'Suddenly I was with my people': two South African choirs contributing to community development

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Abstract   Singing is a rich and dynamic part of South African cultural and national identity. The authors explore the identity of two choirs in the Cape Town metropole against the background of response to ongoing social change. The disparate yet similar choirs enhance the well-being of their members as communities and who sing for community. Community development as an outcome of community music is understood as process-driven. The Identity Process Theory serves as a useful integrative framework in which identity, social action and social change can be collectively examined with qualitative thematic analysis to code and analyse questionnaire and interview data (2017–2022). Three overarching themes are discussed, focusing on the experiences as perceived by research participants from the two choirs in relation to 'singing as a music community', 'having a place to belong' and 'singing during COVID-19'. The discussion highlights differences, similarities, challenges and opportunities for these choirs in relation to community musicians, identity and place. Although generalizations to other choirs cannot necessarily be made, recommendations are offered, both for further research and of a practical nature. This paper argues that diverse forms of communal singing continue to play an important role in South Africa's group identity for choirs, fostering hope for communities and their development. Notions of community

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development and community music should not become narrowly defined, excluding many choral groups and their contributions to society from the global conversation.

Introduction

South Africa's history of political, racial, social, economic and cultural domination—and of change and adjustment—includes complicated 'identity configuration and re-configuration, emphasising the creole history of all South African musics support[ing] the feelings of belonging together compatible with attachments to smaller social entities, be they based on language, locality, origin, religion, etc.' (Martin, 2013, p. 380). Post-1994 South Africa's identity remains questionable. According to Dubow (2012, p. 65), 'there is nothing self-evident about South Africa or South Africans ... the struggle for South Africa has always been, and in many ways continues to be, a struggle to become South African'. The country constitutes approximately 60.6 million people. Though a democratic nation since 1994, the country maintains its racial ethnic demographic classification: Black (African indigenous people) make up 81 percent, Coloured (mixed race) 8.8 percent, Whites 7.7 percent and Indian/Asian 2.6 percent (Statistics South Africa, 2022). This research situates itself in South Africa, rich in cultural heritage with a choral tradition strongly linked to culture (Barrett, 2008), identity (Hammond, 2007) and responses to social change (Barrett and Vermeulen, 2019).

Statistical publications and census data continue to refer to different races (Olonisakin and Idemudia, 2023). The South African constitution and constitutional court acknowledge race in addressing its divided past and moving towards a non-racial society (De Vos, 2020). Although interracial interaction has become much more spontaneous than before 1994, South Africans continue to interact largely within their racial groups (Olonisakin and Idemudia, 2023). South Africa has had a Western choral tradition of sacred and secular music since Dutch settlement in 1652, with Black South Africans 'immersed in the religious and classical repertoire of Europe' (Muller, 2004, p. 3). Colonization and missionary actions influenced indigenous group singing traditions. Between 1850 and 1906, Kholwa converts from colonial Natal toured Europe (c. 1892) singing European songs (Meintjes, 2020). This reflected how 'Christianity, education, property and market exchange produced a hybrid cultural and social life' which did not provide them with 'recognition as colonial citizens on a par with white settlers' (*ibid*, p. 216).

Singing in South African communities occurred before Western choral influences impacted the African continent (De Beer and Shitandi, 2012).

Though choral music may have nurtured previously segregation over the centuries, present-day practice combines Western and African traditions that emerged since mission schools in the 19th century, including social, political and aesthetic influences of hymn singing, giving rise to choirs (Detterbeck, 2002). The *Amakwaya* choral practice combines African and European music, contributing to a national multicultural choral identity (Haecker, 2012).

The power of group singing promotes social bonding. For younger people, it offers group identity (Elorriaga, 2011), and for older people, singing has been shown to promote physiological and psychological well-being and shared sense of cohesion (Davidson et al., 2014). Singing fosters individual and group identity considering ongoing personal and/or societal changes impacting identity, 'a dynamic process and a dynamic state of being' (Breakwell, 2014, p. 25). [P]ractice, community and meaning' are interrelated; they define 'communities and ways of belonging' (Saltofte, 2018, p. 310).

