

Reflections on researching the social and health impact of music activities

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In this paper I want to argue the case for two main issues in relation to research that looks at the social and health impact of music activities, based on my own experiences in researching in this area and also on the growing weight of evidence that is out there on how music affects people.

I begin from the starting point that music is powerful and can influence aspects of human experience and behaviour beyond music – a well-acknowledged fact. However, the current climate presents challenges and threats to the arts and culture, with cuts to funding and opportunities. In this context, there is an urgent need to generate credible evidence – evidence that will convince policymakers, politicians, funders, the public, and researchers. From a health commissioning perspective, the randomised controlled trial is typically acknowledged as the gold standard for credibility, but this conference and the growing body of qualitative enquiry has shown us that an alternative approach which priorities the lived experiences of those engaged in music can shed more light on the situation, and that this kind of evidence can, if generated appropriately, generate just as credible a picture.

So what might I mean by ‘appropriately’? The important key argument I want to present is that to avoid simply anecdote, we need theory. I present one example of a potentially relevant theory which could be used to explore not only *that* music affects people but *how* it affects people. This is a model drawn from positive psychology, pioneered by Martin Seligman, which illustrates five pillars of wellbeing (Figure 1). Seligman suggests that a truly rewarding activity will connect with people in all five of these ways.

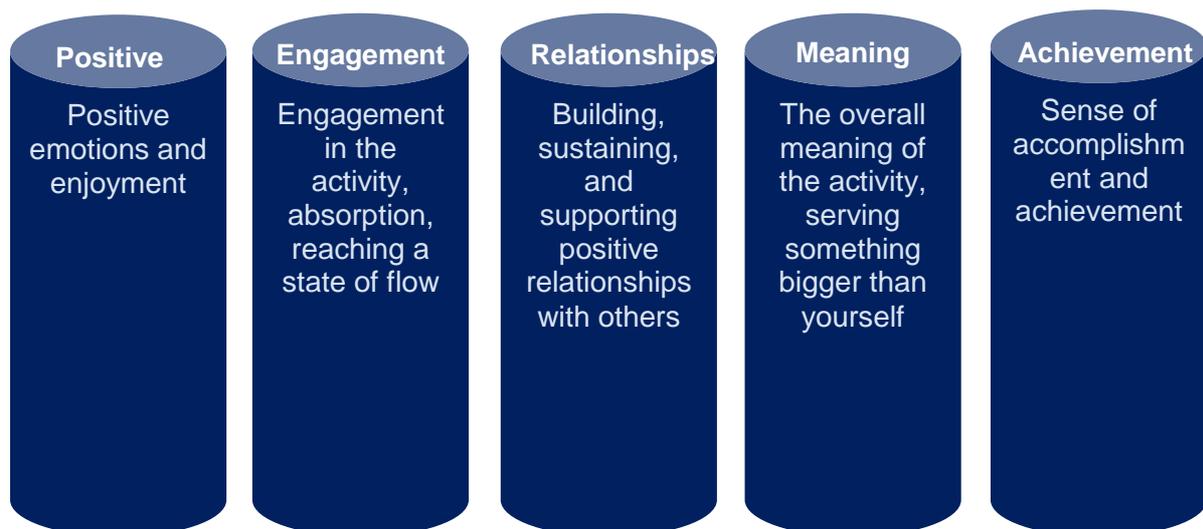


Figure 1: PERMA model of wellbeing (from Seligman, 2011).

Firstly, whatever activity we are engaged in should provide us with positive emotions. It should also be engaging, and have the potential to generate a state of absorption or flow. In

addition, Seligman adds two more 'social' factors: the activity should contain the potential to build and support positive relationships with other people, and to generate a sense of meaning to go beyond the individual to connect them to spirituality, religion, or culture. Finally, Seligman suggests that activities should also engender a sense of accomplishment or achievement in addition to the other elements of wellbeing they might bring.

This model can provide a theoretical basis for explaining how music activities could contribute to an individual's wellbeing. I have used this framework in a case study of a choir for older people, Golden Voices, based in Manchester and will briefly illustrate how it can help provide more rigour to such small-scale investigations.

Golden Voices was a community choir set up in 2008 by Manchester City Council as part of its Valuing Older People initiative. It was set in an urban area within the large city of Manchester (2.4 million people) and was inspired by a visiting choir from Baltimore, US. The council project worker set the choir up by finding an inspirational singing leader (Jules) and some rehearsal space and it began as a small singing group. All the music was sung a capella, and without using music notation.

