's about connection and sharing." An interviewee added that when the whole choir is singing this song "you can look around and see everyone is getting emotional but it is beautiful." The MD also encourages the choir to sing "more Australian stuff" and she hopes to extend this to "new age Aussie rock."

The MD wants South of the River to have a recognisable musical identity “to give us a bit of a point of difference.” Although the choir has about 35 members, the actual numbers at each event varies depending on availability. Numbers can range from 9 to 35/40. There is no expectation that everyone performs every time. The MD canvases the choir to see who is available and this may influence her decisions about repertoire.

Moving to the music

One of the facets of singing in this community gospel choir is that choir members are expected to move to the music. The MD admitted that moving to the music “doesn’t come naturally to a lot of people, but usually after a little bit of encouragement everyone gives it a go.” The MD encourages the choir to practice their moves at home so they can feel “comfortable doing some uniform movements and not feeling like a fool.” To assist in this, the choir has engaged a theatre director a few times to help with songs that include movement. The MD pointed out that “it is very difficult, particularly for older men to be able to dance in time and sing and not look uncomfortable.” To assist the choir, the theatre director asked them to talk about the meaning behind the song and what they want to impart as performers. From this she made suggestions about staging but the interviewees thought that all this had added a degree of difficulty. One interviewee explained that, “because I’m short I have to stand in the front row, I’m not a fan of being in the front row ... there’s that added difficulty of having to get my feet going right and then clapping happening at the right time.” At first this was a “significant [challenge] as I looked like I was catching flies.” This participant was surprised that this was difficult “because I am a musician and I don’t have any trouble singing and playing the guitar.” As a gospel choir, movement is an expected component of performance. To maintain their gospel identity, choir members had to learn to move.

Social connection, performing and outreach

Social connection

It was evident from the group interview that there was an easy camaraderie between the choir members. The MD felt that people feel better just by coming to rehearsals and singing with others. She described that “people walk in looking a bit bedraggled, often tired, and then they’ll walk out of there elated [laugh] ... usually. I can see it all the time, and I think it’s definitely that social contact.” One of the participants summed this up aptly by saying “the choir as a community in itself has a strong sense of fellowship and it’s good to have the friendships with the people in the choir, the benefits have nothing to do with music, it’s about doing something together.” The MD observed that “the older crew will be interested in the lives of the others in the choir. So often you know when we’ve had [younger] women going through relationship issues, the old people will have advice.” Ultimately the MD considers that the choir is “a really social group and ... often gigs will finish at the pub, we’ll go for a drink, we’ll go for something to eat.” This doing something together extends out from the choir into the community. The choir takes their performances into public spaces and into more private settings such as hospices and hospitals, and prisons.

Performing

The choir members spoke about their diverse range of venues and performance opportunities. For one participant, “performing is the highlight of being in the choir.” He admitted that, “OK the rehearsals are good fun but when you do a performance and particularly

when the acoustics are good, the crowd really gets in to what you doing” which is the best feeling. Another interviewee added that “you get a real buzz from performing.” Another person concurred that it was all about “joy, the joy of singing.” Although an a cappella choir, South of the River is sometimes accompanied by a percussionist who also sings in the choir. As one member of the choir explained, performing together is

totally rewarding, joyous in a lot of ways, it’s a drug, it’s a great drug because it makes you feel so good when you put out something and then the audience responds – that just makes you work harder and you give more, and they give more – it’s a give and take thing which makes you just feel absolutely great and buzzing at the end of the show.

Performances could be quite informal. For example, one summer evening following a rehearsal the MD took the choir outside and they performed on the footpath. As they sang “all the people were coming out of the Chinese restaurant opposite and they’re all applauding and getting out of their cars and waiting for us to finish.” The choir members relish these moments as significant examples of the nature of the ensemble. Despite this relaxed social “vibe” the members are proud of the musical standard of their performances.

The “pub crawl”

One of the more social of the annual events is a “pub crawl” in which a series of bars in geographic proximity are visited. Initially the MD began these as a novelty but the pub crawl has now become a tradition for the group. The pub crawl occurs in inner Melbourne suburbs where there are bars in walking distance or connected by short tram rides. One of the participants explained that they would “go around three or four different pubs and sing three or four songs and have three or four drinks [general laughter]” and then the whole group would move to the next pub. The songs chosen for these spontaneous performances needed to avoid overly conspicuous religious topics. The MD explained that,

over the years I became conscious of thinking about the songs we were choosing. The choir are very excited about performing in a pub when there’s unexpected punters [members of the public] who are usually delighted by a bunch of people coming in and singing around them, but if the choice of songs sounds like God “botherers” [a slang term for proselytizing members of religious groups] or a religious song, sometimes you can get an adverse reaction from the punters.