For South Africans, singing has played a significant role prior to, during and after apartheid (Schumann, 2008). Songs have represented the voice of the people especially during political upheaval. Despite past and ongoing challenges, 'music can contribute to promoting the idea that what binds South Africans is strong' and 'has always offered a platform where all inhabitants of South Africa could meet and create together' (Martin, 2013, p. 380). Singing has remained a symbol of hope for choristers and choirs, bringing individuals and society together. Being part of a human instrument positively impacts choristers and wider communities (Sithela, 2020).

Myriad benefits are reported of singing together in groups throughout the lifespan (Judd and Pooley, 2014; Einarsdottir and Gudmundsdottir, 2016). These include the value of developing social relationships to combat feelings of isolation, loneliness and depression (Creech et al., 2013). This form of music activity in action is often associated with enhanced personal growth, well-being and quality of life contributing to various causes in the immediate and wider society (Blunsdon and Davern, 2007; Talmage, 2020; Clift et al., 2021). Therefore, participating in community music may provide 'a vehicle for cultural self-expression and an avenue for self-disclosure' which 'serves diversity' and 'promotes unity', implying the social values of 'tolerance and mutual respect' (Leglar and Smith, 2010, p. 344).

Choir singing within communities is participatory and voluntary, providing an opportunity for civil expression, development of identity, connectedness and social bonding (Bartleet et al., 2009; Dabback, 2018). Singing groups (ensembles and choirs) are ideal examples of social communities fulfilling educational, musical, social and psychological needs of individuals of different ages and cultures while contributing to various forms of community development (Leglar and Smith, 2010). Important goals of

community development are participation, promoting quality of life and empowerment (Nikkhah and Redzuan, 2009). Accordingly, community development as one of the outcomes of community music may be realized as a collective action: people share mutual interest through singing and collaborating as a team to build and sustain their individual and group identities (Breakwell, 2014). Talmage (2020, p. 1) offers an inclusive description of community which 'transcends place-based and physical characteristics to encompass abundant diverse psychological, social, and environmental attributes, cultures, and histories found among individuals and groups'. The intricate term development 'describes processes . . . rather than outcomes' . . . 'towards some form of transformation' (Conradie, 2016, p. 4, 5).

The authors are South African, working at different higher education institutes. Based on previous research on the two choirs here discussed, this paper was incentivized by the first author to explore these choirs at opposite ends of the age spectrum: the Helderberg Seniors' Choir (SC) and the Tygerberg Children's Choir (CC) (Joseph and Van Niekerk, 2021; Lamprecht, 2021). Both choirs are based in the Western Cape Province, include diverse music abilities and do not discriminate against socio-economic status. For these choirs, 'singing provides an inclusive and cost-effective means of combating the disintegration of communities that is becoming endemic in many societies today' (Launay and Pearce, 2015, pp. 66–67).

The research question that drove this paper explores how choir membership and performance can promote group identity and enhance community development in Cape Town, South Africa. We argue that independent choirs as social groups in their different communities have the capacity to be agents of change, fostering community development and promoting a South African identity. Through internal and external community engagement, choirs can contribute to society as examples of community development sites, as our findings will show.

Theoretical lens

A group application of Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell, 2014) serves as a tool to simultaneously explore 'identity, change and action' (Jaspal, 2014, p. 3). There are six IPT principles: self-esteem, continuity, self-efficacy, distinctiveness, belonging and coherence (Jaspal, 2015, p. 128). When identity threats occur, individual and group responses provide insights into how identity is formed, altered, changed, transformed or sustained (Breakwell, 2014). Humans can find different ways and 'levels' of coping with threats— first, an 'intrapsychic' level may imply either 'denial', 're-conceptualisation' or 'acceptance' of the threat. Secondly, an 'interpersonal' level is when a

person may either isolate or 'contest and counteract the authority of others'. Thirdly, it is through 'intergroup' connections such as 'group memberships that minimise threat', 'fake membership in a group' or participation in 'pressure groups' (Jaspal, 2015, p. 129). IPT provided understanding of how the COVID pandemic affected participants' experience of being part of their respective choir communities. Conradie (2016, p. 5) highlights the significance of implementing 'theories of social change that not only describe the dynamism but also the mechanisms or dynamos that would elicit such change', confirming IPT's suitability for this study.

