Re-voicing: Community choir participation as a medium for identity formation amongst people with learning disabilities

Nedim Hassan, Liverpool John Moores University

Abstract

This article examines findings from ethnographic research with the ReVoice choir project in North-West England. ReVoice was a community choir that consisted of members from two charitable organizations and the author of this article. A number of ReVoice's members were adults with learning disabilities and part of the choir's remit was to produce music that would feature in a film about hate crime perpetuated against people with disabilities. In the light of debates regarding the politics of identity for people with disabilities, this article illustrates how the formation of the choir, the rehearsal process and the choir performances constituted a distinctive cultural context that afforded people significant opportunities to develop an alternative, empowered sense of self in concert with others.

Keywords

identity

choirs

learning disabilities

ethnography

community

self-advocacy

disability studies

musical performance

Introduction

The potential for specific forms of cultural practice such as music-making to enable people to reflect upon their sense of self and relationship to society has long been recognized as powerful. In his seminal conclusion to *Culture and Society* Raymond Williams wrote that: 'To take a meaning from experience, and to try to make it active, is in fact our process of growth' (1963: 323). In this article the implication that cultural practice can foster the means to actively reflect upon the self in relation to others will be explored by focusing upon a distinctive choir project – the ReVoice choir - which was launched in Merseyside, North West England during 2011.

Drawing upon ethnographic findings and focusing upon the experiences of contributors to the choir with learning disabilities, this article will consider how the choir was developed and how it became a particular context for the formation of solidarity and different performances that accomplished valuable 'identity work' (DeNora 2000: 69). Following DeNora, it will be elucidated that musical material can become a rich resource for people to reflect upon self and collective identity. It will demonstrate that music is 'worked with' in the sense that it can become part of how people imagine and communicate their selves, both on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Participants in the choir project were involved with reflecting upon how their involvement in it connected with their self-identity, but also with reflecting upon how their experiences related to a collective identity fostered by the project's aims. At the

same time, the article will illustrate that the choir performance context is a highly distinctive one for facilitating this kind of reflection on identity, particularly because of the way that it requires the choral singer to listen to their self, while simultaneously listening to others. In this regard, it will argue that choirs have the potential to elicit powerful communicative experiences that are both personal and social at the same time.

The ReVoice choir was initially formed by members of two community organizations based in Merseyside: Moving on with Life & Learning (MOWLL), an organization dedicated to promoting social inclusion for people with learning disabilities, and ichoir, an inclusive community choir and charitable organization that promotes well-being through singing and song-writing. When ReVoice was formed it was an emotional time for members of MOWLL; one of their peers had been killed by a 21 year old man in September 2010. The murder had been a clear example of disability hate crime. In the aftermath of this tragic event MOWLL, together with the victim's family, had set up the FACE Facts Campaign, which was designed to raise awareness about hate crime and bullying that targets people with disabilities.

The ReVoice choir was primarily set up to support the FACE Facts Campaign. Members of MOWLL who were interested in singing were introduced to members from ichoir Liverpool. Led by ichoir's musical director and ichoir members with previous experience of choir performance, the aim was to establish a new choir that would help to produce musical material that could be used in a documentary film raising awareness about disability hate crime. The account that follows will focus primarily upon the choir rehearsal process, considering how the choir became both a medium for social bonding during this difficult time and a context for the formation of self and collective identity amongst members.

Partly influenced by Elliott's 'praxial philosophy' this study asserts that music needs to be understood as practice that is situated and 'revealing of one's self and one's relationship with

a community' (1995: 14). At the same time, it recognizes DeNora's (2015: 1–2) assertion that music is always 'music-plus'; it is a form of 'cultural activity' that becomes meaningful on a local level. In this account, activities that took place within the ReVoice choir will be referred to as 'cultural practices' to reflect the way that, as will be explained more fully below, this choir featured a range of creative and social practices that were not simply 'musical'. Furthermore, drawing on Goffman (1959) this article will reveal that choir rehearsals nurtured a participatory culture achieved through specific social interactions and musical performing that, in turn, fostered distinctive kinds of self-presentation and affective experience. In addition, the article will assert that the sorts of 'identity work' afforded by the ReVoice choir context need to be understood in connection with wider debates about the lives of people with learning disabilities (DeNora 2000: 69).

Background

The ReVoice choir was formed in January 2011 and began to have regular rehearsal meetings until the end of June 2011. Supported by members of ichoir, the choir consisted of people with varying learning disabilities who regularly attended MOWLL, MOWLL support staff, and volunteers. The Musical Director of ichoir was able to adopt an initial leadership role and to train choir members in basic choral singing techniques, as well as to provide compositional expertise when developing musical material for the FACE Facts film. I provided some initial organizational support for the choir by securing a venue for rehearsal at the University of Liverpool and then voluntarily began to regularly attend choir sessions as an active member. After a few early rehearsal sessions where the various members began to get to know each other, for the sake of convenience and flexibility the venue for rehearsals shifted to a nearby church that allowed the ReVoice choir to use its facilities free of charge.

It was at this point when I informally discussed with MOWLL members and staff the possibility of conducting ethnographic research with the choir. Although I am a researcher with previous experience of conducting ethnography with a different group of adults with learning disabilities, I did not want to emphasize my identity as a researcher from the outset. Rather, to establish trust, I downplayed the research, adopting a role that was closer to the 'complete participant' (Jarvie 2003: 105). Gradually, as I developed social and musical relationships within the choir, during breaks in rehearsals I had more conversations with members about initial research findings. Prior to a focus group discussion that is examined below, the findings from participant observation were outlined in a presentation and MOWLL members were reminded of the ethics of the research, and that they could still choose to withdraw if they wished.

