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The wellbeing benefits of choral singing for individuals in recovery from Substance Use Disorder.

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Table of Contents

Project Proposal	1
Project Report	5
Introduction	5
Literature Review	7
Substance Use Disorder	7
Recovery	7
Recovery and music.....	8
Wellbeing effects of choirs	9
Methodology and Methods	11
Findings and Discussion	14
A Deep Relationship with Music: “Medicine for your soul”	15
Strong affective experiences in choir: “I bounce home”	17
Eudaimonic growth and wellbeing: “Living beyond the programme”	20
Conclusion	24
Limitations	24
Recommendations	25
Reference List	27
Appendix 1: Focus Group Transcription.....	36
Appendix 2: Information Sheet	63
Appendix 3: Consent Forms (Focus Group)	64
Appendix 4: Consent Form (Online Survey)	69

Project Proposal

1. Project Title

The wellbeing benefits of choral singing for individuals in recovery from Substance Use Disorders.

2. Context and justification

Research shows wellbeing benefits for singers in choirs (Batt-Rawden and Andersen, 2020; Daykin *et al.*, 2018; Lonsdale and Day, 2021; Moss, Lynch and O'Donoghue, 2018; Pearce *et al.*, 2016). These benefits also extend to populations with trauma and mental health issues (Dingle *et al.*, 2013; Macintosh, Tetrault and Vallée, 2020; Shakespeare and Whieldon, 2018; Williams, Dingle and Clift, 2018).

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is associated with high levels of psychological trauma and mental health comorbidities (Keyser-Marcus *et al.*, 2015). Several studies describe the benefit of music therapy for this population (Harrison, 2019; Hohmann *et al.*, 2017; Ollerton, 2022). Voicework within a music therapy context can be of benefit in SUD, enhancing connection with both the self and others (Mattison, 2021). Given these findings, the core research question of this project is to investigate if choral singing provides wellbeing benefits to individuals in recovery from SUD. And if so, what specific benefits might it provide?

Although recovery choirs have been established in several settings, there is a gap in the literature in terms of studying their outcomes. There are a diverse range of addiction recovery groups, ranging from 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, to “unstructured, locally-led community groups based on social activities” (Rettie, Hogan and Cox, 2021, p. 840). Among the general population, choirs have been shown to increase self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-identity (Hendry, Lynam and Lafarge, 2022). Choirs are therefore likely to benefit those in recovery as they can provide several of the key components of effective recovery groups (Rettie, Hogan and Cox, 2021).

For the past two years I have led a choir comprised of people in recovery from SUD. This study aims to investigate the impact of choir participation on members' wellbeing.

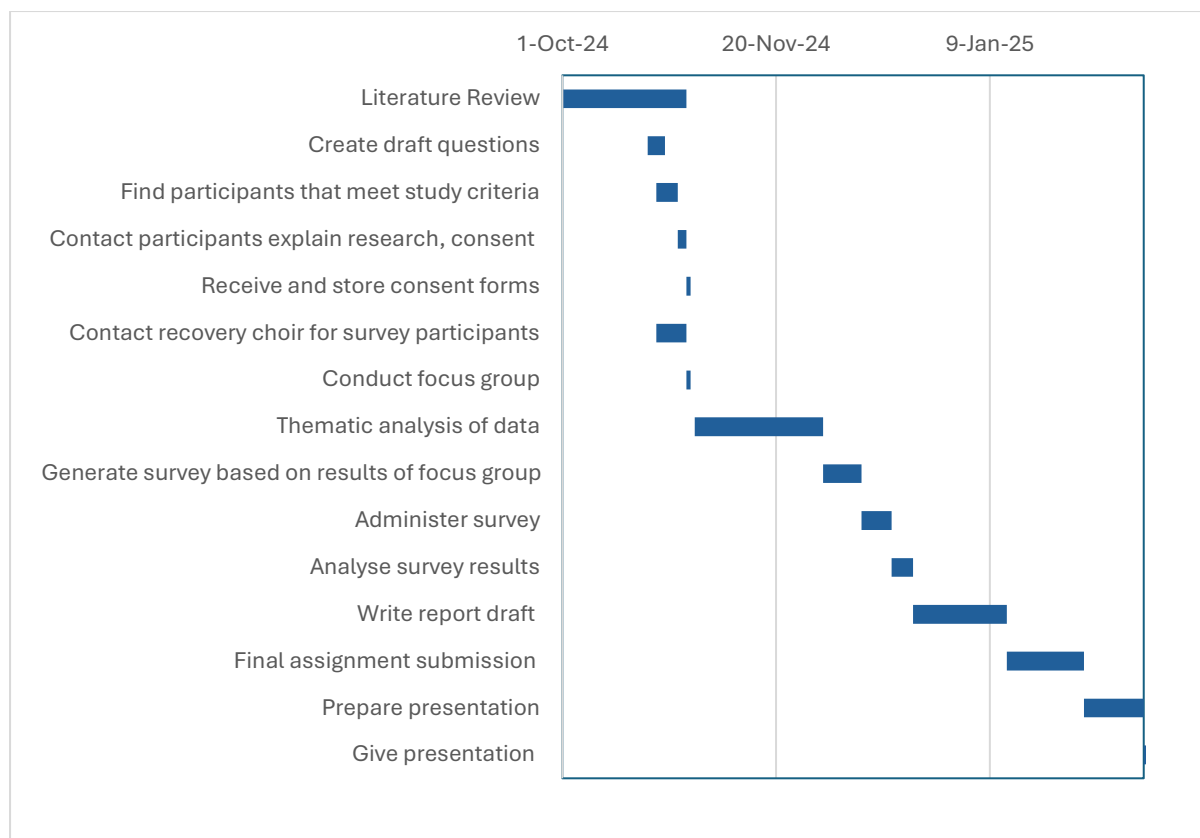
2. Intended impact

The results of this research may offer insights into the impact of recovery choirs on members' wellbeing. Understanding these factors may inform investment decisions for SUD recovery programs and guide effective strategies for enhancing wellbeing in recovery choir members. Additionally, my own practice as a choir director may be improved by the results gained from this study.

3. Outlined intention

I will conduct focus groups with members of the recovery choir which I previously led. Questions will be open-ended and focusing on members' experiences. Data will be analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019) to provide a rich picture of participants' experiences. The identified themes will inform the creation of a survey, consisting of questions based on Likert scales. This will be distributed to a larger group from a different recovery choir. Results from the survey will be analysed using non-parametric analysis. Consideration will be given as to how the survey results align with the focus group themes.

An expected timeline is proposed below in the form of a GANTT chart.



4. Ethics and insider research

All participants will give informed consent for the research, an explanation of the research purposes and procedures will be offered. All data will be anonymised and held on an encrypted device. Participants will be assured of the confidentiality of results and that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

As I will be conducting focus groups with members of the choir which I have led for two years, this meets the definition of an insider researcher (Merton, 1972). To minimize bias, I will delineate my role as a researcher from my previous role as a choir director and emphasise to participants that I am seeking their genuine opinions and experiences, rather than validation of any previous work.

The insider researcher must be careful not to impose ones' own beliefs onto participants or the data analysis (Greene, 2014). This requires acknowledging the researcher's insider status and potential biases and reflecting on how these may influence the research process (Greene, 2014). As a leader of a recovery choir, I am aware that I hold pre-conceived ideas about the research topic. I will keep a

reflective diary to reflect on my own thoughts as I interpret the data. I will also engage in de-briefing with my supervisor and colleagues as the data is analysed.

5. Personal learning outcomes

- Deepen understanding of Substance Use Disorder and Recovery processes.
- Expand knowledge of choral singing as a tool in recovery, enhancing my professional practice.
- Understand qualitative Thematic Analysis and how to conduct research using this method.
- Learn how to time manage a research project over a short duration.

Project Report

Introduction

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a complex condition, often accompanied by psychological trauma and mental health comorbidities, that significantly impacts an individual's overall wellbeing (Keyser-Marcus *et al.*, 2015). Research has shown that therapeutic interventions such as music therapy and voicework therapy can play a crucial role in the recovery process for individuals with SUD (Harrison, 2019; Hohmann *et al.*, 2017; Ollerton, 2022; Mattison, 2021).

Among the general population, choral singing has been identified as a potential vehicle for enhancing wellbeing. Studies have demonstrated that choir participation offers a range of psychological benefits, including improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social connectedness (Batt-Rawden & Andersen, 2020; Daykin *et al.*, 2018; Lonsdale & Day, 2021; Moss, Lynch & O'Donoghue, 2018; Pearce *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, these benefits have been found to extend to populations experiencing trauma and mental health challenges (Dingle *et al.*, 2013; Macintosh, Tetrault & Vallée, 2020; Shakespeare & Whieldon, 2018; Williams, Dingle & Clift, 2018).

Despite the growing body of research on the positive effects of choir participation, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific benefits of choral singing for individuals recovering from SUD. Choirs have potential to benefit recovery processes as they can provide several of the key components of effective recovery groups (Rettie, Hogan and Cox, 2021).

This project seeks to address this gap by exploring the wellbeing benefits of choral singing for individuals in recovery from SUD. The central research question is whether choral singing provides wellbeing benefits for individuals in recovery from SUD and, if so, what these specific benefits are.

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore choir members' experiences. Participants for the qualitative focus group were recruited from a recovery choir I have led for two years, while the quantitative survey involved a similar choir with which I have had minimal interaction. The research aims to provide insights into the personal and collective benefits of choir participation for

those in recovery. Findings could potentially inform SUD recovery programs and the practice of choir directors working with similar populations, contributing to the broader discussion on music and community interventions in recovery.

Literature Review

Substance Use Disorder

Substance Use Disorder (SUD), also known as addiction to substances, is characterised by the American Society of Addiction Medicine as: “a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual’s life experiences” (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2019). SUD frequently occurs alongside other psychiatric co-morbidities such as depression, anxiety, ADHD and trauma (Bartholow and Huffman, 2021; Keyser-Marcus *et al.*, 2015; Valentino, Nair and Volkow, 2024).

SUD is linked to significant social isolation (Christie, 2021; Chou, Liang and Sareen, 2011). Isolation is both a marker of addiction and a widely acknowledged contributing factor (Volkow, Baler and Goldstein, 2011). Additionally, individuals experiencing SUD are often stigmatised in society, and such stigma can enhance isolation, exacerbate substance-related challenges, and undermine treatment effectiveness (Earnshaw, 2020).

Recovery

Recovery from SUD is a complex and challenging process, often requiring a profound restructuring of an individual’s life (Kelly, 2017). In recent years, the concept of addiction recovery has expanded beyond abstinence to incorporate overall health, wellbeing and active community participation (Cano *et al.*, 2017). A person’s ability to overcome addiction is influenced by their environment, personal traits and available resources. The concept of “recovery capital” refers to the various resources, such as personal (qualities such as self-esteem), social (networks and supports available) and community (facilities such as housing and employment) resources, that an individual has to support and sustain their recovery. Recovery capital is dynamic and can be both enhanced or depleted depending on environmental factors (Cloud and Granfield, 2008; Hennessy, 2017; Best and Hennessy, 2022).

Although recovery capital is recognised as a key factor in addiction recovery, there is still limited understanding of the core overarching components of recovery

processes and how they change and relate to one another (Dekkers *et al.*, 2021). Studies have identified essential elements of recovery including the development of a sense of self, development of a sense of the future, and the importance of time and supportive environments (Dekkers *et al.*, 2021).

