

My essential reads: the value of group singing

by Yoon Irons

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Background

Singing in groups is deeply rooted in many cultures. Through group singing, we feel closely connected with others and experience great pleasure. Traditional choirs typically aim to deliver high standard performances and improve musical skills. On the other hand, group singing has its emphasis on promoting wellbeing, encouraging participation, and being inclusive for so-called 'non-singers'.

In recent years, we have seen increasing popularity of community-based group singing programmes, and growing evidence of the wide-ranging benefits of group singing. Research has found that people who participate in group singing experience both physical and psychosocial health and wellbeing benefits. Group singing has therefore received much attention in relation to social prescribing, which means that group singing practitioners can also be responsible for delivering elements of health and social care.

Here are my **essential reads**, a list of useful reading resources for group singing practitioners or those who wish to work in this field, to support this important work.

My Essential Reads

1. [Singing and social bonding: changes in connectivity and pain threshold as a function of group size. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 37\(2\), 152-158.](#)

Weinstein, D., Launay, J., Pearce, E., Dunbar, R. I. M., & Stewart, L. (2016)

The background to this study stems from the anthropological theory that social group memberships are essential for our survival and music plays a vital role in facilitating these memberships. The findings are interesting because they show how group singing can facilitate and maintain valuable social connections even in large groups (e.g. more than 200 people).

It is not an easy task for group singing practitioners to facilitate a large group, where personal contacts might be reduced. This article is invaluable for singing practitioners thinking about how to plan carefully and utilise creative ways to bring people together, so that singers in large groups feel supported and enjoy social benefits that are mostly reported in smaller groups.

2. [Singing for adults with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews \(12\).](#)

McNamara, R. J., Epsley, C., Coren, E., & McKeough, Z. J. (2017)

When we sing, our voice and whole body becomes a musical instrument. Much attention has been paid to singing and breathing in the context of respiratory health. A number of studies were conducted to assess the effects of group singing on respiratory functions in people living with respiratory conditions, such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

This piece, part of a series of Cochrane Systematic Reviews which provide gold standards reviews for healthcare interventions, assesses the currently available research evidence of effects of singing for improving lung function. It shows there is only limited evidence in relation to improvements in general physical health following group singing. The review therefore recommends that more evidence from robust research, such as randomised controlled trials, is needed to support the notion that singing enhances respiratory health in people living with COPD. This may challenge our assumptions about the positive impacts of group singing and encourages us to take a more robust approach to evaluating our practices.

3. [The therapeutic effects of singing in neurological disorders. Music Perception, 27\(4\), 287-295](#)

Wan, C. Y., Ruber, T., Hohmann, A., & Schlaug, G. (2010).

Neuroscientists have shown that engaging in singing can stimulate a range of activities in the brain, the most important organ. When singing, a range of muscles are coordinated by the brain. The language and memory functions are also actively involved, as we recall song lyrics and sing them. Moreover, the emotional departments in the brain are activated, as we express ourselves during singing. Thus, singing is an activity in which the brain plays the major role.

This paper discusses the benefits of singing for conditions such as stuttering, Parkinson's and aphasia, as well as autism. The brain images of a stroke survivor show how new networks have been established in the damaged parts of the brain after receiving a singing intervention. Amazingly, singing facilitates brain plasticity.

The article also enlightens us about the multi-faceted effects of singing on the brain and demonstrates the value of practitioners working with people with a neurological condition, using a variety of songs, to stimulate language and memory functions as well as support emotional expressions.

4. [A qualitative study exploring the effects of attending a community pain service choir on wellbeing in people who experience chronic pain.](#) Br J Pain, 10(3), 124-134.

Hopper, M. J., Curtis, S., Hodge, S., & Simm, R. (2016).

Chronic pain is not just a physical symptom, but multidimensional experience, in which physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social/cultural aspects of pain are involved. This study provided two major psychological wellbeing theories that underpin the values of group singing: [Bandura's self-efficacy theory](#) (one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task) and [Ryff's psychological wellbeing theory](#). The article argues that group singing can promote self-efficacy, self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth.

Often, people with long-term health conditions experience a range of difficulties. Thus, it is important for group singing practitioners to understand those health-related complications, in order to provide suitable approaches. For example, understanding chronic pain and its impacts on the person will help group singing practitioners to design sessions appropriately. For example, if someone has persistent backpain and cannot sit for a long time, singing time could be adjusted accordingly, and guidance on singing in the standing position should be provided.

5. [The Sidney De Haan Research Centre's guide book series](#)

The Sidney De Haan Research Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University has been engaged with evaluating the values of group singing and promoting best practice. The centre published a series of guidebooks on group singing for enduring health conditions and practical advice for setting up and running singing groups.

These free, online guidebooks include topics such as singing for dementia, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), mental health, Parkinson's and general health and wellbeing. Each guidebook provides excellent overviews of research and practice of the health condition and useful tools for practitioners, such as recommendations for repertoires, evaluation methods and ethical considerations. Note that as some guides were published some time ago the references may not always be up to date, but they are a fantastic resource.

6. [Singing Together, Yet Apart: The Experience of UK Choir Members and Facilitators During the Covid-19 Pandemic](#) [original research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(303).

Daffern, H., Balmer, K., & Brereton, J. (2021).

This UK-based study explored the experience of choir singers' virtual engagements during the Covid pandemic through an online survey. For many, despite the limitations of virtual settings, the online opportunity to sing together was a lifeline, which enabled people to maintain contacts with their group members. Virtual singing might also afford better access to group singing for some (e.g. who are housebound).

However, virtual engagements removed the shared physical and sensory experience of singing together, so that most of the multifaceted benefits of group singing appeared to have been lost. Thus group singing practitioners are required to find creative ways to engage virtually with group members. For example, in the absence of refreshment breaks and social outings, some alternative medium might be needed to facilitate social aspects of group singing.

Summary: shifting the focus from research to practice

The value of group singing appears to be multifaceted and unique. Community-based group singing programmes can promote health and wellbeing widely for people of all ages. Therefore, group singing practitioners' roles are important. But there are different skills and special considerations needed in working with different groups to achieve different benefits. I hope these readings will help raise our understanding of some of these different skills and considerations.

Biography

Dr Yoon Irons is a singer, musician, music therapist and researcher. Her latest book *Singing* highlights that everyone can sing. Yoon has conducted research projects to develop specialised group singing programmes for people living with a long-term health condition, such as Parkinson's, cystic fibrosis, chronic pain, stroke and spinal cord injury. Currently, she is leading a singing for mental health project, [Singing Side by Side](#), funded by the MARCH Mental Health Network to provide research-based resources and guidelines for group singing practitioners. Her publications can be found at [ResearchGate](#).



Yoon regularly shares updates about new studies in group singing on Twitter. Follow [@YoonIrons](#)

Call to action...

What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn? If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us get in touch at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into a future resource. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.



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