The structure and social dynamics of the ReVoice choir gradually changed as the weeks went by. Some of these changes will be examined in more depth during later sections, although here it is pertinent to briefly outline broad aspects. Several of the early choir rehearsal sessions were primarily structured by Chris, the Musical Director of ichoir. He facilitated icebreaker exercises, introduced the group to vocal warm-up techniques and suggested songs for the choir to practice. The repertoire for the ReVoice choir during these early stages consisted of popular chart hits such as Bob Marley's 'Three Little Birds', as well as gospel and traditional folk songs like Francesca Matthews' 'Great Day!' and the Ghanaian folk song 'Senwa Dedende'. Once the choir became more established and members became more familiar with each other, members of MOWLL became more active in making suggestions to add to the repertoire. Indeed, by the end of the first month of rehearsals, icebreakers and warm-ups were dispensed with because choir members were keen to not only rehearse previous songs, but in some cases to state their preferences for new songs that could be incorporated into the sessions.

The ReVoice choir not only went on to develop music for the documentary film, they also gave two performances. One of these was during the launch of the FACE Facts documentary that took place in a cinema in Liverpool city centre on Monday 27 June 2011. The second of these occurred a day earlier on Sunday 26 June 2011 at a vigil held outside of a pub near to University of Liverpool, which was in memory of the member of MOWLL who had been killed. Members of his family were in attendance at what was a highly moving event. Shortly after these events, the choir went into hiatus as MOWLL's resources were concentrated upon promoting the FACE Facts campaign and developing other projects.

Choral singing, identity and disability

There is substantial evidence to indicate that participation in choral singing can have a positive impact upon peoples' general sense of well-being. For instance, Clift and Hancox's (2010) large-scale questionnaire-based research conducted with choristers from Australia, Germany and England indicates that choir participation can help to foster physical, psychological, social, emotional and intellectual benefits amongst a range of individuals. More important to this research, studies have found that participation in choral singing can become particularly important for vulnerable or marginalized groups (Bailey and Davidson 2003; Davidson and Faulkner 2010; Dingle et al, 2012). Because some members of the ReVoice choir have learning disabilities, they have experienced discrimination and stigmatization in their lives, which some have discussed openly at university events.

[1] Members of MOWLL could therefore be defined as a marginalized group to a certain extent, although as will be explained shortly such categorization can be reductive and problematic.

A central issue that can contribute to feelings of marginalization for people with learning disabilities is a lack of control over their lives. Dowson (1997: 106) suggests that despite the move towards 'care in the community' that has occurred since the 1980s, people with learning disabilities are still likely to experience feelings of exclusion from 'ordinary life'. Dowson asserts that, for many, daily experiences in care services are characterized by a lack of agency and control over basic aspects of everyday life. Indeed, Borland and Ramcharan (1997) go as far as to utilize the concept of excluded identities when discussing the life experiences of people with learning disabilities. They write that: 'If the conditions for experiencing everyday life are those in which the person is excluded, it is likely that a person will be socialized into an excluded self-concept and identity' (Borland and Ramcharan 1997: 88). These issues of exclusion and a lack of choice and control have been recognized by previous UK governments, with the White Paper, *Valuing People*, emphasizing the importance of policies that focus on choice, inclusion and independence (Department of Health [DoH] 2001).

This policy agenda has seen the rise of person-centred planning and some funding for advocacy projects designed to enable people with learning disabilities to take more control over the key issues affecting their lives (Hoole and Morgan 2010). However, despite this agenda and such initiatives, research from the likes of Hoole and Morgan (2010) and Mansell (2010) indicate that for many people with learning disabilities, exclusion and a lack of control continue to be a dominant feature within their everyday lives. Given this context, it is useful to examine the potential for cultural activities such as choral singing to alleviate such experiences of marginalization.

Existing studies of choir participation and musical performance amongst marginalized groups have yielded some significant findings. Bailey and Davidson's (2003) qualitative interview-based research with a Canadian choir made up of men who had been previously homeless is

particularly relevant in relation to this present study. Drawing upon the work of music therapist Evan Ruud and his contention that musical performance can create agency, Bailey and Davidson argue that choir performance for this group enabled them to convey a positive sense of self. This was especially important for this group of homeless men because being in the choir enabled them to feel less helpless and dependent on others. Rather than viewing life as directed by others, the agency facilitated by musical performance fostered a sense of control because during choir participation the men felt able to 'act on one's own behalf' (Bailey and Davidson 2003: 28).

Research conducted by MacDonald and Miell (2002) and Haywood (2006) has also illustrated how musical activity can become important for fostering the agency of people with disabilities. MacDonald and Miell's qualitative interviews revealed how certain individuals with learning disabilities were actively resisting 'attempts to impose what are often seen as 'damaged' or 'spoiled' identities, defined by lack of ability more than anything else' (2002: 169). Individual musicians who had participated in these workshops over a ten-year period articulated how they began to develop an identity as a professional musician with responsibilities, countering the expectations of those who initially defined them as disabled. Similarly, Haywood's research with a young student with physical disabilities who was able to participate in a high school choir (after initially being denied access in previous choirs) revealed how the girl felt that she was able to gain a 'new identity' as a 'musician', which was a shared identity with her peers (2006: 414). Thus, with these studies it could be suggested that the musical performance context enabled the people to adopt what Berger and Del Negro (2004: 138) would term 'agentive' self-identity as a musical performer. This identity provided sharp relief from the stigmatized identities ('homeless', 'dependent', 'vulnerable', 'disabled', etc.) the people had felt that they were 'given' within different social contexts.