Recovery groups play a significant role in many individuals' journeys (Best *et al.*, 2016). Such groups vary widely from structured 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous to informal, community-based groups focused on social activities. Overcoming isolation by fostering supportive relationships and engaging in group activities can help rebuild social connections, improve mental health, and provide the emotional support needed for sustained recovery (Price-Robertson, Obradovic and Morgan, 2017; Vigdal *et al.*, 2022). Successful recovery groups are characterised by enhancing self-confidence, improving coping skills, fostering connection and support, promoting giving back to others and following a sober lifestyle (Rettie, Hogan and Cox, 2021). The Social Identity Model of Recovery suggests that through membership of groups who value and encourage recovery, an individual's social identity can be transformed so that they come to embody the values of the group, thereby helping them make changes in substance-related behaviours (Best *et al.*, 2016).

Recovery and music

Music therapy has shown mixed results when studied as a treatment for SUD. Many studies indicate positive effects on motivation, emotions, mood, and sense of control, however, there is a lack of high-quality studies and research examining its direct effects on substance use (Hohmann *et al.*, 2017). Positive improvements in mood and emotions may facilitate engagement with additional interventions for recovery (Gardstrom, Klemm and Murphy, 2017). Group music-making provides social cohesion and combats psychological isolation, thereby attenuating some of the factors which drive addiction (Harrison, 2019; Soshensky, 2001). Music therapy may help clients gain insight into their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, while also encouraging emotional expression through music, reducing isolation, improving mood, lowering stress and anxiety, and decreasing impulsivity (Baker, Gleadhill and Dingle, 2007). However, music also has the capacity to impede recovery by inducing

cravings and generating memories of substance use (Dingle *et al.*, 2015; Bensimon, 2024). Horesh (2003) assigned the term “dangerous music” to refer to music which motivates towards substance use. As individuals identify strongly with their music, often defining their personal and social identities through music, it can thus be related to their substance using identities and behaviours. Alternatively, music can provide pathways towards a new identity related to recovery (Dingle *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, while music has significant potential to aid recovery, it also holds complexities which must be carefully managed (Culler, 2015).

Wellbeing effects of choirs

Singing has been shown to produce increases in positive affect, reduction in negative affect, and physiological benefits such as decreased stress levels and improved immune response (Beck *et al.*, 2006; Grape *et al.*, 2002; Valentine and Evans, 2001). Research on the benefits of group singing has consistently highlighted its positive impact on emotional and psychological wellbeing and social connections (Clift and Hancox, 2001; Clift *et al.*, 2010; Daykin *et al.*, 2018; Moss, Lynch and O'Donoghue, 2018). These benefits extend to marginalised groups, including individuals with chronic mental health problems (Dingle *et al.*, 2013; Shakespeare and Whieldon, 2018). Additionally, benefits to emotional wellbeing have been shown in adult survivors of childhood trauma who engage in choral singing (Macintosh, Tetrault and Vallée, 2020). However, the lack of randomised controlled trials in this area presents challenges in establishing a robust evidence base, determining causality or calculating the effect size of such benefits (Williams, Dingle and Clift, 2018).

The mechanisms by which choirs promote wellbeing remain unclear (Lonsdale and Day, 2021). Proposed explanations for the improvements seen in choir members include enhanced mood, focused attention, deep breathing, social support, mental stimulation and the commitment to regular attendance (Clift *et al.*, 2010). Choir participation involves the synchronisation of breathing, pitch and timing, such movement synchrony has been shown to increase prosocial behaviour, which may contribute to enhanced wellbeing (Reddish, Bulbulia and Fischer, 2014). There is speculation that the emotional and psychological benefits of choir participation are

more closely linked to increased social interaction than the act of singing itself. A study by Pearce *et al.* (2016) found increased wellbeing as a result of both choir membership and adult education classes, with no significant differences between the two. The authors speculate that the increase in wellbeing stems from the social bonding inherent in group activities. Another study which compared the psychological wellbeing of choir members with participants engaged in five other leisure activities: solo singing, band/orchestra, solo instrumental, team sports, and solo sports, also revealed no significant difference in wellbeing for choir membership relative to the other chosen activities (Lonsdale and Day (2021). A key predictor of wellbeing in this study was the importance of participants' leisure activity to their self-identity, suggesting that the value of choir membership depends on the personal significance of the activity to an individual's sense of self. The authors suggest that this has implications as to who will benefit from choirs and should be considered when recommending activities in social prescribing initiatives. This study suggests that wellbeing benefits are not exclusive to choirs, and that a combination of various factors may contribute to enhancing wellbeing.

In conclusion, it is thought that the wellbeing benefits of group singing come about due to a confluence of multiple different factors working together in synergy to create a wellbeing effect which is more than the sum of their parts. The intrapersonal, interpersonal, neurobiological, musical, communicative, cultural and spiritual effects of group singing create a complex interdependence, making the measurement and understanding of the wellbeing effects of group singing a complex endeavour (Camlin, Daffern and Zeserson, 2020).

Methodology and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach which aligns with the pragmatic research paradigm (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Pragmatism prioritises answering the research question effectively, rather than adhering strictly to interpretivist or positivist views (Dawadi, Shrestha and Giri, 2021). As this study addresses a complex social issue, the pragmatic approach was suitable due to its adaptability, inclusivity and focus on practical findings (Morgan, 2014). By emphasising human experience as a pathway to knowledge, pragmatism reflects a commitment to democratic values and the pursuit of social justice, which aligns with my own philosophical stance to research (Allemang, Sitter and Dimitropoulos, 2022; Morgan, 2014).

The mixed methods approach used in this study is an exploratory sequential design. This design prioritises the qualitative results and attempts to assess their generalisability through supplemental quantitative study (Dawadi, Shrestha and Giri, 2021; Morgan, 1998). It was chosen because the issue under investigation is subjective and complex, requiring an approach which is grounded in the personal experiences of participants. By beginning from the narratives of the participants, this study prioritises the individual experience of a complex issue, and from there seeks to identify if there are any shared or universal patterns that emerge (Camlin, Daffern and Zeserson, 2020).

Initially, qualitative data was gathered through a focus group with members of Recovery Choir A. A focus group was selected for data collection as it efficiently captures diverse perspectives and fosters discussion which can generate further insights (Breen, 2006; Smithson, 2008). Individual interviews were considered due to the sensitivity of the topic; however, this was ruled out due to time constraints. To protect participants from exposure to triggering or sensitive topics, no questions were posed about addiction or substance use, and all questions were focused on choir membership and its effects.

The analysis from this phase then informed the development of the subsequent quantitative phase, which involved a survey of members of Recovery Choir B. This approach allowed for analysis of the relevance and generalisability of the focus group results from one choir to a different choir. The decision to use a

Likert-based quantitative survey instead of an open-ended qualitative survey was driven by the aim to simplify the survey process and ensure ease of completion, accommodating potential low literacy levels among individuals in recovery (Ivers, Larkan and Barry, 2018).

Recovery Choir A has been in existence for over two years and is located in South Dublin City, Ireland. Membership consists of individuals in recovery from SUD, and members of the wider community who are not in recovery. One of the mottos of the choir is “we are all in recovery from something”, reflecting its inclusive and welcoming environment. I have been engaged as the director of this choir for the past two years. Participants were selected by purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with the choir and were in recovery from SUD. A request for choir members who met these criteria was posted on the choir message group. Four participants responded to the request. The focus group was semi-structured and contained open-ended questions to stimulate discussion. An example of questions asked include: “Can you share your initial thoughts when you first joined the choir? How do you feel before and after a performance? What does it mean to you to be part of the Recovery Choir?”.

The discussion lasted for one hour and was audio-recorded and transcribed (Appendix 1). A longer time frame for discussion was considered, but based on experience working with this group it was felt that one hour was a suitable period to maintain attention and focus (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). The focus group took place at the usual choir practice time and venue, to maximise participation numbers. Participants were read a brief introduction and given a written information sheet explaining the nature of the research, data, confidentiality and anonymity procedures (Appendix 2). Consent forms were provided and signed before recording of the interview (Appendix 3). The focus group took place in Dublin City, Ireland in November 2024.

The introduction time prior to the focus group was used to distinguish my role as a researcher from my usual role as a choir teacher, and outline to participants that I sought genuine opinions and experiences, rather than validation of my work. The advantages and challenges of insider research are acknowledged in the literature, emphasising the need for reflexivity and transparency in managing these dynamics

(Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972). Although I had the unique advantage of familiarity and rapport with the group, I was also aware my presence may influence participants to withhold opinions or give answers which they think I find favourable. Additionally, the use of a focus group, over individual interviews, may have influenced group dynamics, replicating the choir's usual dynamic of respect for the director. To minimise this, I worked to create a neutral and open environment during the focus group and to remain aware of my insider role as it progressed.

The focus group data was analysed using thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its flexibility and lack of attachment to any specific theoretical framework, which appealed to me as a novice researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase method, the data was analysed using an inductive analysis. It is important to acknowledge that the researcher's preconceptions inevitably shape the data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). As an insider researcher, I was conscious that I held preconceived ideas about the topic. To minimise the risk of imposing my own beliefs onto the analysis, I actively reflected on my insider status and biases and how these may influence my interpretations through reflective writing (Greene, 2014). To ensure rigor, several sessions were held with my project supervisor to review the codes and themes that were generated.

The themes from the focus group analysis informed the creation of a follow-up survey, which was distributed online using Google Forms. Purposive sampling was employed to find participants from Recovery Choir B, a larger choir located in County Dublin which has been in existence for approximately 3 years. Similarly to Choir A, its membership consists of individuals in recovery from SUD and members who are not in recovery. I have had minimal interactions with this choir in the past, filling in for their teacher on two occasions. A message was sent to the group chat of Recovery Choir B requesting their participation, with a reminder sent one week later. The survey link led to an initial consent page, followed by a general information section with two questions: a yes/no question on membership of Recovery Choir B, and a multiple-choice question on recovery status with 8 options to choose from. The remainder of the survey consisted of 30 questions in a Likert scale format, and one optional free response question about barriers with attendance. The survey remained open for three weeks after which time no new responses were forthcoming, and the survey was closed.

Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the focus group produced three final, high-level themes comprised of multiple subthemes; ‘A deep relationship with music’; ‘Strong affective experiences in choir’, and ‘Eudaimonic growth and wellbeing’. A summary of these themes and their sub-themes is presented in Table 1. There were 17 responses to the online survey, of which 7 participants self-identified as being in recovery or having past issues with substances and were categorised as the “In Recovery” group. Ten participants identified as not in recovery, and these were categorised as the “Non-Recovery” group. As this study is centred on the experiences of people in recovery, only the 7 responses from the “In Recovery” group were analysed further. Future research could examine the responses of the “Non-Recovery” group, exploring the effects of participation in a Recovery Choir for this cohort. In the following sections, I will discuss each theme in detail, providing an exploration of each in relation to both the qualitative and quantitative findings.

