

Unfreezing Identities: Exploring Choral Singing in the Workplace

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Abstract

The topic of this article is the emerging trend of singing at work. The discussion is based on case studies of singing interventions carried out at two different work places. Our phenomenological and hermeneutic approach focuses mainly on the employees' experience of singing at work. The research data comprises group interviews, participant observation and questionnaires. The analysis was structured by thematic coding of the interview data. The discussion is illuminated mainly by Etienne Wengers community of practice theory (1998). The following research questions were explored: How do the members of a workplace community experience choral singing? What implications do the participants see for themselves as individuals and for the organisation? We identified four axes of impact: enjoyment, comfort zone, communality, and identity and roles. A workplace choir challenges perceptions about how colleagues view each other and transform individual identities. Consequently, the choir may also change the workplace as a practice community.

Keywords: choral singing, workplace singing, communities of practice

Background

The scene was an office space that could have been anywhere; individual offices along two corridors facing a communal area with couches, small tables and a coffee machine. The area was beginning to fill up with people coming out of their offices with their lunch packs, some doors had been closed, others were open. The setting appeared to be an ordinary lunch break in the local unit of a government agency. However, this day, the team would not only have lunch together, but sing together and have a proper choir rehearsal. Forming of bands and

choirs among voluntary colleagues is commonplace, but having an *entire* department or company make music together is different. Taking place within the realm of the workplace, such musical practice intertwines with group dynamics of the 'business'. What happens, and what is the impact of such a workplace choir?

Choral singing is very much a vibrant community music activity and recent research identifies a variety of positive effects of singing (Clift 2008; Balsnes 2010). Oscar-nominated films like *Les Choristes* (2004) and *Så som i himmelen (As is it is in heaven)* (2004) give epic examples of the richness of choral experience. As society changes, new arenas for community music-making arise (Veblen & Waldron 2013). For example, TV-shows such as *Last Choir Standing* (2008-) and *The Choir* (2006-) demonstrate new settings for choral singing. There is also a growing trend of workplace singing, especially in the UK. Under headlines like *The Singing Offices*¹ and slogans like 'You don't really know your colleagues until you've sung together!'² Choral conductors are hired to establish company choirs. There is even a competition for these choirs, *MIO Office Choir of the Year*,³ and the concept was featured in the TV-series *Sing While you Work* (2012-).⁴ The sales pitch is that a workplace choir is not only fun and enjoyable, but improves teamwork, personal confidence, communication skills, creativity and wellbeing, and reduces stress.⁵ The trend is also observable in Norway⁶, where The Norwegian Choral Association has workplace singing as one of their focus areas (Norges Korforbund 2013). Another example is the *Sound of Wellbeing* project, where 700 hospital employees participated in 21 choirs.⁷ The project was part of the government programme, *Inclusive Worklife*, aiming to reduce absenteeism and improve wellbeing. Vaag et al. (2013) studied retrospective perception of change in the psychosocial work environment and their health during the project period. Measurable differences in wellbeing indicators between participants and non-participants were found (although not seen to be very strong) in terms of engagement, organizational commitment and self-reported change in psychosocial work environment and overall health.

Engaging with music – musicking (Small 1996) – has the ability to affect human beings in ways that are related to wellbeing and health (DeNora 2013; MacDonald et al. 2012; Ruud 1997). Certain effects and experiences are specifically related to singing, using our only embodied musical instrument – the voice (Bailey 2004; Balsnes 2012; DeNora 2013). A choir may be seen as a community of practice (Wenger 1998; Balsnes 2009) where the experience goes beyond the music material and the engagement with it. The effects of singing cannot be isolated from the social practice it engenders and is nourished by. The type of choir and the setting in which it operates is consequential. A choir constituted by people that happen to

work in the same organisation, but do not necessarily have daily work-related contact, will be different than a whole organisational unit that comes together in order to sing.

This study is built on the premise that choral singing *does* affect employees of an organisation (Vaag et al. 2013) and the purpose is to explore what goes on in the minds and bodies of the participants, specifically:

- How do the members of a workplace community (an organisational entity) experience the situation when their entire community engages in choral singing?
- What implications do the participants see for themselves as individuals, and for the organisation?

The study is exploratory in the sense that it seeks to open up the research topic rather than reach closure on specific issues. It is qualitative in that it seeks to understand, in all its complexity, what is going on in the case choirs, as opposed to measuring the impact of specific mechanisms.