This research considers primarily the belonging principle, shedding light on how the SC and CC have experienced change through the pandemic. It investigates how the choirs adopted changes into their respective choral identities as indicated by the first of two IPT processes, namely 'assimilation-accommodation', and how these elements were meaningfully integrated with longstanding characteristics according to the second IPT process 'evaluation' (Bardi et al., 2014, p. 176). Belonging relates to how people engage in community music activities. To belong 'refers to our sense of being known and accepted by others, a process sustained through relations of spatial inclusion and exclusion' (Dixon et al., 2014, p. 271). Physical/geographical place in this instance implies a certain 'familiarity with our surroundings (autobiographic insideness) as well as a sense of being known and accepted by others (social insideness)' (*ibid.*).

Methodology

Our case study approach emphasized two choirs as separate cases. As an empirical inquiry, case study 'investigates a contemporary problem within its real-life context' (Scholz and Tietje, 2011). It is significant that Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) focus 'exclusively' on qualitative methodology and Yin (2002) on a 'combination of qualitative and quantitative evidentiary sources' (Yazan, 2015, p. 142). We followed Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) in our qualitative investigation. Yin's (2002) prescriptive case study design aligns with a positivist epistemology, providing a set of specific choices to implement for every aspect of research design. Stake (1995) believes that it is impossible to precisely plan and control qualitative research from a design perspective as it is a developing process; Merriam (1998) provides more structured design steps than Stake (1995), though both support a constructivist epistemology (Yazan, 2015). This aligns with the data on participant perspectives and researchers' interpretations thereof as constructions of reality within specific choral settings.

In this research 'collaborative case studies involve researchers from different academic departments, multiple institutions … working together to better understand the particular phenomena' (Tardi, 2019, p. 6). With case studies, one or more sources can be used such as direct and participant observation, interview/s, document analysis, archival records and artifacts (Stake, 1995; Njie and Asimiran, 2014). Convenience sampling was employed, as participants were accessible, conveniently located, available and willing to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). Participation was voluntary; questionnaire and interview data informed the findings.

Data collection
Ethical approval was granted for a questionnaire with SC members and to interview the conductor. The Plain Language Statement and Consent form were emailed to the organization, inviting members to participate. Once the organizing committee approved, the conductor distributed the questionnaire to all members. Out of 40 members, 36 completed the questionnaire which included closed questions to ticking a box regarding age, gender and previous occupation. Open-ended questions included the following: What made you join the SC? Why have you continued to participate? What benefits do you derive from participating in the SC? Why is sharing music and singing with others important? The Cronbach Alpha coefficient was not used for reliability testing, but the questionnaire was administered to another SC in South Africa for face validity, which 'evaluates the appearance of the questionnaire in terms of feasibility, readability, consistency of style and formatting, and the clarity of the language used' (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 29).

Questionnaires were convenient for gathering SC data. Telephone interviews (30–60 minutes) were held with the SC conductor (2018 and 2019) and in 2022 during the pandemic. Semi-structured interview questions included the following: What are some of the ways you teach music? Why is it important to be part of community music making? Describe your engagement with the choir when restrictions were enforced? How has music impacted on your well-being?

In the case of the CC, ethical permission was obtained for interviews with adults only (conductor, volunteers, committee members and music staff, and former choristers)—not with children. Seeking ethical approval to include minors is extremely complicated. Therefore, a diverse group of former choristers were interviewed; their ages were 25–52. They shared their past memories when they were between 10 and 14. The former chorister interviewees do not represent perceptions of all past or current members. In a follow-up study, data will include children's voices. Interviews (60–90 minutes) took place between 2017 and 2018 with 27 participants and email

conversation/feedback with the new conductor in 2022. Questions included the following: Which aspects of the CC's identity have changed/altered during its history? Which aspects of the CC's identity have stayed the same during its history? What did membership mean to you personally? What do you think makes the CC a group? Where did you meet, or practice and/or perform during COVID-19 and how did this impact on the choir?