Another salient feature of existing research on the value of musical performance for marginalized groups is the significance of the act of 'having a voice' and of people making themselves heard. As DeNora asserts, on one level singing is similar to speech because it is the 'social and communicative use of the voice' (2015: 83). Singing, and especially choral singing, is social performance that can 'offer…resources for the self-in-action and…offer potential resources to others – for identity and for interrelation' (DeNora 2015: 86). Therefore, the act of making one's voice heard by others and of vocalizing together with others can become potentially powerful for people who may not be used to having their voices heard in other contexts. This factor is clearly illustrated in the research findings of Dingle et al. (2012). They conducted qualitative interviews with members of a choir supported by a charitable organization that works with socially disadvantaged adults in Australia. The people they interviewed had experienced chronic mental illness or in some cases had physical or learning disabilities. Their research participants indicated that the opportunity to be heard in a choir context and to perform a song about empowerment enabled them to reflect upon their own experiences of marginalization and to recognize the value of 'giving others some awareness and insight' into their lives through their performance (Dingle et al. 2012: 414).

Another significant factor referred to in existing studies of choir participation is the value of teamwork and group bonding. Dingle et al. (2012) and Bailey and Davidson (2003) highlight the ways that choir participation fostered opportunities for relating to others and forming good social relationships based on support and trust. For instance, Dingle et al. cite participants who felt that the choir they belonged to was like a 'family' and who valued the feeling of safety within a close knit peer group of fellow choir members (2012: 414). Conversely Bailey and Davidson's (2003) study illustrates that this sense of solidarity and feelings of belonging are not inevitably the products of the choir process, rather relationships

with fellow choristers have to be worked at. For example, as one of Bailey and Davidson's interviewees put it: 'We have learnt to accept each other as human beings and that is something that I am working on very much' (2003: 26). The experience of performing with a choir is particularly interesting in this regard because, as Davidson and Faulkner note in their research on a choir for carers and the people they care for, it involves a strong degree of 'interdependency' (2010: 168). Within the choir performance context people who may have different social statuses in other aspects of their professional or personal lives have to come together as a group to contribute to something greater than the sum of its parts (Davidson and Faulkner 2010).

The above discussion makes clear that social exclusion and a lack of agency continue to be important issues affecting the daily lives of many people with learning disabilities. Yet, the examination of research on musical performance and choir participation also underlined the importance of not generalizing that the identities of people with learning disabilities (and indeed other often marginalized groups) are always characterized by these experiences. As Klotz puts it, to do this would be to deny 'their role as active participants in social life' and to deny their 'status as people who produce culture' (2004: 98). MacDonald and Miell's (2002) work in particular illustrates the way that people with learning disabilities have struggled to forge a sense of self-identity related to musical skill and ability, rather than one defined by their disabilities.

Indeed, here it is pertinent to outline the role of cultural practice as it has been examined within disability studies more broadly. Sharing fundamental concerns with theorists such as Hall (1998), disability studies scholars have examined cultural practices such as music-making as a site of struggle and resistance. When highlighting inequality of access to leisure activities or the politics of media representation, various writers have demonstrated that cultural practice can become a source of empowerment and inclusion but also a barrier to

these things (Morrison and Finkelstein 1993; Barnes and Mercer 2010; Beart et al. 2001; Reynolds 2002). Taking inspiration from Williams' notion that the examination of peoples' cultural experiences, such as those relating to musical activity, involves paying attention to how they develop a vocabulary and 'ways of thinking' about their experiences, this account takes seriously the potential that cultural practice can have for enabling people to reflect upon their self-identity and their relationships with others (1963: 323). As Morrison and Finkelstein put it: 'Disability arts… can redress the balance and engage a lot of people in questioning assumptions that their exclusion from society is a fact of life' (1993: 126–27). A striking feature of the research mentioned above was how musical performance and choir participation seemed to offer rich ways to resist 'given' or imposed identities and to forge individual and group identities that were more 'agentive' (Berger and Del Negro 2004: 138). The sections below will examine this point, focusing upon the cultural practices of ReVoice choir members from MOWLL. However, prior to a specific consideration of these practices, it is necessary to outline the methodology utilized when examining them.

Methodology

Ethnographic approaches were utilized during research with the ReVoice choir. Atkinson et al. (2001) argue that although there are some variations in the way ethnography is utilized by certain scholars from different disciplines, ultimately ethnography privileges 'the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting' and that observation and participation 'remain the characteristic features of the ethnographic approach' (Atkinson et al. 2001: 4–5). As I was a contributing member of the choir from its inception, this enabled me to participate in and observe rehearsals, performances, conversations, routines and so on over a period of several months. Consequently, I was suitably placed to conduct participant-

observation. After each session, I wrote in a field diary, compiling field notes that attempted to describe and reflect upon the musical and social practices I had been involved with.

Like a number of the members of MOWLL, I had no prior experience of choir participation before joining ReVoice. This placed me in an interesting position as an ethnographer because I was on the same level as the participants in many respects – I learned the songs and choral techniques alongside them. Consequently, I was learning to adopt an adequate posture and the requisite deportment for singing, as well as vocalizing and listening to others vocalize in similar ways to others around me. My process of learning enabled me to share fundamental choir context-specific embodied experiences. Writing about music's connection with healing, Gouk notes that: 'the only viable way of grasping the connection between music and healing is through embodied knowledge; that is, a way of knowing expressed through bodily actions rather than discursive speech' (2000: 22). By learning alongside members of MOWLL, I was able to arrive at some understanding of how it *felt* to make my voice heard in front of others and to make mistakes as well as share successes in performance. A choir member can talk about such matters to a researcher, but participation in such processes can enable the development of the embodied knowledge required to gain insights into the complex and multi-layered nature of choir participation.

Accordingly, when conducting this ethnographic research, it was important for me to draw upon my sense of self and my experiences as a resource (Collins and Gallinat 2010). Skinner makes clear the value of such an approach during his discussion of an ethnographic interview with a dancer, asserting that 'it is vital that the writer dances and so shares the experience of the dance, joins in with the dancers and embodies the dance' (2010: 111). Similarly, Nash recognizes the value of reflecting upon how the self 'is situated in emotional expressivity' in his ethnographic account of his participation in barbershop choruses (2012: 583). As will be explicated below, my personal feelings and anxieties about singing in front of others, but also

the reassurance I felt about being supported by individuals (many of whom felt the same way), became a useful resource that enabled a richer consideration of the choir process. This was because as I reflected upon how I was feeling about certain aspects, such as the pride involved with listening to our collective sound on certain songs as we practiced and improved, this helped me to develop an awareness of how others may have been feeling and to gauge this whilst observing and talking to other participants.