High level themes	Sub-themes
A deep relationship with music	Deep love of music Always wanted to join a choir Preconceived ideas of choir/singers Use music as a tool to boost mood or gauge mood Increased connection with music in life
Strong affective experiences in choir	Acceptance, belonging Safety Connections Vulnerability Sense of fun Feel better after Negative experiences in choir- not meeting expectations
Eudaimonic growth and wellbeing	Giving something back Pride in your achievements Building confidence Mixed group, not focused on recovery Criticism of 12-step programmes

Table 1. Summary of high-level themes and sub-themes

A Deep Relationship with Music: “Medicine for your soul”

Focus group participants reported that they had a rich and meaningful relationship with music throughout their lives. One participant reflected: *“Music always kinda brought me to a good place, no matter where I was.”* Others shared similar sentiments, highlighting the soothing role music had played in their lives, describing it as *“medicine for your soul”*. Music was described as a tool for emotional regulation, a concept frequently discussed in the literature (Hou *et al.*, 2017): *“When I’ve had a really shit day in work...blare the music and again I get home, that’s it, it’s done.”* Another participant reported using music as a gauge to identify when they are feeling out of sorts and potentially vulnerable to their addiction; *“I got the Smashing Pumpkins ... and I hadn’t listened to it, and I knew, there’s something off. It’s kind of a gauge now... it’s a way of knowing your mood.”*

Despite this connection with music, some felt excluded from choirs and held preconceived notions of choirs as religious or formal and that only skilled singers could join: *“A lot of people when they think of a choir its all, you know, {mimes praying} older people.”* Participants reported being interested in the idea of joining a choir for a long time but lacking the confidence. The recovery choir appealed to them as a safe space of like-minded people: *“It always appealed to me to try to sing, and singing in a choir as a recovery group it was a perfect opportunity to dip my feet in the water... I felt safe.”* Their experiences in the choir challenged preconceived assumptions and mitigated fears: *“Everybody’s just valued to be there... it doesn’t matter if we’re getting the notes...we’re trying...but we’re enjoying it.”* This shift from a sense of exclusion to being included and engaged, mediated by a sense of safety and non-judgement, represents an important journey for those seeking to redefine themselves and their identities in recovery.

Choir membership has been shown to positively impact self-identity, as individuals reconnect with lost aspects of themselves (Hendry, Lynam and Lafarge, 2022). One participant described how the choir helped repair a damaged relationship with music which had been fractured due to an abusive relationship causing her to stop singing and playing guitar for many years. Since joining the choir, she has re-found her voice and enjoys singing again.

“I stopped singing for a while, for a long time. And I used to play guitar, I learned myself ... but ... I was with a very, very abusive relationship ... he criticised me singing, he said I was nasally... And I used to always be whistling, and he’d say stop... when I got out of that I never picked up a guitar again... And I realise that... I never stop singing around the house since I started this choir ...Spontaneously just, it comes out, wherever I am. And that’s since I started here... And I, I stopped singing and playing music for all them years.”

Additionally, choir membership has led participants to further explore their creative potential: *“Coming to the choir has led me into so many other things. Like I mean, creative things.”* As choir membership fosters positive changes in self-identify, it may also support the transition from a drug-using to a recovery-focused identity, which is linked with sustained recovery (Dingle *et al.*, 2019; Hendry, Lynam and Lafarge, 2022).

The findings of the quantitative survey with Recovery Choir B in relation to this theme are presented in Table 2. The results align strongly with the qualitative findings, the majority of respondents agree that music and singing have played an important part of their life. All respondents agree that they have always loved singing and five out of seven acknowledge that music helps them when feeling low, echoing focus group sentiments. Six out of seven said they felt choirs were not open to people like them, aligning with experiences of the focus group around perceived exclusion. Respondents reported singing more and feeling a strengthened connection to music since joining, which corresponds to benefits seen in the qualitative study.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have loved music deeply for my whole life	4	2	1	0	0
I always wanted to join a choir	5	2	0	0	0
Music is not an important part of my life	0	0	0	1	6
I have always loved singing	4	3	0	0	0
Before I joined the Recovery Choir, I felt that choirs were not open to people like me	2	4	1	0	0
Singing makes me feel good	6	1	0	0	0
When I am feeling low, I use music to cheer myself up	5	2	0	0	0
When I am not listening to music much or singing much, I know it is a sign that something is not right with me	5	1	1	0	0
Since joining the Recovery Choir, I sing more in my day-to-day life	4	2	1	0	0
Joining the Recovery Choir has changed my relationship with music and singing	4	3	0	0	0

Table 2. Results of Questions Pertaining to Theme 1: A Deep Relationship with Music

The deep, longstanding relationship with music, shared by members of both choirs, may have contributed to the wellbeing effects experienced through choir participation. Research suggests that self-identifying with a leisure activity enhances its wellbeing impact (Lonsdale and Day, 2021). It is unclear whether similar benefits would be seen in individuals who do not already have a meaningful connection to music or singing. Additionally, recent studies have shown that the effectiveness of music as a tool for emotional regulation is dependent on its significance in a person's life (Carvalho, Cera and Silva, 2022). Thus, recovery choirs may show higher wellbeing benefits for those who already value music as an important part of their lives.

Strong affective experiences in choir: "I bounce home"

Participants reported feeling a strong sense of acceptance and belonging in the choir: *"they're ... nearly hugging you the minute you come in the door ... it just felt right... feeling belonged and a part of... you're part of it, you're accepted"*. Several participants noted how the choir group functioned as a pseudo-family which was very meaningful as they had strained personal familial relationships, echoing findings in research on the effects of group singing for adverse life events (Von Lob, Camic and Clift, 2010). This sense of belonging and acceptance aligns with the

wider literature on choir membership (Clift *et al.*, 2010). In SUD, this phenomenon works to overcome isolation and stigma and supports recovery capital (Best and Hennessy, 2022). Additionally, many noted how vulnerable they are in recovery and the choir was seen as a safe space which enhanced the enjoyment of participation: *“For me it’s safe, it’s just safe to come out and enjoy yourself. And literally no judgement.”* This sense of a safe place, where individuals feel connected with others in a non-substance using capacity, is a key component of recovery processes (Dekkers *et al.*, 2021).

Many participants highlighted the sense of fun that pervades the choir, expressing relief at finding an activity which allows for sober fun: *“I think it kind of made me realise you can have fun in recovery.”* Participants spoke of laughter, lightness and good energy at the choir practices, coupled with a sense of relief from external stressors: *“Every time I go, I go out the door laughing and I bounce... home to be honest”; “You just forget the outside world”*. This stood in stark contrast to the fear and isolation felt when emerging from addiction: *“you can’t believe how frightening it is until you’re there, and you’re trying to reintroduce yourself into a world you actually don’t know anything about. Cause your world has been so small for so long.”* Positive affect, such as fun and light-heartedness, may play a significant role for those in recovery from SUD (Carrico *et al.*, 2018; Stone, 2022).

Despite these positive affective experiences, one participant reported that the choir can generate negative experiences: *“I feel anxious sometimes... I feel a bit anxious and I can get self-conscious as well”*. However, he spoke of making an effort to overcome this negative affect, forcing himself to attend practice in order to experience its benefits: *“I had to force myself some weeks to go but... I always did go and I always felt much better for having come.”* Another participant noted that the benefits of choir can be diminished when significant negative circumstances are present in her life. She noted that on such occasions she left the choir with a feeling of frustration, particularly when she was expecting the choir to provide an emotional uplift: *“It depends on where I’m at. Right? In meself...Cause I don’t know sometimes I’ve kinda left feeling... I think it’s more frustration... I’m more frustrated leaving the choir. Cause I’m coming in expecting it to lift me, but I’m probably too far gone at that stage.”* Such a reflection highlights the challenges experienced during recovery and

underscores the need for a multi-faceted approach in recovery from SUD (Brown and Ashford, 2019).

Table 3 outlines the results of the survey with Choir B in relation to this theme. There is broad agreement between the qualitative and quantitative studies pertaining to the affective experiences in choir. Like the focus group, all survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was a sense of acceptance and belonging, felt a sense of safety, and have made connections with other members. Equally, all respondents strongly agree with the focus group that there is a sense of fun, they feel better after going, and they feel less isolated as a result of the choir. No respondents felt a sense of anxiety in choir practice, and none found it hard to make themselves attend, this contrasts with one member of the focus group who spoke of anxiety which he had to overcome to attend. However, in the optional question to elaborate on this answer, one respondent stated that occasionally self-esteem or addiction problems can cause issues with attendance which have to be overcome. When asked about feeling frustration, one response strongly agreed, one agreed, one was neutral and four disagreed. Feelings of frustration may be due to multiple factors, for example, frustration with other choir members' behaviour, or the pace of learning, or maybe due to the same phenomenon as the participant in the focus group who felt frustrated when the choir didn't provide the emotional boost she was anticipating. While all participants reported positive affective experiences overall, it may be possible that these were experienced in the context of transient negative affect such as frustration or anxiety.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel a sense of acceptance and belonging in the Recovery Choir	7	0	0	0	0
The Recovery Choir is a safe space	6	1	0	0	0
I have made connections with other members of the Recovery Choir	6	1	0	0	0
The Recovery Choir practice gives me a sense of anxiety	0	0	0	2	5
I feel a sense of disappointment when I go to Recovery Choir practice or performances	0	0	0	0	7
I feel frustrated during Recovery Choir practice or performances	1	1	1	1	3
I feel better after going to Recovery Choir practice or performances (e.g. happier, calmer, less anxious)	7	0	0	0	0
There is a sense of fun and laughter in the Recovery Choir	7	0	0	0	0
The Recovery Choir has helped me feel less isolated	7	0	0	0	0
I find it hard to make myself go to practices and performances	0	0	0	4	3
(Optional) If you have any additional thoughts on your answer for the question above "I find it hard to make myself go to practices and performances", please give further information	1. Sometimes self-esteem or active addiction can cause me to not want to show up for myself but I know if I attend choir I'll feel better about myself				

Table 3. Results of Questions Pertaining to Theme 2: Strong Affective Experiences in Choir

Eudaimonic growth and wellbeing: "Living beyond the programme"

Participants reported improvements in self-confidence and increased engagement with the world as a result of participation in the choir; *"By coming to the choir, it pushed me then to go and do something else and feel the confidence and just mix with people"*; *"It's given me a hell of a lot more confidence. It's... helped hugely with my isolation. I'm...engaging more now. I'm engaging with more things, and the choir has led me into that."* These reflections point to a form of eudaimonic growth: the development of a more meaningful, connected life that extends beyond hedonic pleasure. Participants spoke of their lives opening up since joining the choir; *"It was coming and joining the choir that has opened up so much. It's very important for me you know, after years of isolating myself."* Striving for finding purpose in life and being open to new experiences are key markers of eudaimonic growth (Dodge et al., 2012).

Participants noted that, while 12-step programmes were extremely useful in the early stages of recovery, eventually they wanted to *“grow and move on”*. This aligns with the literature, which reflects that, after the early stages of recovery, people can feel that they stagnate in 12-step programmes and often express a desire to move on (Ivers, Larkan and Barry, 2018; Vigdal *et al.*, 2022). As one participant noted: *“You could spend years in recovery just going around in circles”*. Some participants had bad experiences with 12-step programmes, mentioning problems such as controlling behaviour and large egos. In contrast, because the choir was not expressly focused on addiction, participants valued that it did not require talking about addiction: *“I find it very safe that you don’t have to talk about anything about that, recovery or addiction or... It’s not about that, it’s about the singing.”* This aligns with a study of a mental health recovery choir, which found that participants valued the choir as a break from discussions of mental health (Shakespeare and Whieldon, 2018). The choir provided participants with a *“new lease of life”* where they could move past repetitive recovery narratives, the *“same old war stories”*, engage in a meaningful activity, and find a way to *“live beyond the programme”*. Similarly, participants valued the fact that not all choir members were in recovery. They appreciated the opportunity to mix with a wider cohort of society, find shared humanity and learn from one another’s experiences:

“I think it’s a lot of learning from one another... I know that it is a recovery choir, but because its people that either have people in addiction or there’s people coming from addiction so... we help each other... cause I know there’s one person in the choir and it helps her kind of understand her son... and then you’re listening to it from a parent’s side too.”