The Keele team was approached to become involved in evaluating the impact of the choir on its members after the first year of operation. This made it impossible to apply the more conventional evaluation methods of testing measures such as levels of wellbeing, singing abilities, physical and mental health prior to and after the 'intervention': the choir had already begun, and was likely to continue. It would be impossible to find a control group of older adults who had not volunteered to join in to provide any kind of meaningful comparison. We thus adopted a case study approach using a range of different methods: we observed rehearsals and performances, interviewed organisers and choir members, conducted focus groups with members, and at the second time point we conducted a World Café with the choir (a participatory technique to promote informal discussion in groups – Brown, Homer & Isaacs., 2007). We studied the choir at two time points, 2009 and 2013, to see how things had changed.

To give a flavour of the impact that the choir had on its members, I begin with an inspirational quote from one member, from an interview in the first phase:

"It's given me a new life, I mean a totally new life. 18 months ago, I was doing very little and was quite lonely. Now I'm in 4 different choirs, I've got some good friends and I'm very busy. It's sort of once you retire, you lose that focus, it's given me a whole new life again. But what I said to you earlier as well, I've never been to singing yet where I haven't come away feeling better than I went. You can go feeling absolutely horrendous, whether it's physical or whatever and singing is physically so good for you that by the end of a couple of hours of singing you do feel 100% better. You know it does make, I think it physically makes you feel good, erm, I just breathe properly now! I've learned how to breathe! You know, it's all those things, it's such good exercise in many ways as well, gentle exercise as well. I think the social thing, I think the learning and the sense of achievement and the social thing are the two big things for me, you know, that I'm learning something new all the time and I'm achieving something as well. That does wonders for your self confidence".

Analysing the rich data from interviews, observations and the World Café, we found five main themes emerging from the data. These were:

- Personal investment and reward
- Inclusive community
- Always evolving yet fundamentally unchanged
- A desire to connect
- Leadership and organisation

The results can be found in a full-length paper which readers may wish to refer to for more information (Lamont, Murray, Hale & Wright-Bevans, 2017). I provide a brief illustration of one theme to show the kind of data obtained and the results of the analytic process. The theme of personal investment and reward reflects a clear sense of positive outcomes from hard work. The weekly rehearsals were welcomed as an opportunity to learn and develop. Learning new songs was definitely welcomed, and participants put a lot of effort into their singing, as well as into suggesting venues and new songs and in the running of the choir. This led to high levels of pleasure and enjoyment. Participants talked about the choir being ‘the highlight of my week’ and referred to the positive enjoyment as ‘it’s like a drug, a wonderful drug’. Figure 2 illustrates one of the doodles on the tablecloths at the World Café in relation to the question ‘how do you feel after choir?’, showing these positive uplifting emotions.

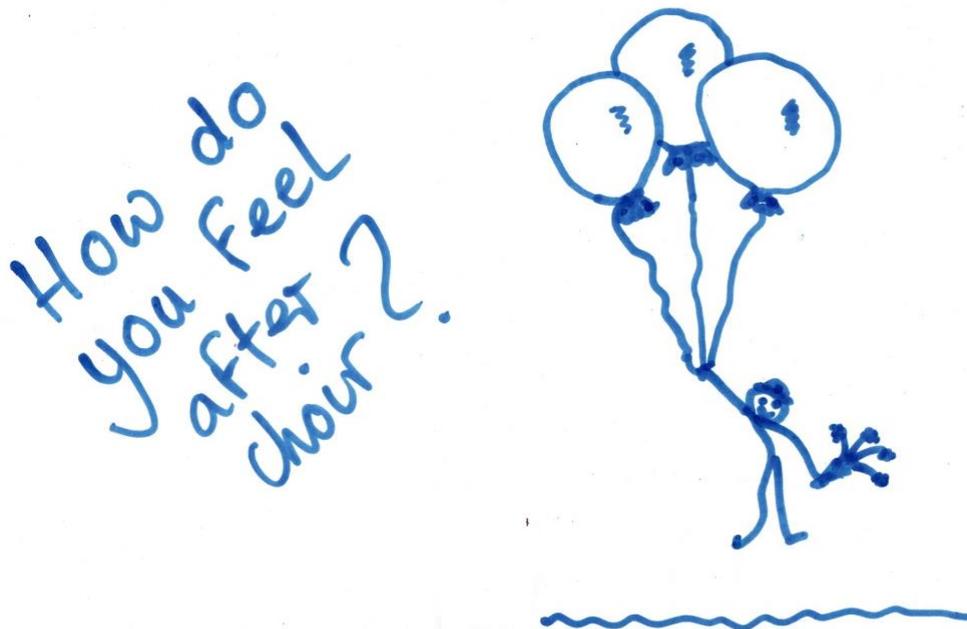


Figure 2: World Café drawing

Referring back to the positive psychology framework introduced earlier, this theme can be seen to clearly relate to the first two pillars of wellbeing: positive emotions and engagement. Going through the rest of the data in this way, it is possible to map all the emergent themes onto the theoretical framework, which then gives both an overview and a way of bringing together all the outcomes in a coherent manner. This is roughly illustrated in Figure 3 below, which maps the themes (shown at the bottom) onto the pillars.