All interviews were semi-conversational: recordings and written notes were made by the authors with interviewee permission. In qualitative research, spoken words are seen as valid as opposed to numbers regarding 'quality' and 'subjectivity' (Morrow, 2005, p. 253). The reflexive stance taken means that the authors are aware of each one's contextual situatedness (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, p. 29) and of participants' subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998), bringing openness to the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and enhanced awareness of personal perceptions (Morrow, 2005). Continuous reflections developed our thought processes while illuminating participant constructions of reality. Qualitative thought holds that there is more than one version of reality: it opposes positivist assumptions, and trustworthiness is achieved by methodological clarity, transparency, reflexivity, member checking and peer checking, using an experienced colleague for triangulation and through systematic coding (Sandelowski, 1993).

Data analysis
Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to deductively code and analyse data. Braun and Clarke's (2012, p. 57) description for TA is useful for 'systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set'. It was important not only to distinguish similarities but to find differences: some data can be lost if it does not fit into a theme (Silverman, 2000). Three overarching themes are discussed below, drawing on direct quotations.

Case study groups

The Helderberg Village, bordering the Cape winelands and close to the coast, was founded in 1987 for retirees, offering superior living with many clubs and activities. Prized among the activities has always been the SC: their initial performance was in 1998. The mixed-gender choir membership also permits non-residents who rehearse weekly at the Village (Helderberg Village 2021). Choristers have formerly held professional positions and are mainly White South Africans with a few Black and Coloured people, all speaking English and Afrikaans. Membership ages range from 65 to 94, mostly belonging to Christian faith communities. Members contribute a small fee for sheet music used for concerts where they perform to paid

audiences. The choir is run by a committee and conducted by a professional accompanist/choir director. Currently, there are 37 choir members. The repertoire is chosen by the conductor, approved by the committee. The conductor trains members to sing from scores. Some learn by ear. Sectional and whole choir rehearsals take place particularly when preparing for a concert. Members sing in English, Afrikaans and local African languages. As older singers, members enjoy music from their era and their repertoire includes Christian and popular Christmas songs.

The CC is a mixed-gender regional choir based in Cape Town's northern suburbs, established in 1972 for auditioned choristers (Tygerberg Children's Choir, 2021). They comprise mainly Coloured, Black and White middle-class children, who speak English, Afrikaans, Sotho and Xhosa and represent different religious orientations. There are 11 official languages in South Africa—most common are Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Afrikaans. Although chorister ages are from 10 to 14, those interviewed were past members or involved in the choir; their current ages ranged from 20 to 79. The first conductor retired in 2019 and was succeeded by only the second conductor who has served the choir as music staff member since 1999. Since privatization (October 1996), choir operation is dependent on membership fees and concerts. The CC has always been managed by the conductor and volunteers (chorister parents or former parents). The choir performs and competes locally, nationally and internationally. There were 73 members at the time of the research. They learn from music notation. The conductor selects the music—original or arranged works by various Classical composers, items by contemporary composers alongside folk songs from many cultures and languages (foreign plus local multicultural South African repertoire) and music from musicals, movies and popular genres, reflecting various levels of difficulty.

Findings

In this section, the themes of 'singing as a music community', 'having a place to belong' and 'singing during COVID-19' include direct quotations from SC members and the conductor, and the CC conductor, volunteers, committee members, music staff and former choristers. The data discussed in the sections 'SC/CC singing during COVID-19' came from the respective conductors. No statistical analyses are provided, nor gender and age differences referred to.

SC: singing as a music community
Singing 'as a community' for the SC meant coming together as a group of older folk to reminisce, singing familiar songs which bring joy, evoking memories for many, and also learning new items while socializing as a

network of choristers. 'Friendship' remains key to joining and staying in the choir. '[I]t makes an outing for older people when they went to rehearsal or performed at concerts'. They joined for various reasons: to 'keep going when my wife died', to 'share experiences' and have the opportunity to 'broaden their social group'.

Singing together over time fosters 'strong connections' for members. Improving quality of life is an important tenet of community development. For some forging friendships was 'encouraged'; as one said, 'it is important to be part of a group in retirement'. The choir creates a 'camaraderie' where 'members offer support to each other'. For some, singing in the choir 'is a way to keep alive'; one described togetherness in the choir as 'consolation' when she had lost family members. As many others may have also suffered loss, being with 'like-minded people was important'. Sharing personal stories and experiences impacted their sense of well-being, was 'enriching and rewarding', and meeting for rehearsals and performing for the community 'gave them something to look forward to'.

