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Singing and Psychological Needs

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores evidence that reveals the psychological benefits of participation in singing activity. The theoretical framework for this chapter focuses on Ryan and Deci's (2002) model of psychological needs. This theory argues that when satisfaction of the psychological needs of competency, relatedness, and autonomy are met, health and well-being are achieved. It is shown how feelings of competency and social connection can be achieved by placing singing at the center of someone's life which can enhance potential for positive well-being impact. Generating feelings of autonomy facilitate motivation and promote the internalization of self-regulation which makes individuals feel more likely to believe their actions are self-endorsed and self-governed. Examples from singing contexts provide evidence for this discussion. In groups such as older people, for example, the sense of individual control in the singing group can have positive effects in a life otherwise often controlled by doctors and care workers.

Keywords: psychological needs, competency, social connection, well-being, autonomy, motivation

Introduction

Throughout our lives we are generally concerned with what motivates us to act. According to self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), along with physiological needs such as food and water, we all have universal, innate psychological needs that must be met in order for us to thrive. The theory explores the ways intrinsic and varied extrinsic forces interplay to shape our motivations to engage in life. While self-determination theory is a macro-theory of human motivation and personality, the current authors have found it useful to apply the exploration of internal and external motivators to the case of singing. Indeed, core questions underlying the current chapter are: what motivates us to sing? What is it about the activity of singing that can be so psychologically powerful and positive for one person and yet, potentially so difficult for another person? To investigate these questions we trace the ways singing meets our basic psychological needs from birth across the lifespan. The role of singing in traditional communities such as in South Africa is contrasted with its place in Western societies such as Australia and the UK. At the end of this chapter, our own theoretical model is proposed to explain the psychological functions fulfilled by experiences of singing in a variety of contexts.

Deci and Ryan (2000) propose that people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs come under the umbrella of three key needs: *relatedness*, the need to be connected socially and integrated in that social group; *competence*, the need to be effective in one's efforts; and *autonomy*, the need to feel that one's activities or pursuits are self-endorsed, self-governed, and of free will (but not necessarily autonomous, given the need for relatedness). While other psychological needs are argued such as meaningfulness and self-esteem, Deci and Ryan believe that all of these can be explained as subsets or combinations of *competence*, *relatedness*, and *autonomy* (Ryan and Deci, 2002). They propose that when psychological needs are met, feelings of well-being

Singing and Psychological Needs

ensue. That is, feelings of happiness, comfort, security, safety, and positive health are promoted (Ryan and Deci, 2002), and human behavior and experience is enhanced.

Singing and psychological needs

Bailey and Davidson (2005) developed a model of the positive effects of participation in group singing sessions and group singing performances. This identified four discreet areas of value: (1) clinical or therapeutic benefits; (2) benefits related to group process; (3) benefits associated with choir/audience reciprocity, and (4) cognitive benefits. Ruud (2012) has also identified four dimensions or categories of quality of life that benefit from making music: vitality (emotional life, esthetic sensibility, pleasures), agency (sense of mastery and empowerment, social recognition), belonging (network, social capital), and meaning (continuity of tradition, transcendental values, hope). Evidence emerging from other community singing projects and a study of the psychological benefits of musical engagement in general strongly suggests that singing may provide a valuable way of meeting the three key needs proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000). The evidence relating to each will be examined separately below.

Relatedness

As highly social beings, our behavior depends on strong forms of social connections and relatedness. The need for relatedness encourages us to place ourselves in social groups to offer protection and sharing; indeed, so strong is this connectedness that it forms a foundation for the transmission of knowledge (Evans et al. 2013). Given this innate drive, we tend to use and develop activities that are beneficial to us succeeding in a social world, and we tend to reject activities that either prevent or inhibit social interaction (Deci and Ryan 2000).