A choir member recalled that one year as part of the pub crawl the group

just jumped on the tram and started singing and some of the reaction was great and some of it was like “oh what are these God botherers doing” so you sometimes get a bit of a mixed reaction but overall people love it and enjoy it.

Interestingly, a side effect of these impromptu performances is gaining potential recruits for the choir. The MD recalled that, on the pub crawl last year, the choir was sitting at tables outside a pub singing and several people asked how to join. This consequence of social participation and self-promotion is unusual in our prior research and choral engagement. In one way this reflects the informal ethos of this ensemble and is a way to foster recruitment of new members.

Festivals and other events

The choir performs at a number of state-wide and local festivals and events. Over the years the choir has sung at major Victorian music festivals such as the popular annual four-day Port Fairy Folk Festival and the three-day annual Apollo Bay Music Festival. These festivals are important events on the community music calendar and the choir members enjoy performing and assert that they “really enjoyed the four-hour bus trip” getting there. Some of the invitations to perform come from choir members, the MD explained that, “there’s a couple of women in the choir who were teaching at Lauriston Girls’ School, so we did one of their big festival events.” The choir has also performed at the opening of local libraries, in art galleries, in garden shows, at the local annual Stonnington Winter Arts Festival, and as the feature choir at Carols in Como Park (Stonnington Council). Taking part in these festivals and events validates the choirs’ sense of self-worth and worth in the wider community. Such performances also offer focal points to their year’s effort and provides opportunities for socializing both travelling to and performing at different venues.

Outreach

The choir has performed at many benefit concerts such as that for “Very Special Kids” in Malvern and “Meals Under the Bridge” in the Melbourne CBD. In the last couple of years, the group has performed at three Melbourne hospitals: Cabrini Hospital Palliative Care, The Alfred Hospital, and St Vincent’s Hospital. The MD spoke about the challenges of selecting repertoire, particularly for seriously ill patients. She explained,

even if we did a song like “I’ll fly away, when I die I’ll fly away,” I didn’t not do that because of potential sensitivities of audience members because I just figured we do what we do, and these songs can be interpreted however once you send them out there, it’s up to the audience to decipher it the way that they want, and you can’t protect them from anything like that.

Another form of outreach is singing to prisoners in correctional institutions. They have sung twice at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre a maximum security prison for women and twice at Port Phillip Prison which is a maximum security men’s prison in Victoria. The MD said that the visit to the women’s prison was “amazing” as it “quite interactive. We did a workshop where some of them sang along.” In the men’s prison choir members sang “in the protection unit, so these were most of the sex offenders, and it took a long time [stressed] to get through security and we all had to have police checks as well.” The MD commented that the prisoners “were extremely well behaved [laugh] and we performed and there was a bit of interaction afterwards actually talking about the percussion instruments and talking about the songs.” Just as in the hospitals, the MD thought about the choice of repertoire to perform in the prisons. She explained, “I must admit in the women’s prison we did a South African song called ‘Freedom is coming ... freedom is coming, oh yes I know’.” After that particular item one of the women, “got up and she said, it’s freedom, yeah that’s what I want, and kind of made a gag [joke] of it.” This confirmed the MD in her decision not to omit songs from the program because of envisaged sensitivities.

The MD shared an unsolicited “incredible letter from one of the inmates” that she received a few weeks after the performance. Her correspondent admitted that before the choir arrived he (and other prisoners) were “a little bit wary of what it was going to be about ... and took a bit of prodding to come along.” The prisoner explained that, “there are many facades and clichés maintained within daily life in prison but I can assure you that there were a number

of ‘men’ truly moved and affected by the performance.” The performance evoked emotions that do not “normally take place as prison life is generally driven by repetition, boredom and a distinct lack of both depth and culture.” On a personal level the correspondent explained that for him,

it felt like long suppressed feelings and emotions that had been lost were reactivated ... Events like this prove that I am not just a surname or a number; I am still a human being capable of reacting and feeling ... Thank you again for not only giving up your time on a weekend but also for having the courage and desire to bring your talents to the prison and prisoners.