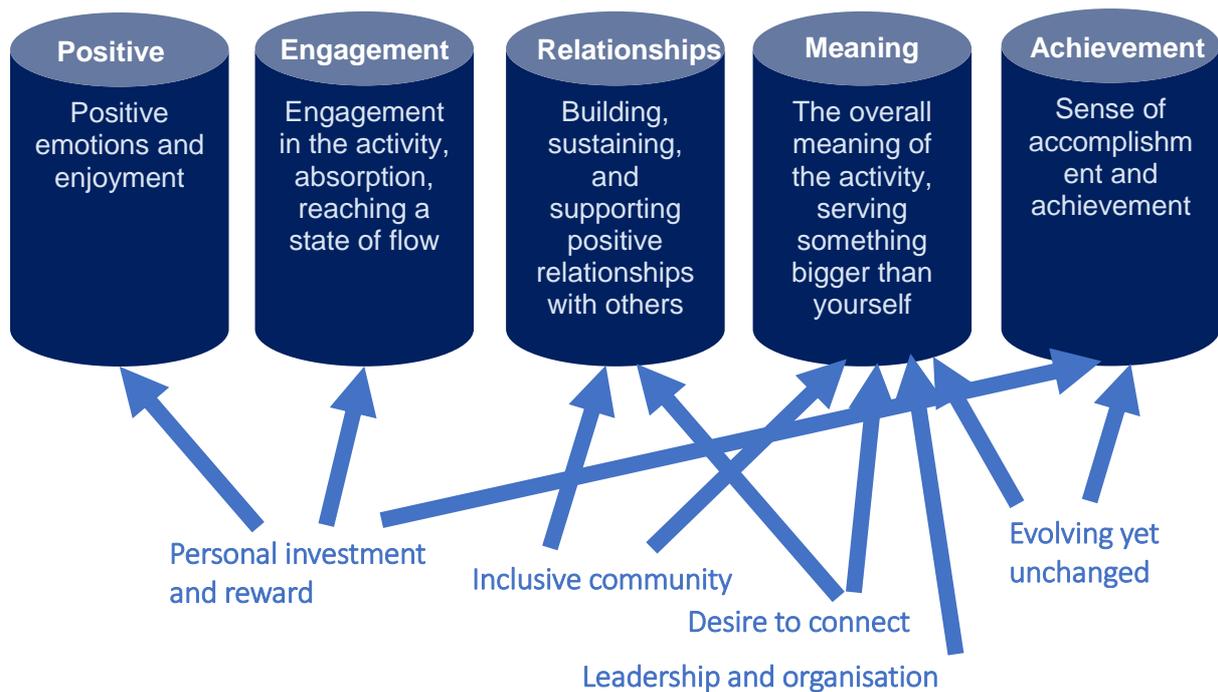


Figure 3: Mapping themes to a theoretical framework

This mapping process illustrates two points for this case study. Firstly, the choir experience is seen to cover all five pillars of wellbeing, suggesting that it is a valuable activity for impacting on its members' sense of wellbeing. Not every moment of the choir experience provides opportunities for each route to be fulfilled, but on balance the experience provides this breadth of opportunity. Secondly, this particular musical experience has more themes that relate to the sense of meaning and to relationships and achievement: there are more arrows connecting the themes than there are to the themes of positive emotions and engagement. The theoretical framework argues that all the elements need to be present, but not necessarily in equal measure. What this may mean is that for this particular case, meaning, social relationships and achievement take a slightly higher priority.

The framework thus provides a way of interpreting the benefits of particular musical activities and the potential for future comparisons with other kinds of music-making (and indeed, other arts and non-arts-based interventions designed to improve people's lives). It is thus possible to undertake rigorous research in small-scale settings, being adaptable and responsive to the real-life requirements of the research context: the theoretical framework provides rigour, and the longitudinal dimension is important in addressing questions of change over time.

References

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