Choir performances led to a sense of pride and an opportunity to give to others. Participants spoke about enjoying feeling valued as a member of society after performances: *“it’s nice to be part of something and to be valued for it at the same time”*. Shame is known to hinder recovery (Hill and Leeming, 2014). By providing an opportunity for pride, the choir has a counteracting effect on shame and stigma. This corresponds with research suggesting that choirs for marginalised groups may help challenge stereotypes (Bailey and Davidson, 2005). Participants spoke about performing in terms of giving back to their community, using singing to console and uplift others who may also be suffering; *“It’s nice to sing for people that*

are... sensitive in life, and you're sort of upping their spirits ... and helping them along the way." This idea of moving beyond their individual recovery to make meaningful contributions to the lives of others was echoed by another participant: *"It was giving something back. Especially in recovery 'cause I think you take, take, take for so long. So, its lovely to be able, to be on the other side of it."* Giving to others fosters a sense of self-worth and purpose, which are important components of eudemonic wellbeing (Ryff, 2017).

Pushing beyond one's comfort zone is often a sign of personal growth. Dodge *et al.* (2012) define wellbeing as a state of equilibrium that can be affected by life experiences or challenges, the ability to face challenges and maintain balance is evidence of greater wellbeing. One participant noted how he balances the benefits of singing in the choir against the challenges of anxiety: *"I, kinda weigh things up now... I look at what I'm putting in and what I'm getting out and I get more out of here... it's the benefit I get out of coming to the choir and singing, for my mental and physical health."* This self-reflection and pursuit of activities that align with long-term benefits, rather than short-term relief from discomfort, is a key marker of eudaimonic growth (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012).

Table 4 outlines the results of the survey with Choir B in relation to the theme of Eudaimonic Growth and Wellbeing. The results align strongly with the experiences reported in the focus group. All respondents reported an increase in confidence, a sense of pride in achievements and reward through participation. Six out of seven strongly agreed that the choir gave an opportunity to give back to the community. Six out of seven also agreed or strongly agreed with the focus group that the choir offers something different from other recovery groups, with one respondent saying that this was not applicable. In relation to the question on whether membership has challenged them, one respondent said it had not, one was neutral and 5 found that it had. However, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had stepped outside their comfort zone. Those who reported stepping outside their comfort zone without feeling challenged may have conceptualised the 'comfort zone' in terms of an approach-avoidance conflict. Research suggests that this perspective of stepping outside the comfort zone involves overcoming avoidance behaviours, which are more closely linked to the fear/anxiety an activity generates, rather than its perceived difficulty (Kiknadze and Leary, 2021).

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable
I like that the Recovery Choir includes people in recovery and people who are not in recovery	4	3	0	0	0	0
I feel a sense of pride in what I have achieved as part of the Recovery Choir	7	0	0	0	0	0
Being in the Recovery Choir has NOT challenged me at all	0	1	1	2	3	0
I have stepped outside my comfort zone in the Recovery Choir	5	2	0	0	0	0
My confidence has increased since I joined the Recovery Choir	5	2	0	0	0	0
Being in the Recovery Choir is a good way to give something back to the community	6	1	0	0	0	0
I have grown personally from being part of the Recovery Choir	5	2	0	0	0	0
Performing with the Recovery Choir feels like a task with no reward	0	0	0	1	6	0
The Recovery Choir is a good way to inform the community about recovery	5	2	0	0	0	0
The Recovery Choir offers something different from other recovery groups that I have attended	4	2	0	0	0	1

Table 4. Results of Questions Pertaining to Theme 3: Eudaimonic Growth and Wellbeing

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of individuals with SUD of belonging to a choir, in relation to wellbeing. The findings suggest that choir membership played a role in enhancing participants' wellbeing. Results suggest that choirs provide many of the key components of successful recovery groups, namely increasing self-confidence, promoting connection and support, and providing opportunities to give back to others (Rettie, Hogan and Cox, 2021). These factors will increase recovery capital for choir members, enhancing the resources they have to sustain their recovery (Best and Hennessy, 2022).

By overcoming social isolation and stigma, choirs directly effect a key factor in driving and prolonging addiction (Volkow, Baler and Goldstein, 2011). The sense of belonging and acceptance, experienced by all participants in both choirs, is an important facilitator of recovery (Patton *et al.*, 2024). This social bonding may be a result of group dynamics, but studies suggest that it may also be facilitated through the act of singing together (Kreutz, 2014). Participants reported a sense of safety in both choirs A and B, which studies show can contribute to the self-change necessary for recovery (Vigdal *et al.*, 2022). The fun-filled atmosphere of both choirs is also an important consideration. Individuals with SUD frequently experience anhedonia, linked to chronic exposure to substances, and the need to avoid negative affect can be a motivating factor for substance use (Cheetham *et al.*, 2010). By providing opportunity for positive affect in a sober environment, the choir helps to reinforce recovery. This was echoed by one participant who noted that before joining the choir she was *"in a very dark place... Trying to look for a bit of fun, but that that fun is a bit safe."* Coming to the choir helped her realise that *"you can have fun in recovery."* Other research has similarly found that through a sense of fun, group music participation can counteract the lack of pleasure which can dominate life in recovery (Gardstrom, Klemm and Murphy, 2017).

Limitations

Dolan and Metcalfe (2012) highlight that those who are most likely to volunteer are those with higher wellbeing, complicating findings that volunteering itself promotes wellbeing. Similarly, individuals in recovery from SUD who have

enough recovery capital or are further along their recovery journey, may be more likely to join a choir and more likely to benefit in terms of wellbeing. Therefore, it may be possible that the potential benefits of choir membership for those in recovery are dependent on their existing recovery resources or progress.

As discussed, all participants reported a meaningful relationship with music in their lives, which may have contributed to the wellbeing effects observed. The benefits of choirs to the wellbeing of those in recovery may be dependent on the extent to which participants value music or singing in their lives.

The fact that the survey results from Choir B align with the themes from the focus group with Choir A, suggest that the findings are not specific to just one choir. However, as both choirs consist of members from the same county in Ireland, and the sample size is small, further study is required to determine if similar effects can be found in different geographical and cultural environments.

My position as the director of one of the choirs under study introduces a potential for bias. Qualitative thematic analysis necessitates the involvement of the researcher, with their pre-existing knowledge and opinions, in the creation of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2019). To minimise bias, I engaged in reflective writing, consulted with my supervisor to review the analysis, and encouraged participants to respond honestly and not consider my role as their choir director. Future studies could attempt to limit bias further by ensuring that data analysis is conducted by someone other than the researcher, as recommended by Murphy (2017).

Recommendations

By providing a safe space which is recovery friendly, but doesn't exclusively have members in recovery, the choir can provide a stepping stone into wider social groups beyond the recovery sphere. Recent literature emphasises the potential of recovery to be transformative at a societal level through "recovery contagion" (Best and Ivers, 2022, p.158). By providing a visible recovery resource which challenges negative stereotypes, while offering services to the community and fostering interaction between the recovery and wider communities, the recovery choir has the potential to offer a broad positive contribution to such social transformation (Best and Ivers, 2022). Such insights could help shape the development of recovery choir

programs as part of recovery or community outreach initiatives, showing how music and performance can reduce stigma, increase visibility and create meaningful connections between individuals in recovery and the larger community.

Given that there is reason to believe that wellbeing benefits will be greater in those who already value music and singing, recruitment efforts could be targeted towards such individuals, to maximise the impact and ensure efficient use of resources. Based on the findings of this study, future recovery choir directors should prioritise the creation of an atmosphere of safety, acceptance, and fun while also providing opportunities for performance, in order to promote wellbeing.

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Appendix 1: Focus Group Transcription

Focus Group 6th November 2024

Researcher: Lisa Quinn (R)

Participants: (psuedonyms) Sarah (S), Lucy (L), Aisling (A), Paul (P)

R: What parts of the choir sessions, or what about the choir sessions did you enjoy the most?

L: For me it was the music. Music always kinda brought me to a good place, no matter where I was. Music would take me out of anything, like any humour I was in. I just yeah, I just, it was a relief for a while.

S: I loved just singing. And I was always in groups, whether its church groups, or folk groups or, em, any type of singing groups. I've always kinda been, well most of 'em were church groups because that's all that were around. But eh, but yeah, the singing is great, but I just love the feeling of belonging that's here. Yeah, I really do, I love, I like the connections, I love the feeling of connection.

L: Yeah

S: Yeah, I like the feeling of belonging.

A: Yeah, I love it too, I love the music. I love singing, always did. Its like medicine for your soul as I say. It really is, but eh, meeting new people and doing, and singing out at the beach there and all, that was lovely, that was a lovely thing to do for that chap John. So yeah, I enjoy it and its good, its good for everyone isn't it? Like even signing here one night, the hour just went like that (clicks fingers). I said, its over? I wanna sing more songs!

L: laughing

R: Peter, what do you think?

P: It was something I was always interested in, em, like, I love music, from listening to music when I was young and I'm kinda self-taught on the guitar to a certain bit, but that's an improvement now cause I'm even more now. But it always appealed to me to try to sing and singing in a choir as a recovery group it was a perfect opportunity to dip my feet in the water. Eh, I felt safe in this group. I had to force myself some weeks to go but any... I always did go and I always felt much better for having come. And the singing, it was, it wasn't, it was different than I thought, em, I felt much better after it. It helped my physical as well as my mental health.

R: Interesting, yeah

L: You found the group by accident as well, didn't ya?

P: Yeah, I was in the O_____ church

{laughter}

P: I went in to light a candle and I saw the poster in the church. And it said, and the word that appealed to me first was, because I had been looking for a choir to join, but I saw Recovery Choir and I thought well that's my kind of people.

S: Like a calling.

P: And I thought, there'd be no, because I've been in recovery groups and 12 step groups and you kinda have to watch what you're doing in certain 12 step groups, because people can abuse that. People are vulnerable in that type of group and people know that and people can take advantage. But I knew, I had a feeling as it was a recovery choir everybody would be on the same page and everybody would want the same thing. And when I saw the word recovery, I thought it was a good group. The first week I came...

{laughter}

I meant to, I went to the far side of the hall and I, someone came in and they said, I said I'm looking for the recovery choir and they said 'aw its upstairs'. I ended up at a SMART recovery meeting!

{laughter}

R: Oh

P: and it was 10 minutes into the meeting and I was thinking to myself these people are not going to start singing anytime!

{laughter} {inaudible dialogue}

R: That's gas. Well, that brings me on to another question. What were your initial thoughts when you first joined the choir? What were you expecting and what did it turn out like?

S: Well I, I, I took ages to come at first because as I mentioned I was with other groups, recovery groups, and singing groups and someone in this said 'why don't you join the choir' and I wasn't in a great place at the time to be honest with ya and I put it off, and put it off and then I think I got better in myself. And then one day I said I would go, and I text her and she said yeah come up, come up! And I don't know actually were you here {points to Lucy} and actually, can I say names?

R: Yeah

S: And I knew N_____ as well, she ran one of the groups I was in and eh, but em, I didn't know what to expect. I went in and yous were doing all mad, all mad voice things, yous were doing the mooing thing and all and I just started doing it and I fit straight in. I didn't have any inhibitions because I'd been on this road you know?

P: Yeah.

S: But I just started doing the cow chewing thing and, and they're a mad group, which I love, I love it, it's very accepting.

L: The dysfunction.

{laughter}

A: functional dysfunction.

S: I felt at home straight, straight away.

R: And what about you?

L: I was nearly taken hostage if the truth be told.

{laughter}

L: by the person who organises it, well like that N_____ introduced me to C_____ and em, I kinda didn't know what to expect really but it was very early days, it was only literally starting, I don't know if, there was probably five people in it at that stage. But em, yeah, it gave me a reason, I was in a very dark place back then as well, like that, I was very isolated in myself, I just didn't know where I fit in anymore. Trying to look for a bit of fun, but that that fun is a bit safe. Yeah so, I didn't, I didn't have any expectations really coming in to the choir. But I was surprised at how quick and how much I enjoyed it. And it just gave me a sense of belonging, like that, yeah.

R: yeah, yeah. Aisling what about you?