Singing plays an important role in fostering a sense of relatedness from the earliest stages of life. It is reported in historical texts that singing to an unborn fetus has been practiced for centuries (Garrido and Davidson 2013). For example, reference is made to the mother of Henri IV of France, who reported that she wished to make her unborn child of mild temperament by singing sweet music to him during her pregnancy (Davidson 2001a). In fact, by about the twenty-fourth week of gestation a growing fetus has functional hearing, sounds within the womb being mainly internal such as the mother's heartbeat, the movement of blood, and gastrointestinal sounds. External sounds can also be heard, though attenuated. The mother's own voice is one of the external sounds that is most clearly heard in utero since it is also transmitted via internal vibrations (Querleu et al. 1988). Thus newborn infants are able to recognize the sound of their mother's voice after developing a familiarity with it during the pregnancy (see Garrido and Davidson 2013 for a summary).

In utero it is primarily the prosodic element of the mother's voice that is heard, e.g. the rhythm, along with the melodic intonations and dynamic contrasts, rather than the articulation of the actual words or the specifics of subtle pitch variation. In a sense, singing focuses on all of these aspects of speech, and is certainly a stimulus to which even an unborn child can respond (Hepper 1991). Thus, even before birth, singing (or listening to it), promotes a sense of connectedness between mother and child. It can also contribute to the ease with which mother and child relate after birth, for it has been shown that infants not only recognize the contours of their mother's voice, but that they can recognize musical stimuli learned in utero (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009), using it most typically as a means to calm the infant.

For the newborn, maternal singing is prevalent and this is across all cultures (Trehub and Trainor 1998). Promoting the value of singing in such interactions, it is important to note that infants do seem to show greater responsiveness to maternal singing than to maternal speech (Nakata and Trehub 2004). Studies have demonstrated significant benefits to preterm infants when their mothers sing to them in their incubators, suggesting that renewed connection to the maternal voice has important implications for the long-term well-being of the most vulnerable infants (Filippa et al. 2013).

Of course, after birth, and the child develops, the act of singing becomes rapidly increasingly interactive, with both mother and child becoming involved in the singing and gestures that may accompany it. The bonding interactions of holding, patting, and bouncing babies for parents to engage in proto-musical behaviors known as infant directed "parentese"—that is, those "goo-goo," "ga-ga," "sing-songy" interactions—which characterize parent-infant communication in the early months of the infant's life. These interactions are playful and fun, thus developing social interaction, but they also offer soothing, and can be gentle and restful, promoting feelings of comfort and

Singing and Psychological Needs

security. Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) regard these interactions as a crucial part of child development, with infants becoming less engaged or even fearful in social contexts when they are deprived of such parental exchanges in their environment.

It has been argued that the relatedness aspect of music more generally is the evolutionary basis for the existence of music as a whole. The major proponents of this idea are Dissanayake (2000) and Cross (2001). Their theories propose that music evolved from pre-verbal vocalizations, as a way of bonding child and parent, enabling them to stay in touch even when the caregiver has to move away at times like gathering food. From an evolutionary point of view, these pre-verbal communications could be seen as being vital to survival given the vulnerability of human babies. Support for this theory rests in the fact that neonates are more responsive to the exaggerated pitch contours, higher pitch, and slow tempo of infant-directed speech than to adult-directed speech (Trehub et al. 1997).

It has been argued that prenatal experiences of maternal singing prime neuro-psychobiological systems to associate particular acoustic features with the expression of certain emotions (Welch 2005). This is described as providing infants with “emotional capital” (Welch 2005, p. 247) with which they can begin to make sense of their sonic environment after birth. Studies have found similarities between the acoustic cues used to signal emotions in music with those found in speech (Juslin and Laukka 2003). In general, the capacity to recognize emotion in music is associated with emotional intelligence, or the ability to identify, understand, and manage emotions in everyday life (Reniscow and Salovey 2004), an ability which is crucial to human relations.

Taken together, these findings tend to support the hypothesis that early maternal singing plays an important role in not only facilitating child-parent bonding, but in ensuring social relatedness throughout life.

Communication of emotion is at the heart of singing performances throughout the lifespan. As discussed by Davidson (2001b, 2006) gestures and facial expressions within singing performances further facilitate the communication of emotion. Singing in groups or in social settings also assists in creating a sense of inclusion with social groups and in identity formation (see Chapter 4.1 by Walker, Chapter 6.6 by Davidson, and Chapter 7.3 by Welch, all in this volume). For example, as a form of cultural practice, pop music offers opportunity for peer identification, and social bonds in sub-cultural practices for generational and trans-generational connection. It is highly pervasive in mass media, bringing a focus for social discussion, if not participation (Clarke et al. 2010).