CC: singing as a music community
Gathering 'as a music community' for CC participants meant maintaining the long standing of a choir that sings a wide repertoire, constantly learning new items that are representative of the chorister cohort. A former chorister said, 'making friends was a bonus', 'something . . . I really loved'. A committee member felt singing as a community meant children engaged in social learning through choral music activities: 'singing in the choir teaches you that you are a part, you play a role, you are a pearl in the string'. He felt singing as a group 'entailed discipline', it 'gave children a sense of belonging that fosters a sense of community'. Interviewees said the choir's aims were to nurture a 'mutual love for choir music', 'produce a quality product' and 'promote shared interests and mutual goals' as a South African choir with children of mixed races.

The adult CC volunteers found meeting as a group 'a form of community service', they had 'a love for children', they volunteered their services to 'fundraise', 'taxi choristers', 'organise concerts' and 'prepare the singing folders'. Their involvement promoted 'friendships they would not naturally forge in their neighbourhood'. One volunteer strongly felt 'what a difference can be made in the local community when children come together to rehearse and perform as South Africans'. Since the 1990s, choristers of all racial groups from different neighbourhoods, schools and socio-economic backgrounds have 'enriched the choir', making a difference to the identity of a multiracial Western Cape. According to volunteers, racial inclusivity was the 'most important change', a historical change: 'singing together and achieving greatness together' is significant for South Africa as a young

democracy. Inclusion of children from all walks of life across former racial divides is a positive sign of community development as a dynamic process over time and where children from low socio-economic areas are recruited and included.

CC choristers have been allowed to prioritize school and extracurricular activities, yet were reported to be 'dedicated' and 'committed' in supporting the choir goals. Although singing in the choir 'consumes your life like music does', it prepares many young people for various career paths and builds aspirations to become future citizens who can socially, economically and politically contribute to the country. Each chorister 'is valued ... noticed as an individual in the group' under adult leadership which takes into consideration the children's emotional well-being.

SC: having a place to belong
Singing together 'as seniors' gives SC members a sense of social insideness: they could 'feel accepted', and through singing they were able to 'meet new friends'. Choir participation, one member said, 'gives meaning in a stressful life situation'—her husband had Parkinson's disease. Joining the choir gave her a purpose in life other than being a caregiver; she, in turn, gave others hope to participate in recreational living activities. For some, singing provided a physical place to belong: 'an excuse to get out of the house'– many said 'it's good for your health'.

Members claimed they 'met nice people' who are 'singing lovers', they 'enjoyed each other's company' and 'the support of experienced members'. Communal singing releases happy and positive feelings across all ages: 'you feel good' and you have 'shared a sense of enjoyment'. Retirees still wanted to 'feel part of society', giving back to the community as part of community development by hosting fundraising concerts. Doing this, they interacted with each other and the audience, 'feeling a sense of belonging and validation' as proud South Africans. Music sharing and social engagement with the wider community is important for older people particularly: it endorses their sense of belonging, providing pleasure for individuals and the group, singing for self and developing community.

CC: having a place to belong
Singing together meant being 'like a family' according to former CC choristers. The choir functions 'as a safe place of being'; members felt cared for by adult volunteers, 'motivated' and encouraged to use their voices to show how music can be effective in building social cohesion, strengthening community.

World-ranked in international competitions, the CC has offered choristers the opportunity to sing and travel beyond their neighbourhoods. This is life

changing, especially for the less privileged. A former chorister shared that although she 'never really fitted in her own community', singing with the CC made her feel that 'I was with my people'. She found 'there was kindness and there was the opportunity to flourish'. Singing in the CC meant 'being part of a bigger group', a community of South Africans. Forging an inclusive South African identity enabled 'shar[ing] their talents with the community' and singing for 'charitable causes' according to interviewees from the committee. The choir serves as a role model for the youth to aspire to, a platform to foster social cohesion that enhances community growth towards development, a complex and gradual process promoting change.