A: Yeah, I'd be the same, just, em, I always liked to sing, that's the main thing why I done it but then as well with the recovery and people are just, they're lightheaded people like, do you know what I'm saying? I don't mean lightheaded, that doesn't mean, that doesn't sound very nice does it?

{laughter}

A: Like light-mooded

R: Easy going?

A: Easy going yeah. Yeah no, just that's the vibe like its always good energy anyway so, with anybody that's, that's in recovery, they're, they're just so light, you know what I mean. Yeah, and then meeting new people and doing something I like as well so yeah...

R: So, another question then is what emotions do you typically feel during the choir rehearsals, choir practice?

P: I feel anxious sometimes, like yeah, I do get anxious, I do, I'm autistic also, I have autistic spectrum disorder, em, I do suffer with social anxiety and social situations and stuff like that so I feel a bit anxious and I can get self-conscious as well... about my voice. Em, yeah and eh a bit nervous so I , I, I, kinda weigh things up now and

I've started doing that I look at what I'm putting in and what I'm getting out and I get more out of here, it, its, the benefit I get out of coming to the choir and singing, for my mental and physical health outweighs those things I might... I feel more beneficial from it.

R: That's a good way of analysing it, yeah

P: I, I, do that eh since I'm finished work I, I, I kinda struggled towards the end my anxiety and depression were getting worse and worse. And I made that conscious decision to move that way and my life and my recovery is a lot better since then.

R: Very good, yeah, and what about anybody else, any other emotions come up, anyone else feel a bit anxious?

L: I think, it depends, and I think its not necessarily to do with the choir, it depends on where I'm at. Right? In meself. Do ya know what I mean? Cause I don't know sometimes I've kinda left feeling, probably, I don't know a bit sad or something.

A: Emotions, yeah.

L: And for all of that, another time just lifted from whatever. It depends what's going on, mostly I come back the other way.

R: Yeah, like emotionally it lifts you?

L: Yeah, I just, like that, its me own mental health, I just, I've kinda been on a bit of a roller coaster the last year or so. Do ya know that way? So, its like punching through a card board box and then stopping and then you're fine sometimes. So I think its more frustration, that'd be the way I'd describe it, I'm more frustrated leaving the choir. Cause I'm coming in expecting it to lift me, but I'm probably too far gone at that stage, d'ya know that way?

A: Yeah, yeah.

R: Its too much of an ask for one thing to be the lift?

L: Yeah, yeah.

R: And does anyone ever experience happiness or excitement?

L: Yeah

A: Yeah

P: I always feel better leaving

S: Yeah

P: And I'm always glad that I came. Sometimes I can struggle to get here and force myself to get here.

A: Its like training, gym training.

P: But what I...

L: It's the laugh, it's the fun-ness

A: You feel instantly better for singing, don't you? Its like you sing your anxiety, if you have any.

L: Especially when you're working and all, and with everything you're doing, the difference from the mundane stuff, d'ya know what I mean, its kind of something out of the ordinary.

S: As I said earlier, it does take me a while to kind of get it, cause I'm very kind of wary.

L: I can remember when you first started as soon as it was over you'd be legging it out the door.

{laughter}

L: Yeah completely, there's such a difference in ya. You're a lot lighter looking and all

S: Well, I'll tell you why that is, its because, I think ya, and again we're in another group {gestures to Paul} and it's a singing group and its great and they're great people but there's not the same kind of...

A: not a feeling of family

S: belonging I think or em, being accepted as the, because once I had the, and especially yourself {gestures to Lucy} and C____ and I think J____, they're real, real, kind of, nearly hugging you the minute you come in the door and not like patronising ya, but d'ya know what I mean genuinely happy to see you and happy to see you coming up the stairs. You know and it just felt, it just felt right.

L: there's always room for ya.

S: Yeah, feeling belonged and a part of, you're not an outsider, but you're part of it, you're accepted.

L: You're seen by everyone.

S: Yeah, no I don't feel nervous now, I always love coming and I always come out the door laughing, always. Every time I go I go out the door laughing and I bounce, I bounce home to be honest.

R: That's lovely, em, ok, what about performances? So, we haven't done too many of them. Over the course of two years, I think we've done four or five things, but we've all had some experience of doing them. How do you feel before and after a performance?

A: Well, I felt great after doing it.

R: Did you?

A: Oh yeah, it was deadly, I only done one of them.

R: And what about beforehand?

A: I was living for it, yeah not a thought, not a bother. It was actually great, yeah, I was buzzing from it like for a little while after you know, telling people all about it.

L: You wanna seen our first one, it didn't even go ahead our first one.

A: No way?

L: We got to the place and how many of us showed up? Three or four of us.

A: No way?

L: It was in the Christmas fair. and it was outside and there was a brass band on first and you could barely even hear the fucking brass band!

{laughter}

L: So, we just said no, we can't do this, and we pulled out which was the right move. But then we did S_____ Housing (*a supported housing centre for people who have experienced homelessness*). But it was, we didn't really know one another, really, realistically...

A: Oh stop, yeah, yeah, yeah.

L: There was only a handful of us, but it turned out we kind of we winged it along. It was good and then we stayed back, and they sang to us. It was lovely and then we thought we were great and then we went across to the kids and they were like this {gestures putting fingers in ears}

A: No way! Covering their ears!

L: But then afterwards, it was like, yeah, you wanted to do it more. It was a great thing giving back to the community.

A: Yeah.

L: It was giving something back. Especially in recovery 'cause I think you take, take, take for so long. So, its lovely to be able, to be on the other side of it.

R: Absolutely. What about you Paul?

P: I think the thing we did for the R_____ community. I think we, we did so many practices, I think we were prepared. I wasn't nervous because we had practiced so much. And I had a feeling that everybody wanted everybody else to do well. And, and, I've never had that feeling before. I wouldn't have, I wouldn't have sang in front of anybody before, I would never have had the guts to go before but that time I wasn't nervous, I wasn't... I just thought well here we are let's do this because everybody else-

L: Was rooting for us.

A: Rooting for us.

L: Rooting for the group.

P: I don't, I don't talk to my family, or I've got a really big family and I don't really talk to them that much. But I told my brother that I joined a choir and he's a couple of years older than me and I said to him, I've joined a choir. And he said 'but sure you can't fucking sing'. And I know, I knew he was gonna say that, its always been that negative thing my whole life. And I thought, I'm not gonna say anything to anybody. And I feel about the choir and the fellowship you know... I was talking to someone at choir one night and talking about families you know and I said I don't have much to do with my family and she said 'well we're your family now'. And that feeling was...

L: I remember that, who said that, I know the stories you were telling.

P: Yeah, and I thought yeah, they are, they're my family.

L: Yeah, we're like that, but we're a mad bunch.

P: And I had no nerves standing there and I think that showed in what we did that night. I think that was... everyone stood up and we got a standing ovation.

R: Yeah, so what does the experience, the performance experiences that we've had, what do they mean to you?

L: It is, its giving back to the community. Its an amazing thing for everybody, d'ya know, it's something so simple but can mean so much especially like with the communities that we're going into, d'ya know what I mean cause, I spose depending on where you are in the community, probably most people are looking as the downtrodden and you know? But it is, its great, its just amazing to give back.

R: That's an interesting point, when you say most people are, most people are looking at people in recovery as the downtrodden is it?

L: I think, well I kinda think like different areas that you go into, like not necessarily that they're in recovery, just that the area could have a name.

R: Ok, yeah, like different localities?

L: Yeah, yeah, so it could be like-

A: {laughing} Don't mention any names.

L: Like anywhere, like just the places like we're going to, like they've been, you know? So, in that sense its worth putting on a show for them and they're deserving of it. There's good people everywhere you go.

A: No matter what or where you are.

L: Yeah.

R: Like the people at S_____ Housing.

L: Yeah, ah that was amazing. Just the joy they got, they start singing back to us and they got a turn each. And it was, some of them were amazing singers. But the joy that they got out of it, just listening to them, they were part of the, the singing.

R: Yeah, so, the feeling of we're giving something back?

A: Yeah, cause that chap, when we were singing at the beach for that chap and it was real emotional wasn't it?

L: I wasn't there that time.

A: No but it was, but we had a bit of a laugh at it too, but he was fairly emotional, but it was lovely cause they did all stand there hugging each other, and especially that song The Voyage, they got real emotional and now when I hear that song I always think of that fella and that girl. Now, I didn't know that girl. And then he bought us, he bought a bunch of flowers for everyone, and it was nice to see and everyone clapped and it was lovely. Yeah, it was a lovely thing to be part of, even though it was a year of her being gone, but it was like-

L: I didn't know her but-

A: Yeah, her children was there and all running around... Yeah.

R: So, the feeling of giving to others is one thing, but it leaves you with, like does the experience mean anything to you personally?

L: For me, I know it probably sounds, again like that, I was embarrassed to do anything as I said before, I was embarrassed to go outside my front door never mind to do anything. At one point I was thinking, god, would I be better off dead?

A: God yeah, yeah, I know what you mean.

L: But d'ya know that way, yeah, so it's like it's nice to be part of something and to be valued for it at the same time. And I'm not saying, c'mere, I'm not fucking Celine Dion or anything right?

A: Yeah, but its true! {laughing}

L: Yeah, but you don't have to be, d'ya know what I mean, everybody's just valued to be there, d'ya know, it doesn't matter if we're getting the notes or, we're trying, but, but we're enjoying it.

A: Yeah.

S: And it gives you confidence.

L: Yeah, that's what I'm saying.

S: It gives you confidence .

A: And you're meeting, meeting like the C_____ choir, they were all lovely. We'd a great time with them. They were so nice like. And it gives you more confidence then, to get out there and meet people.

P: Yeah, I find.... I forgot what I was gonna say there... like the confidence it, it gives me confidence. Like even when I, if I'm doing a chair at a 12-step meeting, I find now I'm different at it. I always mention the choir if I'm doing a chair or if I'm at a 12-step meeting or I'm doing something, I always mention I'm in a recovery choir. And I say it at other stuff too. And then if people ask me, I say well not everybody in there is in recovery, you don't have to be in recovery. Eh I, if I was doing a chair, I've done two chairs recently, I did one last Wednesday, eh and I did one at another meeting a couple weeks before that. But I used to get very anxious before I did a chair. But I find, since I've been in the choir and since performing for people and stuff like that, I'm not as anxious now. Even before, speaking to people I would have got all nervous and that.

S: You're speaking tomorrow in C_____.

P: Yeah, I'm doing a seminar, it's a, it's a mental health talk-

L: But even looking at you, the way you're-

P: But the singing, the singing its eh, I have a song that I wrote, its an inner child recovery song. But I recorded it, as part of my, my thing, but that's, that's probably something I was gonna lead into but the... Coming to the choir has led me into so many other things. Like I mean, creative things.

R: Very good.

P: And this was the first place I came with stuff like that, and this has brought me into other places.

R: That's actually one question that I have and I, we'll go to it now then. So, what role does music play in your life outside of choir and has this changed since you joined? So that's really interesting.

P: Yeah, I did, eh, during lockdown, eh, everything went online, meetings, stuff like that. And I was in an Adult Child of Alcoholics group in Southern California and I did a thing. I, I'm self-taught on guitar and I was doing all this stuff and we'd to do a collage one week and I thought... I was going to counselling at the same time online and I said it to the counsellor I don't know whether I should sing a song, will I chance it? And she said 'you have to sing that tonight at the meeting'. So, I got up the courage and I sang it and it, well it was well received. But I started playing guitar at home, I don't play for anything, I play because I enjoy it. But I go to, I've joined G_____ Peer Mental Health Support Group, they have a jam session on Thursdays, so I try to learn a new song, a cover version of something and I sang one of my own songs there now.

R: Wow.

L: Fair play to you.