Competency

Beliefs relating to our ability to do something successfully or efficiently influence us as we approach any learning situation: there has to be a belief that we can attain competency (Deci and Moller 2005). According to Seligman (1995), one of the founders of positive psychology, learning optimism is crucial to avoiding depression and achieving success, and the crucible in which optimism is forged is through “experiences of mastery,” that is, learning through experience that it is possible to face challenges and overcome them successfully.

Singing is something that everyone can engage in without specialized training. Despite the idolization given to so-called expert singers especially in Western societies, people everywhere can engage in the most widespread forms of community music-making through singing even without formal training as a singer. For many, this provides a unique opportunity to face previously unknown challenges, and to enjoy the satisfaction of meeting them successfully. Cohen et al. (2006), for example, quote the words of one chorister:

I'm 94 years old, and wasn't sure I could sing, and was even less sure that I could follow the notes. [Becoming increasingly animated] But I found that I could sing! In fact, I'm improving! And, I can't believe it but I'm finding it easier and easier to read the notes! I am so glad I decided to take a chance and join the chorale. This has been one of the most important experiences of my life. I hope it will never stop (p. 728).

Such experiences may then flow on to other areas of life, encouraging the individual to face challenges with more confidence, thus achieving competency and mastery in other activities as well.

When the activity that one is engaged in provides just the right level of challenge to match one's personal abilities, one often experiences “flow,” a sense of complete immersion in one's task, deepened concentration and heightened alertness that is highly satisfying and pleasurable (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). The concept of flow is

Singing and Psychological Needs

related to the phenomenon of absorption, a similar capacity to become so immersed in a task so that one is unaware of the passage of time or of things going on in the external environment. Absorption also tends to occur when engaged in tasks in which a certain level of competency has been reached. Not only are absorption and flow pleasurable states to experience, they can act as useful ways to cope with stress and difficulties.

The sense of competency and achievement that singing provides for some can lead them to experience flow-like experiences when engaged in it. A group of marginalized individuals in a study by Bailey and Davidson (2005), for example, described how their participation in a singing group resulted in feelings of increased alertness and mental stimulation. Participants in the study conducted by Hays and Minichiello (2005) also described a sensation of becoming so absorbed in the singing activity that they stopped thinking about their physical ailments or personal worries.

Thus singing can provide an opportunity for people with little or no musical training to experience the satisfaction of mastering something difficult, and the discovery of an activity in which they can achieve a state of flow and absorption which lifts them above the worries of daily life.

Autonomy

The condition of having the freedom and circumstances to self-govern, autonomy is viewed as being vital to learning because it influences the achievement of competence and relatedness, and the level of satisfaction obtained from fulfilling these other psychological needs. In essence, feelings of autonomy aid intrinsic motivation and promote the internalization of regulation. Autonomy is allied to self-regulation, for the more individuals internalize regulation, the more they become intrinsically motivated, and feel that their actions are under their own control (Deci et al. 1996). Autonomy is closely related to the concept of agency, which is the freedom for individuals to act independently and to make their own choices. Lack of agency or helplessness, is a state that can lead to depression (West and George 2002).

Promoting a sense of agency is one of the key aims of music therapy (Ruud 1997). However, it has also been found to be of benefit in studies of community music making. Bailey and Davidson (2003) have demonstrated that homeless men benefited from a singing group formed in their soup kitchen in Montreal, with the singing experience leading to feelings of pride and personal pride in achievement, as well as increased feelings of agency and self-empowerment. Rapping is a form of singing that is popular particularly with young males and it has been found to promote a sense of empowerment through self-expression among disadvantaged youths who may be overwhelmed with helplessness in other areas of their lives.