Learning with members of MOWLL in this way also informed the ethics of the ethnographic research. As will be elucidated below, barriers between my position as 'academic' and between other choir participants from different social and educational backgrounds were eroded as we worked together to foster a sociocultural context conducive to choir rehearsal. Furthermore, even though my research was not formulated by the members of MOWLL in any straightforward sense, ethnography was conducted because of my interest in *their* project and its aims. Thus, similarly to the work of Riddell, Baron and Wilson, my ethnographic research strived to be 'supportive' of the lives of people involved with the ReVoice project and because it aimed to 'make sense of diverse experience' it needs to be partly assessed for 'its capacity to make suggestions about the conditions which might improve people's lives' (2001: 238).

While ethical principles of informed consent and confidentiality were adhered to during this project (pseudonyms are used to refer to MOWLL members throughout this account), the research also utilized the 'expertise and specialist knowledge' of MOWLL members (Riddell et al. 2001: 229). This was accomplished through a focus group discussion that was held in March 2013 in order to enable members of MOWLL to reflect upon their experiences as part of the ReVoice choir. The discussion was deliberately held at a particular time and venue where MOWLL members usually engaged in activities together. This venue was a local community centre. Thus, members who had been involved with the choir did not have to

make a separate journey to attend the group discussion; rather it was scheduled into their pattern of activities at a familiar location.

I was the moderator for the group discussion and I had support from a volunteer working with MOWLL. It was significant that I was the moderator because I was somebody whom members clearly recognized and associated with the ReVoice choir. Consequently, when posing questions and discussing issues, even though I had not spent a great deal of time with the group since the choir had been on hiatus, I was still able to speak from the position of a relative insider. This also enabled me to reflect upon some of my experiences during the group discussion process.

One of the limitations with this approach was that my insider status and position as choir member might also have led some interviewees to feel that they did not want to say anything negative about the choir experience for fear of offending me. Nonetheless, the group discussion seemed to facilitate frank discussion and was an approach that seemed the most appropriate for MOWLL members. Group familiarity, together with the prior relationship that had been established between researcher and participants during the choir sessions, facilitated an open and supportive environment for group discussion. Indeed, one of the salient features of the event was the extent to which MOWLL members were supportive and encouraging of each other. Within this environment, individuals shared their reflections on the choir process and seemed to be largely at ease when discussing the value of the choir on both a personal and social level.

Becoming 'a choir': Fostering a hospitable space and a participatory culture

As previously described, the ReVoice choir included members of two charitable organizations (MOWLL and ichoir) as well as a few volunteers. This varied group of people had to cohere and work as a team in order to learn songs and to develop musical material for the FACE Facts campaign. Members of MOWLL in particular had a shared sense of purpose during the choir project because they wanted to produce material and perform in honour of their friend who was killed. However, by the end of the project what was striking was how MOWLL's purpose had become the collective focus of everyone associated with the choir. As we performed outside a pub near to the University of Liverpool on a somewhat grey Sunday where the threat of rain was ever present, I was caught up in the emotion of the moment as we sang to the relatives of their murdered peer. By the end of the choir project it seemed that everyone had invested time, energy and emotion. Yet, while the FACE Facts campaign provided a 'catalyst for social bonding' in that it initially brought people together, such bonding was not inevitable (Specker 2014: 76). Rather, as I will argue below, bonding was facilitated through specific social and musical practices and relationships.

Firstly, the motivation for the members of MOWLL to work collaboratively on a project that was partly inspired by the death of a friend should not be underestimated. When asked in the group discussion about what their initial thoughts were when the choir was formed, responses mentioned the pride felt when working on a project in honour of their friend. For instance, Jimmy recalled that 'The way we felt' and 'writing a composition' about their friend 'made me feel proud of it'. Likewise, Liz who wrote the poem that became the lyrics for the song that eventually featured on the FACE Facts documentary film, recalled the pride she felt at the time: 'I enjoyed it and I felt dead good that like I wrote it and that everyone else was singing it and I wasn't just on my own'. These comments convey the sense of collective identity that the ReVoice choir had fostered in connection with the goal of combatting

disability hate crime. What mattered to Liz was that she did not feel on her own. Her song lyrics that celebrated a feeling of self-worth (see below) were sang in unison. As we sang her song together at the launch of the FACE Facts documentary film in front of a diverse audience that included local dignitaries, members of Merseyside police and local media, the choir's performance felt like a powerful medium for delivering the campaign's wider message. It embodied the notion that, above all, discrimination and marginalization are collective issues that can be and need to be tackled by a community.

However, while the shared purpose of the FACE Facts campaign may have galvanized the group to work together, the broader process of bonding between MOWLL members was, to an extent, facilitated by choir participation. When asked to reflect upon their overall memories of being in the ReVoice choir, Vicky replied by saying that: 'I liked meeting new friends and [gaining] confidence. And, my singing really and meeting loads of these [gesturing to the people around her] because they're like a family to me'. While it would be inaccurate to attribute this social bonding as something that emerged solely due to the choir (MOWLL members met each other regularly during a range of activities throughout the week and not just during choir rehearsals), it could be suggested that for individuals like Vicky, choir participation was a fruitful way for her to solidify her social relationships with others in her peer group. Indeed, a striking feature of the choir rehearsal sessions as they developed was that both Vicky and another MOWLL member, Liz, began to work together on musical performances that were distinct from the ReVoice choir. They rehearsed individual performances of popular songs that they planned to perform at the MOWLL awards ceremony later in the year. With each individual rehearsal they encouraged each other and during one choir rehearsal performed a duet of the song 'Big Spender', singing along to the recorded track in front of the rest of the members. Such instances of performing were far from inconsequential within the overall context of the ReVoice choir. The two women

displayed agency in negotiating space for their own individual and dual performances and also demonstrated a great deal of confidence in their ability to perform in front of others.