P: But it was coming and joining the choir that has opened up so much. Its very important for me you know, after years of isolating myself, which was really my addiction or my alcoholism. Or that's what my alcoholism wanted me to do, just stay isolated. Now, part of my recovery now is to do something creative and to engage in things creatively and I'm, I'm doing really, really well now.

L: That's really brilliant Paul.

R: Wow. And what about you Aisling, how does-

A: I forgot the question {laughing}

R: What role does music play in your life outside the choir and has it changed since you joined?

A: Eh, I love music. Always have. Since I was very young. Eh, I love music 'cause of me da, he always plays it and ... I just love to sing, I've always loved to sing like. I was actually saying it a couple of years, I'd love to join a choir and eh, as you say, you put it out into the universe it comes back and it came back like! Eh, M____, I, I found out through M____ and eh, she goes 'its starting next week' and I says to her 'why don't we go' and she goes 'I'll ask' and whatever like so. But I, I love music, I think music is medicine for your soul.

R: Yeah, and did you used to sing regularly like before you joined the choir?

A: Just at home. I swear to God, I love singing. All the time I sing. I ju-, even in the morning now I have the eh phone on, speaker on. Not now a big huge speaker. Just, d'ya know the little speaker I brought? That's for making phone calls on but its just nice for the morning like and in the car, music singing. Like if you saw me on the camera on the motorway, I'd be like that 'AAAH' {mimes driving and singing}. I do! I often pull up to lights and I'd be singing and someone would be at you staring and I'd be like 'd'ya like that'?

{laughter}

A: I do! I swear I love it though, I just love it

R: And you Lucy, what's the role of music in your life and has it changed?

L: Well, like, I always loved music, always. Virgin on the Quays, anytime I was coming home from town I went in-

A: Oh yeah, me too, I've loads of CDs and tapes!

L: I always loved music but eh... in me job with the clients, depending on the day, now I'd always go round singing .

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

L: But coming home from work, like if somebody's after dying or if there's something horrific going on the job, ugh, I'd just blast the music because before... when I'd be working, it's just, there's no cut off point. So, when I came into recovery, it was a woman, a key worker, said, she told me, she said 'that's somebody else's pain Lucy'. You have to leave that. Like you can empathise them whatever, but literally, you know, your own life is separate. D'ya know what I mean? Don't be getting everything into a mess. It, it felt like everybody was just dying constantly, if it wasn't happening at home it was happening in the job. But now, when I've had a really shit day in work, whatever it is that's after happening, blare the music and again I get home, that's it, it's done.

A: Yeah, you're actually so right.

L: I'm probably on many of the traffic cameras as well {laughing}

{laughter}

R: And what about you, Sarah?

S: Yeah, I actually didn't realise until I was listening, until you asked that question. I stopped singing for a while, for a long time. And I used to play guitar, I learned myself on guitar as well. Because, and it's nothing to do with this, but I tell you, and I'll just tell you why the reason I stopped because before I got married I was with a very, very abusive relationship, ok? And I was with this chap for ten years and he played guitar. He played really, really good guitar, amazing guitar, ok? And... I sang with him but he kinda, he criticised me singing, he said I was nasally and stuff and... And I used to always be whistling and he'd say stop. And I think it... and... but he did teach me a bit of guitar but eh, I had eh taught myself when I was younger as well you know? And, and, and then like, when I got out of that I never picked up a guitar again. And I don't know why I didn't. And I realise that I... And it's only now that you're asking... I realise that I, I never stop singing around the house since I started this choir and I.... I only realise now that that's how long it's been since I, since I em, em, I forgot how to say it, what's it when you do something on the spur of the moment?

R: Spontaneous.

S: Spontaneous! Spontaneously just, it comes out, wherever I am. And that's since I started here. You know? And I, I stopped singing and playing music for all them years. And it's because, like he'd have his music, and he introduced me to good music, but a lot of music was shoved on me. The Doors, I can't fucking listen to The fucking Doors now!

{laughter}

S: He made me sit in front of that fucking Catch 22, he literally made me. Not a shred of a lie, he literally made me physically, physically made me watch it....

{inaudible}

S: But I kind of stopped, it put me off music and, and, its only now I realise since you ask that question how now I sing everywhere. Around the house. The boys and all... I'd be doing... you remember I asked you how to do that shake in your voice that good singers do and you showed me and now I go round the house singing {puts on a high note operatic vibrato} 'AAAAH YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL' to the boys and all!

{laughter}

P: In a similar thing to what Sarah was saying I love music, I grew up listening to, my mother always played records. I grew up with that. My mother playing the old 78s and I still have a big record collection' and I still buy new ones, I've loads of CDs. But I, I, probably after years of isolation and doing... I kind of use it as a gauge now, similar to what Sarah said and I, I think to myself hang on I haven't played a record in a while.

S: Low times.

L: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

P: Like I got the new Fontaines DC album, and I got the Smashing Pumpkins the Mellon Collie and The Infinite Sadness, it's a four record set, I mean it cost me 35 euro and I hadn't listened to it, and I knew, there's something off. Its kind of a gauge now, it is, it's a way of knowing your mood, when things are off and they need a change.

L: Do you find, can I ask yis, now people I'm sure I couldn't be the only one, I'd listen and I'd listen very deep into a song.

P: Oh yeah!

L: Like the words and everything, yeah. D'ya ever notice, now there's an awful lot of songs that are very connected with recovery? Like people are actually singing about it, and addiction and stuff.

A: D'ya remember years ago-

P: Yeah, definitely in some songs. I have a playlist of songs like that for recovery. But its something you know, when you realise it.

L: Ah yeah, they're amazing like.

R: That actually brings me to another question, what do you think about the song choices in the choir?

L: I'm kind of a bit bored with them if we're going to be really honest. Cause we've been doing them for a long time.

P: We've been practicing them for a while.

R: In terms of, so we had Something Inside So Strong, Crazy World, Put a Little Love in Your Heart, em what else did we have?

P: Lean On Me

S: I Can See Clearly Now

L: Well Lean On Me just haunts me altogether.

{laughter}

P: It's a real recovery song.

L: Yeah, it just reminds me of rehab.

S: And we done em, what's his name, the fella that sings The Giant?

R: Oh, Better Days Are Coming.

L: That was good, that was a hard one to do.

S: Yeah, but we got it.

R: Yeah, so we've had a few songs where we've tried them and then let them go and then there are ones that have stuck the longest, that we're still doing. And realistically we'll probably be doing some of them until the day the choir ends-

S: Yeah, because we're so good at them.

R: Yeah.

L: Yeah, but I don't, I think its not even about singing it, like if you're out somewhere singing it, its 'cause we're constantly going over it.

A: Yeah, yeah, so we know it.

S: But what about the choices of them?

P: I think its good to have two or three or four-

L: Solid.

P: In your catalogue that you're good at and that you know you can go to.

L: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

P: And I understand you can get sick of them.

R: And the, the themes of the songs, would they be, do you think they're appropriate? When you were talking about lyrics, you know, there's some songs seem like they're written from the point of recovery or addiction. The ones that we've picked, some of them chime with that, some of them don't. Do you ever notice that?

L: I think they don't have to be.

R: What I'm tryna say is, when you're singing them in the choir setting do you ever feel like you're, like I'm singing 'there's something inside me so strong', you know?

L: Ah yeah, no, yeah, it would and the Lean On Me and all, they're all great. But I think, like that, it is great to have songs that are just other songs, and depending on who we're singing to, its to who it'll hit more with.

P: I, I prefer, I like the simple songs like Put a Little Love in Your Heart where there's not that many complicated lyrics in it and it's a nice melody. And its like these simple little... I think, I dunno, but I think you can probably do more with them than something more... complicated.

R: Yeah, yeah.

L: Or even shorter songs, it doesn't have to be real long songs.

P: Feel good songs, simple feel good songs.

S: But like, you, eh, eh, eh, you, you feel something you kinda sing it better, don't ya?

L: Yeah, you connect with it.

S: You connect with it, yeah.

R: Yeah, okay, eh, right, let me see... If you had a friend who was thinking about joining the choir what would you tell them about it?

S: Give it a go, I'd say give it a go, go on, I'd drag them, because look it, its great craic.

L: Well ,I think a lot of people do be like 'oh I don't know, because I can't sing' but I'd say 'well none of us can sing'! Really like.

{laughter}

L: But I don't think its necessarily like trying to put us down, its just saying you don't need to know how to sing, its just fun like, its just-

A: Yeah, and don't be doubting yourself.

S: Yeah.

A: Yeah, exactly yeah and we're all on the same level.

P: I do say it, as I said, I do say it if I'm doing a chair. Even some people come to me, I went on a retreat last year in Cornwall with a recovery group, em, and I said it to the people I was going with and one of the guys found me after and said he was a singer and he was asking me, but then he never , and I told him you know, all about it, but then he never came back. But my AA sponsor did come to a few practices-

L: Yeah.

P: And he enjoyed it but it kind of clashes with, it was clashing with, em, other things. But he did enjoy it.

R: And what would you tell someone about the choir, in terms of explaining it?

S: What, I'd say we were thinking of putting on the poster and we all said, we all agreed that when you come you just forget the outside world, you come in here, whether you sing or chat or whatever you do, we do sing, but, eh, you just kind of forget the outside world and it just gives you that bit of, of your own bit of time, I think. Its like going to the cinema or something, you forget everything else. You know?

R: Yeah.

S: Your minds not racing, you're not thinking of the dinner or, or, or whatever. Escape. It's just a bit of your own thing, your own time. That's for me anyway. That's my, my thing.

P: Its good for your physical and mental health, its good for your breathing. Its good for your posture and, and, to me its good time and space as well.

A: Its great fun,

L: Yeah,

P: Something I'd tell them is don't be thin-skinned cause you'll...

{laughter}

S: Yeah, I always say they're a bit mad now, but its good.

R: What would you say Aisling?

A: Yeah, the same, eh, I agreed with, eh like we're not all like Pavorotti like you know? Its more of a release and you feel light when you leave. Yeah, you'll enjoy singing, its absolutely lovely like singing, it's the best.

L: Yeah.

A: You've nothing to gain or nothing to lose, so that's-

L: Yeah, one hundred percent.

R: Why did you choose to join a recovery choir, as opposed to another type of a group activity?

L: I don't think I would have had the confidence to join another kind of group. As I said, I was nearly taken hostage into here, but it was a good thing, it was a good thing. But I definitely don't think I would have had the confidence outside of this to go somewhere else. D'ya know that way?

R: Yeah, yeah.

A: As I said earlier, as well, em, I would, I'd join any choir but as I said earlier like people are more light-minded. D'ya know what I mean? So, they're more open and you know that they, we all sort of do be jittery inside in our own sort of way so... When you come into a room with people that's in recovery they're more open and understanding and {puts on a friendly voice} 'ah hey, how are ya, come in have a cup of tea', you know? They make you feel welcomed as well.

L: They do be rooting for ya.

A: Hundred percent, yeah, yeah. They're more open, I think. They're just more light-hearted, they've a lighter mood, a lifting mood, where-

L: Even though we don't know each other's ins and outs.

A: Yeah, but we know there's something like.

L: Yeah, and we know how much it takes for someone to come in so...

A: Yeah, yeah, this is the thing yeah so. We're cheerleaders, we are, wah?

{laughter}

A: {laughing, to Paul} are you a cheerleader? Oh no, he doesn't like that!

{laughter}

P: Yeah, I said it, when I say the poster and it just said 'recovery' and I kind of, I didn't know what to expect but I think it was what I expected, it was... I think the poster said 'recovery' and it had 'addiction', and... but it also said 'bereavement' and 'worry' and stuff like that. So I kinda knew it wouldn't be just everybody would be in recovery. And I think that's what it is, it is what I kind of, I didn't have any preconceived thing of what I was going to get out of it, I just came.