The same benefits hold true in non-Western cultures such as the South African Venda culture. The development of autonomy is facilitated with the entry to performance groups only being allowed after basic skills have been accomplished. This learning occurs through a positive set of social practices beginning with very young children being allowed to play freely at the edge of everyday musical group activities to enable them to learn through assimilation. The youngsters are highly motivated and through trial and error, imitation, and a lot of practice, become able to achieve the standard required to gain entry to the performance group. It is very common to see young children engaging in this sort of autonomous learning alongside a musical group (Emberly 2009).

Thus, singing promotes feelings of autonomy by both allowing self-monitoring which is essential for the development of skilled performance, and by facilitating self-expression which empowers individuals who may experience strong feelings of helplessness in other areas of their lives.

Other psychological benefits

Among the other psychological benefits to singing are cognitive benefits. Again, these begin early in life, with infants who are sung to experiencing increased arousal, mental alertness, and engagement with their environment (Shenfield et al. 2003). Studies with singing groups among homeless people have reported benefits from the increased cognitive stimulation, such as improved concentration and more orderly thought processes (Bailey and Davidson 2003, 2005). Others experiencing adverse life events (von Lob et al. 2010), and the elderly (Clift and Hancox 2010) have reported similar effects. Spatial-temporal reasoning has also been found to be improved in children by singing (Rauscher and LeMieux 2003). The problem-solving skills, language skills, and mental

Singing and Psychological Needs

reasoning involved in a serious study of singing, can also flow over into other domains. In dyslexic children, for example, singing can improve phoneme awareness (Overy 2000). Singing has even been found to increase general IQ even more than instrumental instruction (Schellenberg 2004).

Emotion and mood regulation are also prominently cited as benefits from singing in much of the literature (Dingle et al. 2012). In fact it is one of the most prominent reasons given for musical engagement in general (Garrido and Schubert 2011b; Saarikallio 2008). In babies, as mentioned earlier, maternal singing has a powerful influence on the infant and is one of the most effective methods for regulating arousal (Shenfield et al. 2003). In therapeutic contexts the following examples (among many others) can be found: a mentally ill individual being presented with an opportunity to sing out emotional expressions of anxiety and anger to regulate and calm mood (Ansdell 1995); a terminally ill patient using singing to express their grief and sense of loss (Pavlicevic and Ansdell 2004); group work using singing to explore feelings of empathy and emotional transference (Odell-Miller 2005; Roberts 2006) (see Chapter 7.5 by Boyce-Tillman in this volume for more information on music therapy).

It has been shown that older people with mood disorders who engaged in the choral participation, in contrast to a comparison group who undertook different activities, reported improved general health and morale, reduced loneliness, had fewer visits to doctors, and reported a reduction in the number of over-the-counter medications taken (Cohen et al. 2006).

In other studies outside of formal therapeutic contexts, singing is reported to possess mood-elevating qualities. Choir singers report perceived increases in positive affect and decreases of negative affect observed after singing (Kreutz et al. 2003). A study of 1124 choral singers from choirs in Australia and the UK also reported positive mood benefits (Clift and Hancox 2010). Adults engaging in singing on a regular basis report feeling happier, more confident, and relaxed after their singing session (Beck et al. 2000; Unwin et al. 2002). It may be of particular benefit for emotion regulation purposes when people are going through challenging times, to assist individuals in processing negative emotions they may be experiencing, or as a form of distraction from personal problems (von Lob et al. 2010). It can be a powerful cathartic mechanism for stress release as well (Smithrim 1997).

A study of singing with older people

Strong emotional affect through singing clearly offers huge potential for cognitive stimulation as well as the evocation of collective experience. It was with these potentials in mind that the study described here was developed. In order to explore the viability of singing programs for older people in the Australian context, a study was created that used community musicians to conduct the singing groups. The intention was to investigate improvements in the psychological well-being of older people participating in singing groups. It sought to identify factors that may have facilitated any improvements and contributed to the group experience.

Study

The work reported here is part of a larger project involving an examination of six community choirs involving over 200 choristers all over 70 years of age. Some of the choirs involved included people with dementia and their caregivers. Over the six-year period of the program, intermittent questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and group discussions took place to sample experience. The majority of the surveys were conducted during the group sessions, but in order to minimize interruption to the singing group activities, some data were collected with the researchers attending the participants' homes.