Vicky and Liz's acts of solo and dual performance points to another key aspect of the ReVoice choir context. Instances of additional musical performing may be considered as acts of 'refurnishing' that add to an environment 'something which others will encounter' (DeNora 2015: 50). DeNora utilizes the concept of 'refurnishing' to explore how spaces can be appropriated by people as resources for *asylum* – 'a space within which to play on/with one's environment whether alone or in concert with others' (DeNora 2015: 47). For a space to become a resource for asylum, then, refurnishing acts often have to be negotiated with others. Consequently, such acts may be vulnerable because they are 'inevitably… also about claiming and taking space in a social milieu, and it may involve the perception that at times too much is being taken' (DeNora 2015: 50). Thus, Vicky and Liz's performances were interesting precisely because they felt that the ReVoice choir rehearsal space was a hospitable one – they felt able to appropriate that space and perform in front of each other and other people (some of whom they knew well and some less well).

That the ReVoice choir rehearsal setting came to be experienced for some as a hospitable space for often playful musical and social performance is a significant factor in its own right. As indicated above, while members of MOWLL were familiar with each other, the ReVoice choir introduced unfamiliar people into the mix. Given that a range of people had come together to work on the ReVoice project, it was important that they could work as a cohesive group. Furthermore, for choral singing to take place (often involving people who had no experience), performances needed to be nurtured in an atmosphere of trust. One aspect that facilitated such an atmosphere was the establishment of social routines that became an essential component of the overall rehearsal structure. In the church hall where rehearsals took place, the ReVoice choir members had access to the kitchen. As people arrived at

different points during the beginning of the session, there were usually members of MOWLL who made cups of tea for others (sometimes with the help of people from ichoir, or from other volunteers).

The act of making a cup of tea and receiving a cup from others should not be underestimated in this context. The kitchen had a large dining table and this gave some choir members an opportunity to engage in conversations and to be hospitable to others by offering drinks. On certain occasions, members of MOWLL also brought food to cook in the kitchen facilities and were able to offer a small meal to people from ichoir or to other volunteers. These small acts of generosity became part of what Goffman would term the 'working consensus' (1959: 21) of the ReVoice group – a somewhat tacit agreement on how to act within a given social situation that comes to define that situation for those within it. Sharing the space together in the kitchen and sometimes sitting together at the dining table afforded opportunities for social interaction between ReVoice members. Sometimes there would be an in-joke between members of MOWLL, or members of ichoir, but often this shared space would facilitate conversations between people who had not met prior to the formation of the choir.

This working consensus shaped by small acts of conviviality gradually fostered teamwork that was valued as highly enjoyable by MOWLL members. When asked in the group discussion about what it was like to work with people from outside of MOWLL, 'mixing' or 'mingling' were presented as enjoyable and valuable. Moreover, insights into the value of such mixing were provided by Jimmy's description of the processes involved with it:

> Author: What was it like working with people from outside of MOWLL? So, working with ichoir, working with me, working with the other volunteers, how did you find that?

Liz: It was good because you get to mix with other people and your friends.

Sarah: Mingle you get to mingle with other people…and all that (laughing, which caused others like Vicky and me to laugh).

[…]

Jimmy: Well, I got to know you and that you worked for the uni and I said 'hello' to you in the corridor but because of the time that I spent with you [in the choir] I think our friendship grew a lot. I used to say 'hi' to you in the canteen, but once we were in the choir I think our friendship grew a lot better and I got to get to know you. I found that…you knew where we were coming from in MOWLL and we found out where you were coming from and that was good to know.

Jimmy presents the relationship between me and him (and by extension MOWLL) as one that developed through a kind of gradual social exchange. It moved from one that predominantly involved exchanging pleasantries (saying 'hello') to an appreciation of what each of our interests and backgrounds were – we knew where 'we were coming from'.

Another aspect of the working consensus identified above was a general appreciation and respect for everyone who contributed to the ReVoice choir project. It has already been established that these types of community choir have the potential to become valuable inclusive entities because they are contingent upon a gathering of people who are able to bring different elements to a musical performance. This dependence on others was discussed above in relation to Davidson and Faulkner's research as something that affords the breaking down of social statuses and hierarchies that may be in place in other aspects of daily life (2010). The cultural practices apparent within ReVoice choir rehearsals fostered an egalitarian, participatory culture that operated on a number of different levels: First, there

were participants who were integral to musical performance. For instance, the choir director was a professional musician who helped to train choir members and played accompaniment on either a piano or organ. The director also taught the group a range of suitable songs. Other participants took on, or were assigned, roles that helped to fulfil the stylistic demands of the songs being performed. Thus, for instance, some singers were responsible for bass sections of songs, while others were assigned as tenors or sopranos. Others were important for their roles as backing singers and were responsible for instigating the rhythmic elements within a piece.

However, there were also members, some who did not sing at all, who were still fundamental to the social fabric of the ReVoice choir. This included one individual who was very quiet and seemed to lack the confidence to raise his voice but who would supply some of the musical material in the form of CDs or lyric sheets that others would use when rehearsing. It also included a woman from MOWLL who regularly attended rehearsals but adamantly refused to join in with the singing. Instead, she regularly watched, socialized with other members, told jokes and helped to make cups of tea.