R: Do you think its beneficial that it's a mixed-

P: That it's a mixed group yeah, I do and that, like people who, I find it very, I think, its, I find it very safe that you don't have to talk about anything about that, recovery or addiction or... It's not about that, its about the singing. And whether you want to connect with people you can-

S: Yeah.

L: Yeah.

P: Its no pressure, its no-

L: I think it's a lot of learning from one another, do you find that? Like people, I know that it is a recovery choir but because its people that either have people in addiction or there's people coming from addiction so we're kinda, we help each other on that side as well, cause I know there's one person in the choir and it helps her kind of understand her son, it just kind of gives her a different insight into what things are.

S: Yeah.

L: Kind of to tell her not to be putting up with his bullshit as well like, d'ya know what I mean? But yeah, and then you're listening to it from a parent's side too.

A: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

L: D'ya know that way? So it kind of, there's a whole lot of learning in it.

S: Yeah, yeah.

R: That's very interesting. That was another question I had, in terms of learning, have you learnt any new skills or have you learnt anything through being in the choir? And we already talked a little bit about the musical skills that you might have developed but that's an interesting point about learning other perspectives, just learning a bit outside your own experience. Anything else?

A: Different age groups as well like.

R: Right.

A: You know eh, when we went up and met the other choir like there was young girls there and there was like, not saying anything wrong with age or anything, there was older women like. I'd great fun with them! D'ya know what I mean like? There's just all different ages like and the way everyone just mingles and...

R: That's good, 'cause you don't get that very often in life.

S: No.

A: Yeah totally. So, I thought that was nice. Cause a lot of people when they think of a choir its all, you know, {mimes praying} older people like, d'ya know what I mean? But like, its not really. In the recovery choir it's all like sort of different ages, different stages and yeah.

R: That's an interesting point, what people think of when they think of a choir, it can be very different from what it feels like being in a choir.

L: I think when you hear 'choir' though you just think of a church.

A: Its all real old school.

L: Like you just think all religious and oldy and that so, that's why we were saying like it's a singing group, but it's a choir.

A: Yeah that's, its not like all {puts on an operatic voice} 'AAAAH'.

{laughter}

L: But I'm still finding, when I'm trying to like, when someone's given me instruction... I know what their saying but it just doesn't go...

A: I'm the same, it just doesn't register.

L: And I'm like that with everything. Its like, I need, if I was to do my job now, I'd never do it because I couldn't learn anything through books, d'ya know what I mean?

A: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

L: Like from when I started, I learn from doing, like to explain anything through a book I'd never get it, I wasn't ever able, I was never that way. So even now I, like I know you probably think I'm buzzing off you sometimes but I really, I can hear what you're saying but it's like it doesn't go in.

A: Yeah, I hear you there! I agree with that one strongly!

{laughter}

R: Well, we all learn in different ways and at different paces so that's understandable.

P: I think what I learned is the importance of breathing from your diaphragm. I think, well I did a bit of meditation, but I think the singing has really helped with that, its kind of taught me, rather than sing from your throat or your clavicle, breathing, if you breathe deep and that's what drives it then. I mean eh, like the choir and the singing lessons and eh, my posture as well. It's improved my posture. And that helps with your nervous system and your whole system.

R: Very good, they're some very important skills to learn. Ok so, right, another question, how has being in the choir affected your relationships with other members? We've kind of touched on this already but, have ye developed close friendships or have ye got to know one another-

L: Ah yeah, no, definitely. Definitely, yeah.

S: Yeah, I wouldn't say close friendships yet, but I see possibilities.

{laughter}

S: Yeah, d'ya know what I mean? I wouldn't say I'm very close to, it takes me a while, I don't have many close friends really because I, I, it takes me a while, it does

take me a while. But I do feel close to people but it's different, d'ya know what I mean?

A: Well, she feels comfortable, 'cause she has her shoes off! {pointing under the table}

{laughter}

S: But I do feel comfortable, and I do feel close to people but I wouldn't say...

A: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean.

L: I would, for me its different, but I think as well, connections is better word. But I would class them as friendships now, with some of the girls, but again its from the very beginning of things and I think it's because we were thrown in the deep end.

A: Yeah.

L: Yeah, you kind of have a, but d'ya know the way, you know when you're meant to meet people in life?

A: Yeah.

L: And that's what happened. Now it just happens naturally, you check in on each other and stuff.

R: Yeah, so even if you mightn't have made eh best friends or official friendships, you've made connections with others?

S: Definitely, connections is a great word to use. Yeah, I feel I did, definitely.

L: And well, we started a walking group through it as well.

A: Yeah, yeah.

P: That's really, I find that very good. I find walking and then, cause usually what we do is mix it up, like I might walk with Lucy for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes and then I'll walk with P_____ and you know you're having different discussions. And with some people you might talk about yourself and recovery and with some people you might talk about family and holidays and stuff.

A: Really good, I love all the mix as well.

P: But yeah, it's the, the connections as well because when I go for acupuncture over in R_____ I might make contact with somebody there and recovery people over there who are in the choir and I have the chat with them and they're happy to see you and you're happy to see them.

L: It gives you friendships in different areas.

S: It does, it really does.

L: Like even going down to em, like where W_____ used to put on the karaoke.

S: Yeah, and the dancing.

L: Yeah, just different things you'd end up at, like quizzes and stuff, but its all from it, it stems from the choir.

R: Very good, Aisling were you going to say something there?

A: No I was just saying, I, I actually forget what it was.

{laughter}

A: Yeah, no, just all the girls, they're all lovely, and the meditation group I went to that a couple of times, and I do do other things every second week so I can't come down every week. Em, I do go to counselling and stuff like that. But yeah no, em, yeah, as you say connections and I know they're lovely people, you know by them, they're chatty and friendly so.

P: I, I get, I've gotten messages from people in the choir who when you're talking about your interests and that and they say I think you might be interested in this thing. And it's great that way as well, it just sort of helps.

R: Yeah, yeah. Em, right okay so we're coming towards the end but a couple of kinda eh, bigger questions at the end. So, one of them is what does it mean to you to be part of the recovery choir?

L: A sense of belonging for me. It just means I have somewhere that's for me, and it's a safe space.

R: Yeah

L: Because like that, see what you're saying about your family {gestures to Paul}, well like my family would be like that. D'ya know like, they can't wait to pounce on you to put you down and, well not all of them but some of them, and sometimes I find when you have people that are on that wavelength and then you have a group of people that's on the other wavelength, it doesn't go well together. So, when you have a mixed bunch like us, even though we're not all in recovery, but there's all different reasons we're all here, its, its, for me it's safe, it's just safe to come out and enjoy yourself. And literally no judgement.

P: But that, that affects me like, if, if there's negative energy it kind of drains you.

L: Yeah.

P: You know? But you don't get that in here.

L: No.

P: Because people want each other to do well you know, and as you say, it's a safe space.

L: Yeah.

P: And it's that sense of belonging, that sense of fellowship, we all have the same, we're all here for the same reason, more or less.

R: Yeah.

P: It's the singing and-

L: I, I like the feeling, sorry, you sing from your heart because you're not judged, so you really are, no matter how we sound, you're giving it your all.

P: And singing is being creative and that's, as I said, it's a very important thing to me.

R: Yeah, yeah. What about you?

A: Yeah, no I'm the same, I enjoy singing and then as well as that you make new friendships and then you can just be relaxed no one's here to judge you like. And its nice to sing for people that are, em, sensitive in life, and you're sort of upping their spirits and like you know people that have struggled themselves and uplifting people that are, you know, and helping them along the way. Singing to any body is great. I mean you came out of the womb and your mother sang to you in her arms so like, it pacified you, so it pacifies you. So, its lovely, music is just lovely. I love it, I've always leaned on music.

R: Yeah. And Sarah, what about you?

S: Yeah, it means so much, because I'll tell you, I, I, talking about family and that, like my family, I'd be lucky to see my family. My brother passed away, he took his own life four years ago and because of that, at the funeral we all fell out over it, and we were all very close. But so, well with one sister its ok, the other two not. But so, my older sister, I know I didn't say this at the time to anybody, she died two weeks ago-

L: Oh god.

R: I'm so sorry to hear that.

A: Ah, sorry.

S: Yeah, no, but its ok, its ok. But, I came to the group, to the women's group, but no no, I just want to tell you because, what I'm going to say to you is, I came to the women's group, her funeral was on the Tuesday but they didn't want us at the funeral so we weren't invited so but, but, but I got peace, now it wasn't in the choir, but it was the same group actually, because most of the people in the singing group are in the women's group. But I felt, I felt, em, even though I didn't mention it and I didn't talk about it, I felt comforted by being with people that I felt close to and I had connection with and that were, that em, em... that I felt comfortable with. You know? That safety and that closeness. So, so, and I know it wasn't the choir but most of the people are from the choir in that group. Oh, it meant so much, and I know I didn't say much, but it was just lovely to have somewhere to come to, you know, because,

em... Yeah, really now, you know, so.... And, and... to think like that bitch done that to me at the funeral-

L: Aw.

S: And we didn't even know she was sick and she just, she just died and... like that's but, what I... that's beside the point. The point is, that I felt, I felt, that I could come and I did come and I had a place... So, to me it means, its such a, to have somewhere to go and a connection with people. And I always, I always seem to be looking for something, I'm always looking. I joined this group at the back of L_____ and my kids are saying to me 'they look like a cult'.

{laughter}

S: They had a stand on M_____ St. and I was going past, this was years ago and your man says to me 'come to our group' and I went down, and they'd be looking for money off you.

L: Yeah, I know the ones, they are a cult.

S: And they'd be doing all this manifesting and wishing for things like I want two houses and they're into real material things. Materialism stuff. Like if you pray for two houses, you'll get two houses. Yeah, but that's... my point is, I'm always looking for something, or feeling a part of something, or belonging somewhere.

A: Yeah, we all do.

L: No but it is, it's like when you're coming here, nobody's looking for anything from you.

S: Nobody's looking for anything off you, yeah. Just to have you in and sing and be part of it.

A: Yeah, and take your shoes off!

S: {laughing} Take your shoes off, yeah!

{laughter}

R: Ok, right, last question, this is very similar, but a bit different, looking back on your time in the choir, how would you summarise its impact on you?

L: It gave me a new lease of life. It gave me a new lease of life. Because, when I joined, I was really, really at one of my lowest points in recovery. Because I was thinking like, what the fuck is the, is this my life now in recovery? Because I was kinda weighing it up and saying if its going to be like this, I'd rather be the other way or I'd literally rather not be around full stop like, it was just... I felt like I had no life. So, by coming to the choir, it pushed me then to go and do something else and feel the confidence and just mix with people and... yeah... yeah...

R: That's a huge impact.

L: Oh yeah, yeah. Definitely, one hundred percent. And I'm not exaggerating now when I say that. Like that's the god honest truth, I just, I was at the lowest point I've been at since I came into recovery, yeah.

R: A new lease of life is such a great phrase, but it sounds like you clearly, really mean it.

L: Definitely, one hundred percent, yeah.

R: And what about you Paul?

P: Eh, it's given me a hell of a lot more confidence. Its, it helped hugely with my isolation. I'm, I'm, engaging more now. I'm engaging with more things and the choir has led me into that. Em, confidence and isolation are the big, em... And its, I keep saying it, but it's very important for me, being creative is a huge thing like. I was just listening like, like what Lucy just said, you know I'm twelve years in recovery now, but I'll tell you something in recovery groups now, sometimes it's the same shit over and over again.

A: Yeah, yeah!