SC: singing during COVID-19

Singing for audiences before COVID-19 was life giving to the elderly. However, once COVID took the centre stage, members were unable to physically interact with each other and the wider community. The conductor said: 'all activities came to a grinding halt', people were afraid of the virus, 'padlocks were on the doors, they stayed at home in total shock and panic'. This devastating reaction forced members into isolation, their well-being and social outlet through music negatively impacted. This was no different to other countries across the globe, yet for South Africans meeting regularly and not only on special occasions with family and friends is generally a norm.

During COVID-19, two choristers passed away and members were 'not able to pay their respects … nor sing to them as a mark of respect as it was an honour to do'. This was an emotional setback and the conductor felt 'dark cloud[s] [were] hanging over members'. In addition, some 'gave up and left the choir altogether' as they lost their sense of belonging to a group that rehearsed, met socially and prepared for concerts.

When restrictions were lifted and both choirs were able to rehearse 'masked, adhering to strict COVID protocols', one member said, 'it was good to get together again just to SEE one another'. While sitting '1.5 metres apart, we could do our breathing exercise which required inhaling while lifting our arms to shoulder height in front of us and then opening our arms as if we were going to hug someone'. This physical exercise helped them feel connected despite being socially apart.

CC: singing during COVID-19

The routine of getting to rehearsals, practicing, socializing, seeing parents, volunteers and the CC officials completely stopped due to government-imposed restrictions during the pandemic. All planned performances were cancelled from March 2020 including participation in the 2020 Interkultur World Choir Games in Belgium. This impacted the young choristers and the conductor found it 'difficult to undertake remote rehearsals'. Many can-

celled performances caused 'financial strain'. Numbers decreased, threatening the IPT continuity principle.

Nevertheless, the CC produced various YouTube videos and participated in online national and international choral network projects. When allowed to rehearse once restrictions were partially lifted, the conductor mentioned they found it 'difficult to work on diction, sound production, and facial expression' because all had to wear 'masks and vizors'. The conductor had to 'find ways to make the children laugh again' as they 'felt COVID is taking all their fun and joy away ... they cannot socialize as they had before'. Through singing they could, though, 'express their feelings, sorrow and joy through music' in a shared space. For the CC 'providing ongoing emotional support to choristers was important'. They 'produced a YouTube video of *Baba Yetu* (Swahili meaning Our Father)' to raise funds for less privileged children to build resilience, strengthen identity and foster community development during the dark times of COVID-19.

Discussion

In answering the research question the findings suggest that singing as a community and for community promotes group identity that can build community development for people in Cape Town and around South Africa. We discuss this under two subheadings below (community musicians, and identity and place).

Community musicians
Singing is considered a national sport in South African culture (Interkultur, 2022). Group singing builds strong communities, uniting people across ages, races, languages, cultures and creeds (Pooley, 2020).

Each choir is different: the findings suggest the SC had a passion to learn, to rehearse, to perform for self and others, encouraging community upliftment. The relatively homogeneous SC sang in settings (formal and informal) that positively contribute to their quality of life. They made efforts to perform at fundraising events benefiting the local community. In this way 'learning from song could be a valuable tool in community development to open up discussion in different settings where adults meet, such as community-based support groups or activity-based groups or campaigning groups' (Craig, 2004, p. 310). For the culturally, racially and socio-economically diverse CC, singing together has been a unifier and social equalizer (Durrant, 2005; Einarsdottir and Gudmundsdottir, 2016), instilling hope for many talented members living in low socio-economic areas, seeing other children as role models. It is important to nurture the culture of participation when fostering community development (Gray and Mubangizi, 2010).

The meaningfulness of singing in a shared activity Impacted sense of identity despite disparate life stage needs. Singing together offered individual and group identity. Transformation in multicultural membership, albeit small in the SC, meant older people who grew up under apartheid felt comfortable singing alongside people of colour and performing to mixed audiences. Their music and South African identity were no longer under threat. Former CC members were born in a democratic South Africa; they readily embraced a fusion of Western and African repertoire. They felt singing in the choir helped remove economic and social stigmas. The choir offers multilayered educational opportunities that enhance all choristers' competence and self-efficacy (Jaspal, 2015), providing the opportunity to become agents of change beyond the choir, contributing to community development.