The point is that all of the above roles were integral to the phenomenon that was called a 'choir', which was a concept that within the context of the ReVoice project could not be defined in purely musical terms. Furthermore, as illustrated above, it should also be noted that the choir was not a stable grouping; its social and musical dynamics changed over time. Certain individuals such as Vicky and Liz began to make much more responsibility for the direction of rehearsals by dictating some of the song choices or by incorporating some of their individual performances. Indeed, by June 2011, as the choir engaged in final rehearsals prior to the two public performances mentioned above, it was striking how these individuals were willing to take on leadership roles. At our penultimate rehearsal on 22 June 2011 Chris, the choir director, was delayed and had to arrive late. Rather than waiting for Chris, Vicky

and Liz played a pivotal role in enthusing the rest of the group because they started initiating musical activities and organizing others.

The above examples illustrate the way in which the ReVoice choir developed in a way that was largely dictated by the interests of members from MOWLL. This was not a community choir that straightforwardly adhered to conventions regarding choir structure. O'Toole (2005: 2) recounts how the 'conventions of choral pedagogy' may be experienced as overly rigid and disempowering for individual singers, particularly because of the hierarchical relationships between the director and singers. Although ReVoice's director remained a pivotal figure during the organization and performance of specific songs, his openness to ideas about repertoire and rehearsal practice, helped to foster an inclusive environment. This was vital because it not only enabled the different contributions mentioned above, but it enabled members of MOWLL to have the agency to take sufficient control of a project that was explicitly developed to address social issues affecting people with learning disabilities. They had a hospitable space to reflect on and perform songs that cohered with their everyday experiences. Having examined how the ReVoice rehearsal space became a rich cultural environment that afforded certain kinds of musical and social performance, it is now necessary to examine such performances in more depth. In particular, the sections that follow will focus upon the ReVoice choir as a medium for the identity work discussed earlier.

'Being yourself': The presentation of self and the value of self-confidence

Following DeNora (2015) above, if choral singing is social performance then I would argue that such performance is potentially vulnerable and fragile. One of the central elements identified by theorists of social performance such as Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990) is that with social performance and interaction, the stakes are often deceptively high. Goffman succinctly sums up the vulnerability of social performance when he writes that:

it seems that there is no interaction in which the participants do not take an appreciable chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated. Life may not be much of a gamble, but interaction is (1959: 236)

One of my only prior experiences of singing in public before participating in the ReVoice choir was at high school during a Christmas church service. I recall some friends and I pretending to sing and mouthing the words to Christmas carols, while looking around at what each other was doing, no doubt trying to protect ourselves from being ridiculed by others while also trying to convey to the teachers that we were at least trying to engage in the service. Given this prior experience, when joining the ReVoice choir I was all too aware (as others who had limited singing experience would have been) that Goffman's point about the vulnerability of performance could potentially become amplified in the choir context.

Certain members of MOWLL shared my reservations about these aspects of performing in front of others. For instance, during the group discussion Jimmy admitted that: 'We were all shy' but that 'The more times we were there it brought the shyness out of us and made us feel more confident and look forward to it'. Sarah, a member of MOWLL who was very quiet during early rehearsals but gradually began to sing with more confidence during choir sessions, articulated her own doubts as follows: 'I remember saying "I can't sing, I can't sing" blah, blah, blah'. Whether Sarah actually expressed those doubts in public or not, she perhaps sums up the voice of self-doubt that may well have crept into the thoughts of the less experienced choristers.

This acknowledgement of self-doubt connects with Berger and Del Negro's discussion of the significance of reflexivity and its relationship with performance. They provide a useful definition of reflexivity as 'the capacity of the person not merely to have an experience but to be aware of the fact that he/she is having an experience and to be aware that he/she might be the focus of another's experience' (Berger and Del Negro 2004: 91). Choral singers may have a heightened sense of 'reflexive consciousness' because when in rehearsal they are not only aware of the role of their own voice as part of a song but also they are often listening attentively to the voices of others (Berger and Del Negro 2004: 91). Thus, part of the success of individual subjects during choir performance is in harnessing that reflexive consciousness – drowning out voices of doubt that may be 'in the mind' whilst concentrating on singing and listening to others.

It could therefore be suggested that choir performance features a curious kind of 'self-presentation', one where the concept almost becomes oxymoronic *during performance*. This is because the individual voice that represents the self is both registered in front of others but simultaneously *drowned out* and incorporated into sounds made by others during moments where choristers sing in harmony. It is little wonder, then, that choir performances can be intensely affective for people in certain circumstances. The act of singing, of using one's voice as an instrument but then hearing that voice in unison with that of others, may be experienced as both a profound moment of self-awareness and a kind of surrendering of the self and all its uncertainties. This may be why one of Bailey and Davidson's interviewees from a choir consisting of homeless men utilizes the notion of *immunity*, he indicates that the act of singing immunizes him from the 'blah, blah, blahs' of the voices of other people 'in his head' telling him he's wrong (2003: 23).

These moments where people make their voices heard to others but hear themselves contributing to a collective performance can potentially be experienced as almost

emancipatory. For example, it was striking that during the focus group discussion when participants were asked about what made the choir process distinctive in comparison to other leisure activities, many discussed how they felt that the choir facilitated 'natural' self-expression.

> Author: What types of things can you do in a choir that other kinds of leisure activities don't allow you to do?
>
> Liz: To be who we wanna be, like singing and stuff.
>
> Author: That's an interesting point 'to be who we want to be', tell me a bit more about what you mean by that.
>
> Vicky: Natural.
>
> Liz: Yeah and like gain confidence and just be who you wanna be.
>
> Vicky: Be yourself really.
>
> Author: And what is it about being in a choir that allows you to be yourself?
>
> [Pause]
>
> Jimmy: When you don't be your normal self, I don't know if the word's 'normal', but no one can tell you off [for] being your normal self; there are no barriers in front of you.
>
> Vicky: Yes.