The MD recounted that “when we went back about four years later, we asked after this particular prison inmate but he’d died.” The MD has saved the letter and was proud to share it as testimony to the power of musical outreach that enhanced and promotes musical engagement.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study confirms prior research that asserts the value of music engagement via singing in community choirs (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Fung & Lehmborg, 2016; Hays & Minichiello, 2005b; Joseph & Southcott, 2015; Lee, Davidson, & Kraus, 2016; Skingley & Bungay, 2010; Veblen, 2007). Our focus on an Australian community gospel choir addresses a gap in the literature and offers insight into the genre of music that has the potential to contribute to musical and social engagement. Many of this choir’s understandings of musical and social engagement resonate with our prior studies (Joseph & Southcott, 2017) but what set this study apart for us was the MD’s saving and sharing of a letter from a prisoner in maximum security who has since passed away. She was clearly very moved by this letter and she sought to maintain contact with this man. Although as practitioners we are aware of the power and myriad benefits of music, we have never encountered in our research such evidence of the meaning of music to our participants. Saving just this one letter is an act of personal validation that supports her personal ethos about music engagement.

The MD is instrumental for the choir’s ongoing musical and personal success. Her musical and social vision propels the group to explore, perform and expand their horizons. In facilitating activities with older learners “the interpersonal qualities, teaching strategies, skills, and knowledge of leaders and facilitators” are vital (Hallam et al., 2016, p. 20). The MD makes all the decisions about the choir. On occasion the MD has invited others to work with the choir on performance aspects such as moving to the music which older members of the ensemble occasionally find challenging. Moving and singing are inseparable in African American Gospel music and South African Freedom Songs. The choir members interviewed spoke about the personal attributes of the MD that included a clear vision for the choir, opportunities for group and solo participation both vocal and instrumental, the accommodation of individual rates of learning, and opportunities for social interaction. The MD demonstrated many of the qualities that contribute to participants’ positive experiences including clarity, organisational ability, interest in and respect for individual members, enthusiasm, and subject knowledge (Duay & Bryan, 2008). By using these strategies, interest and motivation for ongoing engagement are fostered within the group as shown in their festival participation, the “pub crawl,” and singing in hospitals.

Singing in South of the River provides choir members with opportunities to perform as part of a larger group in various community settings that has provided a platform for social engagement and outreach such as by singing in prisons. The choir and the MD were moved by

the affect of their singing in the prisons. The MD was proud of what the choir had achieved as shown by the response she received both at the concerts and in private communication from an inmate. The prisoners appreciated not only that the choir came to sing but also that they sang about freedom even though the audiences were all incarcerated. The MD was confirmed in her decision not to avoid singing songs that might be considered inappropriate. This was evident in the response she received from seriously ill hospital patients. Singing in this community choir has enhanced members' sense of personal empathy. They feel that they can share their music in a way that is a form of outreach.

Community music engagement amongst older people provides opportunities for the enhancement of self-esteem which contributes to a sense of competence, validation and self-worth. Improved self-esteem can impact adverse effects of ageing and foster social interaction (Kim & Merriam, 2004). For the members of South of the River, being part of the choir is a fulfilling leisure activity that generates social engagement and promotes the development of music skills. By learning a new genre such as gospel music, older people are introduced to a new way of singing and moving. As an amateur group, this choir has been very successful, releasing CDs, YouTube clips, and performing in varied public settings. The choir has been able to share its music making both formally and informally with the wider community. The members of the choir have benefitted from their musical engagement that has fostered social bonding, cohesion, a perception of personal worth, and a sense of group identity. This study adds to research about the spectrum of ways in which older people actively make music that contributes to the wider Australian society. The vibrant a cappella, acoustic performances by South of the River engage performers and audience alike. The interviewees appreciated a particular audience reaction, "you look like you're having such a good time." This sense of worth, enjoyment and being appreciated is what drives their continued engagement with the ensemble. We need more of such shared group activities for older people to promote positive ageing and well-being across Australian society to "ensure that Older Australians enjoy healthy and productive lives" (Australian Government, 2016). Future research should explore the diverse forms of community music engagement for older people and this research should be brought to the attention of those who formulate policy at the federal, state and municipal government levels. Our study offers an example to local stakeholders of how older Australians can connect and participate in the life of the wider community. We concur with the recommendation of the Australian Association of Social Workers (2013) that "Ageing policy should acknowledge the many ways in which older people have contributed and continue to contribute to their families and to the community."

Limitations of the study

This is a tightly focused small qualitative case study that explores in-depth understandings of choir membership for older people that offers insights into how this choir works. These findings are not generalizable but it has long been recognized that "one good case can illuminate the workings of a social system" (Gluckman, 1961, p. 9). We chose this choir because they offer older people different musical and social experiences to prior studies of community choir engagement in Australia (Joseph & Southcott, 2017). We interviewed all older choir members and the MD and have represented their understandings comprehensively.

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