P: You know it's all the same old war stories and you're thinking god if this fella tells this story again, jaysus... And you know though I have a different perspective now on, on 12-step meetings and meetings in recovery and doing chairs and doing service in, in groups because of the choir, it's had a huge impact on me. Yeah and, and I mean it, that's, I'm not... it's made me look at things more, probably.... And, as I said, you could spend years in recovery just going around in circles.

S: Mmm, yeah, you're right, yeah. Same, same.

L: I think it kind of made me realise you can have fun in recovery.

P: Yeah, and a lot of people will just go to recovery meetings and don't do anything else, whether they're scared of being triggered or, or of going back out maybe, but this is a safe space, and like that, I feel safe coming here and that has led me to doing other things.

L: It's like learning to walk again. It's like, you, you can't believe how frightening it is until you're there, and you're trying to reintroduce yourself into a world you actually don't know anything about. Cause your world has been so small for so long.

P: It's a big part of my recovery journey and I, I accept things now. The whole god thing I have a problem with, the higher power I believe in.

L: Oh yeah, yeah.

P: Things happen for a reason.

L: Yeah!

P: I believe in, things are put in your way, and sometimes they're meant to be there.

A: Yeah, yeah, what you said there yourself, em, things happen for a reason 'cause I love the singing, as I said to you there a little while ago. I used to always be saying 'oh I'd love to join a choir, I'd love to join a choir'. Cause I do caring now, like I'm a carer, and I've changed and done different jobs, but I'm doing caring now, but like always I said I'd love to sing. I love music, absolutely love it, like I really, genuinely do so. And it came to me, everything happens for a reason so... As I said I can't come- oh I can come! It's the other group I'm thinking of I can't go every second week! But I make it my business to come down to choir.

R: So, it sounds like you love the music?

A: Yeah! But and meeting people, like I do love people! I thrive on people. I'd talk to a donkey now, I would.

{laughter}

A: No genuinely, I would, I'd talk to anyone. Like I just, I just like, I don't think I'm going to change either. I literally don't, but like I love singing and then I love meeting people as well.

R: And what about you Sarah?

S: Yeah its, the impact, it's made me a bit lighter in myself and a lighter outlook. Because and, and, I feel privileged that people, yourself is one of them {gesturing at Lucy}, that has shared stories you know, that you were going through there. And I felt privileged that you were able to talk to me about that and I know you talked to the group. And it makes you feel a bit, it makes you feel good that, you know what I mean just to listen to people. But the singing part has just made me lighter, it's made my whole outlook lighter. And I go to em, I attend S_____ {*a rehabilitation centre that also provides outpatient services*} now. S_____ centre over there in, em, S_____ {*part of Dublin*}. And so, I go to, I go to, em, therapy, therapy over there. I should have done it years ago. But, em, they say 'well, what else are you doing, you should be doing you know other groups'.

P: Mmm.

S: But I say to them my groups are my choir, my singing group and my ladies' group. And that's all. I don't want to go to AA. I don't want to do all that. Because this is my groups that I need for recovery. Honestly now, I don't want anything else.

L: Because they can be too much.

S: I'm not against AA and it did work for me at times. But it can be too much. Yeah.

A: You grow out of it.

S: Yeah, you have to grow and move on. I know, I know, its, I don't want to go back to it. Like I do, I do go to therapy and I'm at a group meeting over there as well. So, there's a one-to-one and then there's a group meeting every week.

P: Some people will spend their whole lives in 12-step recovery meetings and not do anything else and that's-

A: But that's good for them-

P: That's, for me that's, especially for myself with my isolation and my addiction and that, it doesn't help. But I met bad characters along the way in 12-step groups, one guy, this fella was trying to control me, they get into your head-

S: Yeah, I know the way.

L: They're nearly telling you you're going to relapse because you behaved a certain way.

A: Yeah.

L: They're afraid to live beyond the programme.

P: But there can be an unsavoury element in people in those programmes. But for me, I go to meetings still, but I don't feel -

L: You're in a healthier place.

P: Yeah, and the choir has been part of that. I think I'm more aware you know?

S: Cause its more eh, its more, to everyone's, like when you're just going to these groups, when you just start you don't want to- you trust everyone because they know.

P: Yeah.

S: They could be 10 years or 5 years or a year, and you're just a newbie and you listen to them, and you think they're kind of, well they must know what... But like you said, everyone, they're not all right.

P: Well, I, I did the S_____ centre, I did the 6-weeks residential programme and a big part of that was AA meetings. We had a meeting in the house, and we had two meetings in the centre, one was on a Sunday morning and one on Thursdays. And I was one of the first people who did a chair while we were in the, in the eh, residential programme. And then, coming towards the end of the programme a fella came up to me and said 'do you have a sponsor, you need one' and he handed me his phone number. ... I wouldn't trust people like that, people coming towards you like that. I thought, hang on, there's something wrong here. Like, I would kind of be wary about like people pushing themselves on you, all 'here, I'll sort you out'. That's the kind of people that started my alcoholism, honestly.

L: What I love though in the choir, you can see people are, they're doing well for themselves in recovery but it's still dysfunctional. And that is life, life is dysfunctional. So, when I was in other groups, like that, I, I couldn't understand them. D'ya know that way? Cause here they are, they're telling you to listen to them and they're just

after coming in and telling a big story about what's after happening to them. I remember one meeting, I had never done crack, and I actually left the meeting thinking I'm not a proper addict at all, and I went and got some crack.... So, I was literally trying to find my place. You can't do it without a bit of help though. But my help is not sitting in a room and having people drone on with the same sorry sad story over and over again.

P: I had that early in my recovery as well. I was going to regular meetings and I was going to one meeting in particular and somebody in there, I dunno, he said I reminded him of his little brother. But he saw me coming out of somewhere and he kinda started lecturing me, I was coming out of a bookies, and he was saying all 'you have to be careful' and you know all this and that and the other. He went back out a couple of months later and he was dead in, like, a couple of months. And I was saying 'what the fuck, he was telling me what to do!'

L: They deflect an awful lot. I find they deflect an awful lot at the meetings.

P: There's a lot of control, there's a lot of control.

S: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

P: And that's the shit that got me into addiction in the first place.

A: Ah here, we're supposed to be talking about the choir! AA are getting lashed out of it here!

L: No, no, but you're not, there's no judgement on them, but you do feel like you're constantly –

P: One of the big things I find, and I find it, well I'm speaking for myself personally. One of the things I find in recovery services and that is ego people who use the groups to boost their ego, huge -

L: Yeah, and then they tell you how to be humble.

P: But the choir is not, the choir is, is, it's a much safer environment in recovery.

S: But having said that, I've met nice, good people, a couple of friends out of AA. I have. Like they're not all-

P: So have I. My sponsor, I have a great relationship with my sponsor. He's the most relaxed easy going person, and he has a great sense of humour. He's got two children and I've got two, you know, we have a few things in common. He knows my partner and I've met his two children.

L: Ah, yeah, that's nice.

P: There are good people in recovery groups.

L: It's finding the right meetings though, like cause there is some now up in R_____ that are brilliant. They're a different mix of people and it's not all, like yeah, you can hear a sad story but it's not all dreary, you can have a laugh, its... its finding your place.

P: I think it's, like when you come in, I think when you come in at first you're a bit raw.

S: Absolutely.

L: Ah yeah.

P: Because I was so isolated at first and you're looking for something, some guidance. But eventually you cop on and you know who's genuine and who's not, you know? You can tell who's honest and who's insincere.

R: So, to sum up, it seems like the choir provides a safe space, a light-hearted space-

A: Yeah.

S: Light-hearted yeah.

R: A space where everybody's welcome, its inclusive and there's something... extra about the power of the singing that seems very important as well. It seems like this, em, has had a big impact on all of your lives in different ways but that you've all taken a lot out of it. Is there anything else that anyone would like to add just before we-

S: I'd just like to add that when we, there was talk about, because the numbers were very low, and there was talk about finishing the choir, I was devastated. Absolutely now. You know what I mean? I really thought you know, such a shame, it would be such a shame because... that, that I just wanted to say that. That's how much it means to me that I thought it would be such a shame to let it go really, it really would.

P: I would miss it. I would really, really miss it.

S: Yeah, absolutely.

R: Okay, right, yeah. Listen I'll stop the recording now so.

Appendix 2: Information Sheet

Title: The wellbeing benefits of choral singing for individuals in recovery

Primary researcher: Lisa Quinn

Organisation: Research is supervised by the University of Wales Trinity St. David and Voice Study Centre Ltd.

Overview of research

This topic of this research study is the experiences of individuals who participate in choirs whose primary membership consists of adults in recovery from SUD.

It will involve a focus group interview of approximately 60 minutes led by the primary researcher, focusing on open-ended questions. A focus group is a type of group interview. The goal is to give participants the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the topic.

The focus group will be recorded and transcribed into writing by the researcher.

The data will be anonymised or given pseudonyms and stored on the password-encrypted hard drive of the researcher. Any details in the interview data which may reveal the identity of individuals will be changed or disguised to protect your anonymity.

Interview transcripts may be shared with research supervisors, the Voice Study Centre or the University, but only in their anonymised form. Excerpts and verbatim quotes from the interview will be used in the project report, but only in anonymised form.

This research is supervised by the University of Wales Trinity St. David and the Voice Study Centre Ltd.



Appendix 3: Consent Forms (Focus Group)

Consent Form

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time up until the interview is conducted or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview focusing on my experiences as a member of the Recovery Choir.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted verbatim in the project report and potential future publications in academic journals, conferences or symposia.
- I understand that signed consent forms, original recordings, and interview transcripts will be retained in the password-encrypted hard drive of the researcher until the university exam board confirms the results of the project.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Consent Form

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time up until the interview is conducted or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview focusing on my experiences as a member of the Recovery Choir.
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- I agree to my interview being recorded.
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- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted verbatim in the project report and potential future publications in academic journals, conferences or symposia.
- I understand that signed consent forms, original recordings, and interview transcripts will be retained in the password-encrypted hard drive of the researcher until the university exam board confirms the results of the project.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant


Signature of participant

6/11/24

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study



Signature of researcher

6/11/24

Date

Consent Form

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time up until the interview is conducted or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview focusing on my experiences as a member of the Recovery Choir.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
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- I understand that signed consent forms, original recordings, and interview transcripts will be retained in the password-encrypted hard drive of the researcher until the university exam board confirms the results of the project.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant


Signature of participant

06-11-2024

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study



Signature of researcher

6/11/24

Date

Consent Form

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time up until the interview is conducted or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview focusing on my experiences as a member of the Recovery Choir.
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- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
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- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant


Signature of participant

6/11/24

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study



Signature of researcher

6/11/24

Date

Consent Form

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time up until the interview is conducted or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an interview focusing on my experiences as a member of the Recovery Choir.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted verbatim in the project report and potential future publications in academic journals, conferences or symposia.
- I understand that signed consent forms, original recordings, and interview transcripts will be retained in the password-encrypted hard drive of the researcher until the university exam board confirms the results of the project.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant


Signature of participant

6/11/2024

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study



Signature of researcher

6/11/2024

Date

Appendix 4: Consent Form (Online Survey)

Thank you for participating in this survey.

It will take approximately five minutes to complete.

All information gathered will be anonymous. IP addresses and email addresses will not be collected, therefore none of the information you provide can be traced back to you.

Results from this survey will be used in a research project investigating the experiences of individuals who participate in Recovery Choirs.

This research is supervised by the University of Wales Trinity St. David and the Voice Study Centre Ltd. and has received ethical approval from the UWTSD Ethics Committee. The principal researcher is Lisa Quinn.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary.

Do you agree with the following statements?

I voluntarily agree to participate in this survey Yes/No

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participation Yes/No

I understand that all information gathered will be treated
confidentially Yes/No