Thus, there was something about the context of the ReVoice choir that fostered presentations of self that many of the participants felt comfortable with. That Jimmy felt there were no barriers imposed upon him in this environment is striking. After all, as with other types of

social interaction there were inevitably certain boundaries in place (in this case these included things such as the church hall setting, the inequality of choir experience due to certain members having pre-existing choir practice, the seniority of certain individuals such as the choir director). Yet, it seemed that the choir setting afforded individuals opportunities to present their selves in a manner that was somehow more honest and truthful.

Perhaps this was due to the fact that many of us who had no previous choir experience were starting from the same foundation. We had to find ways of being within this setting and amongst others who did not know us. We were thrust into a situation – choral singing – that many of us were not familiar with and therefore perhaps some of us felt that we had the flexibility to present a sense of self in new ways. We were no longer '[author] from the university' or 'Jimmy from MOWLL' we were performers who had to work together for a collective purpose. Thus, in a sense, this situation foregrounded the potential of cultural practice to foster human growth that was referred to in the introduction to this piece. As Williams recognized, 'A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized', therefore the 'making of a community is always an exploration' (1963: 320). Consequently, the ReVoice choir rehearsal may be seen as a rehearsal in a broader cultural sense; literally, it involved processes of trying out ways of being together through learning from others. Furthermore, as previously suggested, the act of choir performing seemed at certain moments to unshackle the boundaries imposed on self-presentation, providing sufficient immunity from self-doubts shaped by experiences in other areas of everyday life. This immunity within performance, coupled with the hospitable setting derived from the working consensus, fostered a distinctive cultural context in which members of MOWLL felt that they could display a more natural sense of self.

While it would be misleading to suggest that this cultural context served to eliminate the self-doubts of individuals, it could be argued that it certainly helped to mitigate against them.

Indeed, one of the most common words used when focus group participants were reflecting upon their time in the choir was the term 'confidence'. For instance, Liz commented that she would recommend joining a choir 'to gain confidence to other people and gain confidence and enjoy singing'. Likewise, when reflecting upon what she liked about the choir Vicky said that: 'I liked meeting new friends and [gaining] confidence'.

During their group discussion members of MOWLL talked about the notion of confidence in specific ways – it was something that was highly valued but that had to be achieved and nurtured. For Vicky, one way in which she could recognize the growth of self-confidence was through recognition by others. She discussed how, after the choir's public performance at the launch of the FACE Facts campaign at a city centre cinema in Liverpool, she was praised by an old school teacher who had been in the audience and that this had given her a 'boost'. Vicky also explained how she and her mother could recognize her growing self-confidence: 'Yeah, time went on and it grew my confidence and I could see that in myself. I could think "wow, look at me" and my mum could see it as well. Because she likes hearing my voice inside and it grew and grew really'. Thus, self-confidence here is represented as both a process of realization, but also something that is recognized by others.

In her concept analysis of the term 'self-confidence', White (2009: 111) notes that two overarching consequences of self-confidence are 'intrinsic rewards' for individuals and extrinsic returns for other people (i.e. benefits to others). The above discussion demonstrates that members of the ReVoice choir from MOWLL had clear ideas about the value of self-confidence and an understanding of the personal and social benefits that arise from its development. That a group of people defined as having learning disabilities were discussing the nuances of self-confidence and referring to positive aspects of self-presentation is highly significant. Their conversations illustrate the reductive nature of labelling and that, despite

the challenges of exclusion and marginalization identified earlier, their lives, like those of

many others, can feature moments of personal growth, change and affirmation.

Conclusion

During the ReVoice choir sessions, one of the songs that became central to our performances

and ultimately featured on the documentary film produced for the FACE Facts campaign was

based on a poem written by Liz, a young woman supported by MOWLL. The introduction to

the poem read as follows:

> I'm ok with being me, there's no one I'd rather be.
>
> I've a peace within my heart that your words can't break apart.

In the light of the above discussion, such words take on added poignancy and significance.

They celebrate and affirm faith and belief in the self, while also alluding to the notion of

immunity from marginalization and stigmatization. As has been demonstrated, the choir

sessions were a medium for the articulation of a sense of self that many found 'natural' and

without impositions. They were also a vehicle for the development of self-confidence and the

nurturing of group bonding and social exchange within a largely egalitarian social

environment. However, it has been illustrated that such an environment was not an inevitable

product of the fact that people had come together to form a choir. This environment was

forged through the development of a working consensus that featured relatively mundane

social practices and interactions. The approach to participant-observation utilized during the

project enabled me to convey some of the minutiae of these practices and interactions. While

other scholars have studied choirs by being involved with them from the outset (Davidson

and Faulkner 2010; Dingle et al. 2012), by drawing on data from participant-observation I have illustrated the value of paying attention to non-performance aspects that may not necessarily be recalled in interviews as part of the choir experience. Future research work could pay attention to such aspects in more depth because as demonstrated here they can become crucial to the development and sustenance of a choir.

In a similar way to existing researchers on choir participation amongst marginalized groups, this article has illustrated how the act of choir performance for the members of MOWLL who joined ReVoice helped to give them a voice. Literally, the choir rehearsals encouraged members to 'voice up' and to express themselves vocally – they also inspired Liz to write a poem based on her personal experience. The overall cultural context of the ReVoice choir became a space that members of MOWLL took more control of, appropriating that space and influencing the direction of performances. Yet, as I have suggested, this should not be over-emphasized at the expense of acknowledging the potential vulnerability of performance. Choir performance is a unique type of social performance and communication, one that participants will recognize reflexively as fraught with danger but also one through which a kind of self-emancipation is possible. That such identity work can potentially accomplish this for adults who have often experienced exclusion and marginalization in their everyday lives is crucial, and it is vital that such potential is explored further.

References

Atkinson, Paul, Coffey, Amanda, Delamont, Sara, Lofland, John and Lofland, Lyn (2001), *Handbook of Ethnography*, London: Sage.

Bailey, Betty A. and Davidson, Jane W. (2003), 'Amateur group singing as a therapeutic instrument', *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 12:1, pp. 18–32.