The data reported here were collected carrying out informal semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of singers. Questions explored underlying psychological needs topics relating to motivation for joining, on-going experience, positive and negative aspects of involvement, and the impact of the choir experience on each participant's self-confidence and social connection. The interviews were transcribed for analytical purposes and subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Techniques (Smith 2003; Smith et al. 2009).

Results

Thematic analysis identified a number of key themes that are now discussed: relatedness, mood regulation, expression and validation of emotions, life review, and competency.

Singing and Psychological Needs

Relatedness

While a negative relationship between aging and social isolation, depression, and other chronic health problems has been reported (Bunker et al. 2003; Sorkin et al. 2002), meaningful social engagement is one way in which well-being for older people might be enhanced (Greaves and Farbus 2006).

In our singing groups, participants had the opportunity to meet and work along with new people. Singing together also provided opportunities to enhance relationships between caregivers and the cared-for. This was built on the group activities we encouraged that included cooperating together in warm-ups or small-group singing, and also choosing songs. Singing together also helped people to feel connected via a sense of group cohesion and the immediacy of emotions shared in the music. Participants reported feeling a strong sense of friendship, even intimacy with their fellow singers.

“Sometimes I just sit there and think: this music is helping us all to be together. It puts you into the same space and on the same wave-length. Gets you into the here and now.”

Being in a group and singing is a deeply physical and emotional experience. I can feel the hairs rise on the back of my neck as I feel the vibrations of the low male bass voices singing behind me. When people get older, they don't experience physical contact the way they used to when they were young. When I sing, I can literally feel the caress of the breath of others close to me; I can feel us all breathing together, being close and intimate in the harmonies.”

Mood regulation

As discussed above, music is one of the most effective means for improving one's mood (Thayer et al. 1994). Participants in this study also reported feeling more relaxed after singing, and found it to be an effective means for elevating their moods.

“Before I did the singing group I used to get stuck in my mood and in one of those times. Singing helps to see that life isn't so bad.”

Expression and validation of emotion

Singing can also enable expression of emotions that individuals have not otherwise been able to express (Magee and Davidson 2004). In fact studies show that even when language skills have deteriorated, dementia patients may still be capable of singing (Cuddy 2005; Prickett and Moore 1991). At times, the music itself seems to offer understanding.

“Without words we can understand one another in the music.”

“Sometimes you just understand your neighbor through the tone of their voice and the look they give you.”

“Our members living with dementia certainly understand the group atmosphere, the sensitivity of the music (sometimes they laugh, sometimes they cry—often very appropriately) the melody, the harmonies.”

Life review

Participation in group singing can also help the elderly to make sense of their lives and to imbue past events with meaning and worth. Magee and Davidson (2004) describe the use of singing activities with older individuals in the late-stages of multiple sclerosis to permit the use of songs for reminiscence value. Familiar song repertoire in particular, has been shown to be useful in one-to-one therapeutic contexts for life review in palliative care (Aldridge 1999).

“I wouldn't say I got teary, but when you haven't heard those songs for so many years and your memory goes back... to when you sort of... family company and that.”

“I used the tune from 'Tea for Two' and wrote about 'me and you!', talking about when me and my old man met.”

Singing and Psychological Needs

Competency

As people age, they tend not to have opportunities to learn new skills, yet research shows that the challenge of new skills helps people to feel able and valued. Attendance at the singing groups provided opportunities for participants to develop new skills. Performing added considerably to the experience. Participants gained a sense of pride in the achievement and increased feelings of self-worth and being valued by others. The renewed sense of hope enabled participants to have a reinvigorated interest in life and to further value relationships with others (Mystakidou et al. 2009).

“I used to sing all the time as a child: in the playground, with my Mum at the park. But, that is different to being in a proper choir. I mean, being at home isn’t really proper singing—you know, being able to sing scales, harmonies, hold a line... It is a great new challenge.”

