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The perceived effects of singing on the health and well-being of wives and partners of members of the British Armed Forces: a cross-sectional survey[☆]

S. Clift^{*}, S. Page, N. Daykin, E. Peasgood

Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University, The Block, 69 Tontine Street, Folkestone, Kent CT20 1JR, UK

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: A survey to explore the extent to which a choir programme associated with the British Armed Forces provides benefits of wives and partners and families of military personnel.

Study design: A cross-sectional survey.

Method: Online self-completion questionnaires to survey 464 choir members and 173 committee members who were also participants in the choirs.

Results: Large majorities of participants report personal and social benefits from their engagement in choirs, as well as benefits for their health and well-being. Challenges facing choirs were also identified associated with performance demands and inter-personal relationships within choirs.

Conclusions: Group singing generates a range of personal, social and health benefits for wives and partners of armed services personnel. The study reveals some challenges arising in all-female choirs in military settings and suggests potential areas for further research.

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Introduction

Military lifestyle places demands and hardships on spouses and families. Long and unpredictable duty hours together with periodic redeployments and the risk of injury or death, can have an impact on the psychological and physical well-being of family members.¹ For wives and partners of members of the armed forces, separation can lead to assumption of

the single-parent role and financial difficulties as well as emotional problems and relationship challenges.² This paper reports an evaluation of the work of The Military Wives Choirs Foundation (MWCF), which supports a network of choirs for women who are wives, partners or relatives of British Armed Forces personnel. Established in 2010, the programme now encompasses a network of over 75 choirs, each of which appoints a musical director and is responsible for its own day-to-day organisation. The Foundation provides guidance and

[☆] This study was undertaken by the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University.

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 7764 761 510.

E-mail addresses: s.clift@btinternet.com (S. Clift), sonia.page@canterbury.ac.uk (S. Page), norma.daykin@winchester.ac.uk (N. Daykin), emily.peasgood@canterbury.ac.uk (E. Peasgood).

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information to local committees on issues such as recruitment, finances, facilities, musical direction, repertoire and performances. An important feature is that the choirs use a core repertoire of songs, the rationale being that this will allow women who move location to continue their engagement and access social support albeit in a different choir. The development of the Foundation arose out of a popular TV series presented by Gareth Malone focused on the creation of two military wives choirs.³ This was one of a series of such programmes on national UK television that has raised the profile of group singing in the UK.⁴

Since 2000, there has been a substantial growth in research on singing, well-being and health, sufficient to support recent discursive and systematic reviews of the literature. Singing offers an opportunity to socialise, make new friends and benefit from social support and can promote a sense of mental well-being.^{5–7} However, all recent reviews caution that the existing literature is diverse with varied research designs, interventions and outcome measures and that further, larger and more controlled studies are needed. Clark and Harding⁷ in a systematic review of singing as an intervention state:

Further research with random group allocation, validated measurement tools, larger sample sizes and mixed quantitative and qualitative designs might increase the potential for results that capture the psychosocial effects of active singing for therapeutic purposes. (2012: 80)

More recent research has added to the corpus of studies on singing and health. A pragmatic randomised trial has demonstrated significant improvements in mental well-being in older people living independently.⁸ Singing together in unison has been shown to synchronise breathing and heart rhythms which may account for the reported stress-relieving attributes of singing.⁹ Group singing and other forms of active music-making can lead to increased tolerance of pain, perhaps through the central nervous system release of endorphins.¹⁰ Group singing has been shown to increase the level of the hormone oxytocin, often called the ‘bonding hormone’ as it is released in women during labour, childbirth and breast feeding, and is associated with feelings of emotional closeness and love.¹¹ The suggestion is that this hormone may play a part in the positive feelings of belonging that people can report when they sing together in a group.

The value of group singing is not confined to personal and social well-being but also extends to supporting rehabilitation and maintenance of functional capacity in the face of disabling conditions.

Research has identified clinically important health improvements from singing in people experiencing mental and physical health conditions including stroke, spinal cord injury, Parkinson's, cancer, mental health, and COPD.^{12–19} While there is a need for more robust research designs including controlled studies, the increasing body of evidence lends support to the value of group singing for health and well-being.

In this study, the authors worked with the MWCF to design online survey instruments for members of the choir network, together with choir committee members and choir leaders. The central aim of the work was to assess the extent to which

MWCF is achieving benefits for their members as specified in their Articles of Association (see Ref. 20 for further details).

Method

Sample

The population under study were all members of the MWCF network of choirs (including participants with committee roles in individual choirs) at the time of the survey (September 2014). A survey was also undertaken of choral leaders but these data are not reported on here. For data protection reasons, potential participants were contacted by the administrative team at MWCF with an invitation to complete the survey. The study was also advertised on social media sites through private groups accessed by participants.

Questionnaires

The choir members' questionnaire had five sections:

- introductory questions – asking about choir membership, age and military connection
- personal and social development, health and well-being – asking about friendship, confidence, personal skills, identity, view of military rank, effects on family, attitude of partner, family enjoyment, and effects on health and well-being
- obtaining information and receiving communication – asking about the role of the MWCF, forms of communication with MWCF and within their choir, use of IT, attitudes to social media
- music and performance – asking about musical skills, training provision, core repertoire, learning of material, enjoyment and confidence, feelings about performances
- a final section which requested feedback on the ‘best and worst bits of your experience’ and any additional feedback

The questionnaire for committee members also requested further information on their roles and experience of communications with the central administration of MWCF. Data on these issues are not reported here.

Procedures

Survey questionnaires were administered through the Bristol Online Survey facility. Most of the items involved a structured response scale but there was also scope for written feedback on aspects of the participants' experiences of the choirs and the benefits gained.

Analysis

Responses to the structured items in the surveys are given as frequency distributions in a tabulated format for regular choir members and those with a committee role. Written comments given in response to open questions were subject to a preliminary analysis by the first author in which the most immediately apparent themes were identified.²¹ The

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