Barnes, Colin and Mercer, Geoff (2010), *Exploring Disability*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beart, Suzie, Hawkins, Debbie, Kroese, Biza Stenfort, Smithson, Paul and Tolosa, Inigo (2001), 'Barriers to accessing leisure opportunities for people with learning disabilities', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29:1, pp. 133–38.

Berger, Harris and Del Negro, Giovanna (2004), *Identity and Everyday Life: Essays in the Study of Folklore, Music and Popular Culture*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Borland, John and Ramcharan, Paul (1997), 'Empowerment in informal settings: The themes', in P. Ramcharan, G. Roberts, G. Grant and J. Borland (eds), *Empowerment in Everyday Life: Learning Disability*, London: Jessica Kingsley, pp. 88–97.

Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

Clift, Stephen and Hancox, Grenville (2010), 'The significance of choral singing for sustaining psychological wellbeing: Findings from a survey of choristers in England, Australia and Germany', *Music Performance Research*, 3:1, pp. 79–96.

Collins, Peter and Gallinat, Anselma (eds) (2010), 'The ethnographic self as resource: An introduction', in *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 1–24.

Davidson, Jane W. and Faulkner, Robert (2010), 'Meeting in music: The role of singing to harmonise carer and cared for', *Arts & Health*, 2:2, pp. 164–70.

DeNora, Tia (2000), *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (2015), *Music Asylums: Wellbeing through Music in Everyday Life*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Department of Health (2001), *Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability in the 21st Century*, London: Stationary Office.

Dingle, Genevieve A., Brander, Christopher, Ballantyne, Julie and Baker, Felicity A. (2012), '"To be heard": The social and mental health benefits of choir singing for disadvantaged adults', *Psychology of Music*, 41:4, pp. 405–21.

Dowson, Steve (1997), 'Empowerment within services: A comfortable delusion', in P. Ramcharan, G. Roberts, G. Grant and J. Borland (eds), *Empowerment in Everyday Life: Learning Disability*, London: Jessica Kingsley, pp. 101–20.

Elliott, David J. (1995), *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Goffman, Erving (1959), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Middlesex: Penguin Books.

Gouk, Penelope (ed.) (2000), 'Introduction', in *Musical Healing in Cultural Contexts*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 1–25.

Hall, Stuart (1998), 'Notes on deconstructing "the Popular"', in J. Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, pp. 442–53.

Haywood, Jennifer (2006), 'You can't be in my choir if you can't stand up: One journey toward inclusion', *Music Education Research*, 8:3, pp. 407–16.

Hoole, Lucy and Morgan, Sally (2010), '"It's only right that we get involved": Service-user perspectives on involvement in learning disability services', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39:1, pp. 5–10.

Jarvie, Ian C. (2003), 'The problem of ethical integrity in participant observation', in R. G. Burgess (ed.), *Field Research: A Source Book and Field Manual*, London: Routledge, pp. 104–13.

Klotz, Jani (2004), 'Sociocultural study of intellectual disability: Moving beyond labelling and social constructionist perspectives', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32:2, pp. 93–104.

MacDonald, Raymond. A. R. and Miell, Dorothy (2002), 'Music for individuals with special needs: A catalyst for developments in identity, communication and musical ability', in R. A. R. MacDonald, D. J. Hargreaves and D. Miell (eds), *Musical Identities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 163–78.

Mansell, Jim (2010), *Raising our Sights: Services for Adults with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities*, a report by Professor Jim Mansell, London: Department of Health.

Morrison, Elspeth and Finkelstein, Vic (1993), 'Broken arts and cultural repair: The role of culture in the empowerment of disabled people', in J. Swain, V. Finkelstein, S. French and M. Oliver (eds), *Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments*, London: Sage, pp. 122–29.

Nash, Jeffrey Eugene (2012), 'Ringing the chord: Sentimentality and nostalgia among male singers', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 41:5, pp. 581–606.

O'Toole, Patricia (2005), 'I sing in a choir but I have "no voice!"', *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 6, http://www.rider.edu/~vrme/. Accessed 21 April 2017.

Reynolds, Frances (2002), 'An exploratory survey of opportunities and barriers to creative leisure activity for people with learning disabilities', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30:2, pp. 63–67.

Riddell, Sheila, Baron, Stephen and Wilson, Alastair (2001), *The Learning Society and People with Learning Difficulties*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Skinner, Jonathan (2010), 'Leading questions and body memories: A case of phenomenology and physical ethnography in the dance interview', in P. Collins and A. Gallinat (eds), *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 111–28.

Specker, Sharonne K. (2014), 'Communities of song: Collective musical participation and group singing experiences in Victoria, BC', *The Arbutus Review*, 5:1, pp. 62–90.

White, Krista A. (2009), 'Self-confidence: A concept analysis', *Nursing Forum*, 44:2, pp. 103–14.

Williams, Raymond (1963), *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Middlesex: Penguin.

Contributor details

Dr Nedim Hassan is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. His previous research has focused upon the roles of music in everyday life. He has conducted extensive ethnographic research that has examined the roles and significance of music in the everyday lives of groups of adults with learning disabilities. Published work in this area includes journal articles and book chapters that focus upon everyday domestic musical performing as a resource for social interaction, the articulation of self-identity and communication of memories. He is currently engaged in an ethnographic project that examines rock music scenes on Merseyside.

Contact:

Dr Nedim Hassan

School of Humanities and Social Science

Liverpool John Moores University

John Foster Building

80-98 Mount Pleasant

L3 5UZ

Email: n.a.hassan@ljmu.ac.uk

Note

---

[1] For instance, during 2015 as part of a consultation regarding public information campaigns that students were devising to raise awareness about disability hate crime, members of MOWLL described their experiences of discrimination to Liverpool John Moores University staff and students on the Media, Culture, Communication Programme.