“... You reflect on life and you think: ‘Why not give it a go, you’ve got nothing else to lose!’ When you sing with the others there is a discipline to it. I didn’t realize how precise it has to be: come in together; blend in together; pronounce your words clearly; try to sing that high note stronger or softer; watch your tuning. There’s a precision and beauty to it. Being a singer is not easy, but it is better and more enjoyable than I imagined. Being a singer also means you’ve got to be a team player. Team-building can be challenging.” [smirks].

“Something inside me said: ‘Have a go, because if you don’t do it now, you’ll never do it.’ So, I did, and I’ve never regretted it for a second. I plucked up the courage to go and I did it.”

“When you get up in a concert and all those eyes are looking at you, then applauding you and praising you; well it is fabulous.”

“Performing gives another side to my sense of who I am. I feel good at what I’m doing. I’m no trained musician, but I can do the job and other people tell me that.”

A new model of the psychological benefits of singing

Taken together, the literature explored and the data analyzed reveal that singing can offer effective means of providing social connection, and emotional experience which satisfy psychological needs of the participants and so lead to positive well-being impact. It is clear that the psychological needs for relatedness, competency, and autonomy can be fulfilled through participation in singing activities. Further benefits include the power that singing has to elevate the mood, relax, and to increase mental alertness and cognitive performance in other domains.

However, while singing has a lower participatory threshold than many other forms of music-making, in many Western cultures, opportunities for people to engage in music-making and singing together are relatively limited (Sloboda et al. 1994). In many traditional non-Western cultures, by contrast, wider opportunities are available. The Messengers’ work with the Anang Ibibo tribe of West Africa (Nigeria) demonstrates the high value given to music in that culture. Across four decades of study he noted that everyone in the tribe demonstrated an understanding of their specific musical practices (Messenger and Messenger 1992). Similar extensive musical prowess was found in Venda musical culture. The Venda people of Limpopo Province in South Africa were the topic of extensive study by Blacking (1962; 1964; 1965; 1969; 1973). Fine musical arts practices were found to be used for special ceremonial occasions as well as everyday activities, such as undertaking manual work or in playful improvised drinking songs and dances. The musical arts practices were sites for personal expression, social communication, and sharing.

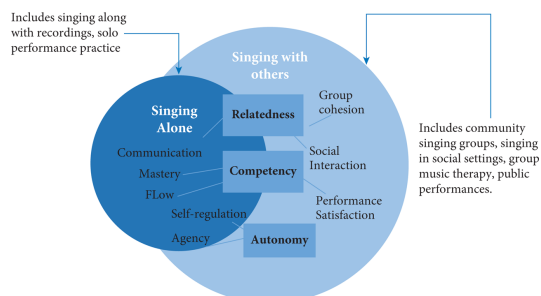
Compared with African and other cultures across the globe, people in contemporary Western culture—Anglophones UK, US, and Australia in particular—experience very limited and limiting experiences of musical participation. Their principal exposure to music is through listening. Sloboda (2005) notes that in fact music listening is a huge industry, and it is a voraciously consumed commodity, frequently used for self-administered mood regulation, social sharing, and often even used to denote social identification and status. The overarching lack of exposure to and experience of musical performance opportunity in Western culture has meant that for those relatively few who do engage as performers, they tend to be placed in a specialist niche with incumbent pressures associated with acquiring expertise.

Singing and Psychological Needs

But one might say that this cannot be the case for vocal performance, as it is something we can all do: you open your mouth and it happens fairly spontaneously. Indeed the majority of us can hum a tune to ourselves or sing out loud in the shower. Also it is important to remember the power of singing for the everyday person, and nowhere is this more strongly characterized than in the four-year period, 1987–1991, when song was to stir people into revolution against Soviet rule in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. “The Singing Revolution,” the term adopted by an Estonian activist Heinz Valk to describe the spontaneous mass night-singing demonstrations that took place, showed that people used national songs and Roman Catholic hymns to share in the powerful emotional experience of being together in the music to promote their solidarity (Thompson 1992). Yet the practice of singing, at least in Anglophone part of Western culture, has diminished and the overarching benefits, especially the psychological ones, have been sorely overlooked.