Identity and place

Belonging to the choirs, being accepted, offered members social insideness—a communal sense of validation (Dixon et al., 2014). For SC members who had lost family due to death or emigration, the choir offered a safe and convenient space to call home as they sang in the same venue unless performing out of the retirement village.

This was different for CC participants: leaving home and being transported to rehearsals may have offered a change in their musical and self-identity. As children, singing in different venues and raising funds can help propel their aspirations for various careers that can contribute to the country. The CC gave them hope, they felt a strong sense of identity as a professional children's choir, belonging to a music family, particularly those from low socio-economic areas who may not have a special place to live and rehearse.

The SC and CC have never performed together. Yet, from opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of age and choir ranking, social interaction is important. Singing offers emotional fulfilment and personal enrichment for both choirs—particularly for SC seniors' sense of well-being and overall health (Davidson et al., 2014). The SC findings revealed a stronger need to meet for personal social relationships, validation and well-being (Creech et al., 2013).

When the WHO (2022) pronounced a global pandemic in March 2020, the choirs' socio-musical place of belonging abruptly fell away (Theorell et al., 2020; Daffern et al., 2021), negatively impacting their group identity, sense of purpose and continuity. Once COVID-19 restrictions were imposed, both choirs' conductors reported members feeling their self-efficacy under threat, with fear of the unknown, not experiencing the purpose of belonging to a group and unable to meet in their 'usual place' to rehearse and perform. This disconnect had a negative effect: being confronted by disease and death coupled with restricted social movement and activities affected confidence

(Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Community development could not be fostered by seeking new members or performing, with concomitant loss of revenue due to concert cancellations (Daffern et al., 2021). Members felt they did not have a 'safe place' to share their mutual interest; they lacked social fulfilment, trust and care (Specker, 2014). Nevertheless the SC and CC coped with threats on both an 'intrapsychic' and 'intergroup' level—by accepting the inevitable. With creative intergroup decision-making, adjustments were absorbed into their respective choral identities and meaningfully blended as part of ongoing identity construction and protection processes during constant social change in support of choir community development (Jaspal, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

The arts (music) play a significant role in South Africa's past and present political climate. Our case studies highlight performing 'as and for community', showing social cohesion and development. Participation affords the opportunity to foster transformation and/or change within local communities as choir composition has changed over time, particularly with the inclusion of children from low socio-economic areas as well as more non-Western music. The choirs have created a better overall quality of life for members and their wider communities by giving performances. Engagement in the arts (singing) positively contributes to the prevention of mental and physical ill health (Clift et al., 2021). Thus, 'the focus of community development is to improve the quality of people's lives by impacting on the experience of living in their communities' (Blunsdon and Davern, 2007, p. 218).

Voices coming together in harmony, as and for community, may be the 'reason why choral singers participate in choirs first and foremost' (Einars-dottir and Gudmundsdottir, 2016, p. 50). The potential joy of collective singing is 'life enhancing', contributing to well-being (Judd and Pooley, 2014, p. 2). When people sing together as one human instrument, choir and social identities and communities are gradually built. Group singing, as an integrative musical, vocal, physical, cognitive and aesthetic action, unifies diversity.

This paper focused on two Western Cape. Generalizations to other choirs cannot necessarily be made. From this study, the authors recommend:

- A longitudinal study of other grassroots and professional music groups in South Africa in relation to IPT, community development as a process, well-being and the impact the pandemic has had on membership
- Local councils in the Cape region establish singing groups for children, youth groups and the elderly, working in partnership with, for example, tertiary

music departments, established school and church choirs and school districts, particularly in low socio-economic areas
- Amateur/community choirs promote social cohesion, fostering community development for charitable causes through community outreach concerts and choir festivals
- Choirs have access to local council and government funding that supports choristers with mental health concerns.

The succinct remark 'suddenly I was with my people' aptly encapsulates the power of singing in choirs: bonding through singing is a rich and dynamic part of South Africa's cultural and national identity. We argue that diverse forms of communal singing play an important role in unifying South Africa's group identity, especially since the remnants of apartheid continue to divide different race groups. The choirs here discussed reaffirm the significance of two choral communities as agents of change, fostering community development as an ongoing process that promotes a South African identity.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals that participated in the study.

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