In a series of qualitative interviews with Australian adults aged 65 and over, participants were asked to reflect on their memories of singing (Hays and Minichiello 2005). Several could recall social activities where people would sing around the piano, and regretted that the frequency of such practices had declined. Smithrim (1997) reports in her study of the role of singing in the lives of women of various ages, that from the turn of the century into the 1950s, singing around the piano played a large role in teenagers’ and adults’ social lives. Older participants report singing hymns with family and friends and holding parties that centered around singing. In the sixties and seventies, rather than gathering around the piano, youths gathered around the campfire with guitars, singing folk songs and the songs of the peace movement. Little social singing was reported by the participants who were teenagers in the 1980s and 1990s. Smithrim reports that going to concerts seems to have replaced gathering to sing as a social music activity. However, she argues that “singing has changed considerably in context, and perhaps not so much in quantity” (p. 230). She cites as evidence the fact that access to recorded music has now increased. People may now carry music around and listen to it wherever they may be and this has only increased since the publication of Smithrim’s study. The compulsion to sing along is strong. Smithrim states that: “The context of singing has changed from social and family gatherings to more private singing. Young women are far more likely to sing along with recorded music by themselves or with one or two others than to sing with a social group for entertainment” (p. 231). She cautions against holding a biased interpretation of what constitutes singing.

Whether Smithin’s view, that the quantity of singing has not changed in Western societies, is true or not, it is clear that the social benefits to be gained from singing in social contexts are not present when people sing alone. We propose in this chapter that the mechanisms by which singing can improve psychological and social well-being are, at least in part, by fulfilling the three overarching psychological needs of relatedness, competency, and autonomy (see Figure 1). However, it could be argued that much of the competency benefits to be derived come from the satisfaction of performing much more than they would from singing along to recorded music in private. As can be seen from Figure 1, opportunities for public and communal singing hold the greatest power to enrich the lives of participants. While there is some overlap between the psychological benefits that can be obtained from singing alone and singing with others, there are virtually no psychological benefits to singing alone which cannot be enjoyed by singing with others. It could be argued that singing alone avoids the need to confront a fear of singing with others, or a fear of performance. Indeed, the singer can express all the emotions of the song’s content, the inner feelings they are experiencing and “let it all out” without any sense of ridicule, the cathartic effects thus perhaps being greater in a private setting in which release of emotions need not be restrained.



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Figure 1 A model of the mechanisms underpinning the psychological benefits of singing.

Additionally, of course, as singing is a capacity we have innately and when encouraged in infancy, it is strongly associated with the warmth of early bonding. As singing alone (without parent support) persists, it might be retained

Singing and Psychological Needs

by us as a technology to produce an imaginary social encounter. Add to this the fact that people who sing alone nowadays often do it with a CD or to a radio voice. As we know that singing offers shared socio-emotional opportunity, it could be that singing along to the radio offers a sense of communion with the recorded singer as well. In sum, however, the multiple benefits of singing in a group cannot be underestimated, as it can provide a relatively non-threatening environment in which to overcome a fear of public performance or a fear of expressing emotions in public, all of which lead to a sense of competency and relatedness.

In terms of developmental processes and conditions for learning, it seems that given the desire for expansion and liberation experienced by the participants in the studies discussed above, we should be working towards expanding conceptions of human development as a lifelong process. While some skills are perhaps more difficult to acquire in later life owing to some of the degenerative conditions associated with aging—arthritis being a difficult challenge to overcome if trying to learn the piano or guitar, for instance—singing and other instruments such as harmonica, flute, some percussion instruments and drums are instantaneous providers of new opportunity, quick progress in learning and potential for group integration and experience, which can assist individuals in finding liberation and developing new interests and opportunities for positive musical experience.

Anglophone Westerners, despite the naturalness of singing and the importance of singing in infancy, have rather impoverished access to musical participation through performance, even though evidence in Western contexts is beginning to reveal the important social, musical, and personal benefits simple activities like group singing can afford. It is also very important to note that in the Western context singing programs can be offered at little cost and that a simple and effective program can be developed along basic principles, such as introductory exercises to warm the voice and establish good group relations; work on repertoire; then finishing with summarizing work for memorization and closure of the session. It is proposed in this chapter that we can and should all benefit psychologically from singing.

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