Case Choirs and Methodology

Case Choir 1: A regional unit of a government agency

Case Choir 1 came about as part of a nationwide programme aimed at strengthening all kinds of singing in Norway.⁸ The choir was initiated and conducted by Author 1 (Jansson). The project was set up as five lunch-hour sessions for an organisational unit with a little less than thirty employees. The department had just been created as a merger of two smaller departments and the manager (also being a hobby guitarist) positioned the project as an opportunity to come together as a team in a different and enjoyable way. It was emphasized that the choir was intended for everyone in the team, with a gentle encouragement that all should take part. A couple of individuals did not participate, for reasons that were not researched.

The choir sessions took place in the course of two months in the lunch lounge located in the open centre of an office area where the employees normally would meet for coffee and lunch breaks. Some participants were experienced choral singers, but most had no singing experience beyond Christmas carols, lullabies or humming at campfires. Participation varied from session to session, as many employees travelled outside office locations. The case choir consisted of approximately six-eight sopranos, eight-twelve altos, and four-six baritones (men).

Every session started with fifteen minutes of warm-up, breathing exercises and voice

training. A key objective was to make a playful entry into the realm of singing, while underlining that singing is also a skill that can be taught and learnt. Three pieces of a cappella music were prepared. These were three-part arrangements (two female parts and one male part) of fairly well known songs, including the pop song *Crying In the Rain* and *Til ungdommen*, a much used song in the aftermath of the July 22nd terror attacks. The songs were arranged so that they would be both quick to rehearse and sound good even without accompaniment. MIDI-files of the parts were distributed for enjoyment and interest, without any expectation of individual preparation. After the last session, the choir performed for two senior managers from headquarters (a decision the choir collectively made during the first session). They were surprised and rather moved by hearing the unit perform the songs and hearing about the process.

After the last choir session, a separate meeting was organized for everyone to collectively reflect on the experience. The meeting was run as a large scale group interview, with a combination of questions and roundtable answers and a free flowing exchange of views. The duration of the meeting was a little more than an hour. The sound recording of this meeting served as the primary data. The group interview was complemented by half page participant narratives of prior musical experience and tenure with the organisation, as well as by notes from participant observation (Wadel 2006) of the choir leader/Author 1.

Case choir 2: Regional health department

Case Choir 2 was initiated by the organisation itself. Author 2 (Balsnes) was contacted by the manager and asked to support a choir project in a medical unit. The choir was one part of their wide organisational development effort focusing on culture and health. The explicit goal was team building, but an element of 'just for fun' was also evident. The plan for the choir was developed in dialogue with the management and the intention was to end the project with a performance at a conference hosted by the department. The department comprises approximately two hundred employees, but the department manager wanted the case choir to consist of an expanded management group of approximately forty individuals. Some of these had choral experience from school or children's choirs. A number of participants did not have any choral experience at all. As part of their regular meeting schedule, the management group meets six times per year for a full or half day. One hour of these meetings was set aside for choir practice – five rehearsals in total. The rehearsals took place in different locations, depending on the venues available. The rooms were cleared so that the participants could form a large ring when singing.

A selection of Beatles songs were selected as repertoire. This choice was partly a wish from the department manager, being a passionate Beatles fan, and partly strategic. A number of Beatles songs are well-known, singable and a group of inexperienced choral singers may easily and quickly be brought to the level where they can experience multi-part choral singing. A band and a soloist were hired to take care of accompaniment and solo verses, while the case choir sang the refrains in three-part arrangements – two female and one male part. With this set-up, the group was able to prepare nine Beatles songs in the relatively short rehearsal time available. The final performance was well received.

After the last session (the performance), the participants were invited to fill out a questionnaire about their experience of the project. Thirty individuals responded. A group conversation was held as part of the subsequent management meeting. In addition, a separate interview with the department manager was held. The choir leader (Author 2) took notes after each session which gives the study a flavour of participatory observation.

Analysis

The group interview recordings from the two cases were transcribed and interpreted with a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (van Manen 1997). Through re-reading the transcripts from each case, themes were identified and coded (Kvale 1997). The coding process was ‘fuzzy’ in the sense that extensive over-coding was done. The purpose was to allow statements and lines of thought to express multiple themes. This process could be seen to lack precision, but within a hermeneutic frame, instead, it reduces the risk of losing meaning. The two authors reviewed each other’s material and developed coding and themes further. A subsequent, more elaborate interpretation took place as a collective re-writing process, where each theme was substantiated by combining statements from both cases. Although the initial thematic analysis was driven by the material itself, it became clear that the emerging themes were highly congruent with Wenger’s theory on communities of practice (1998). The thematic structure that is used for the remainder of this article can therefore be seen as an application of Wenger’s theory as well as driven by our own data.

Results

In this section we will present the following four axes of impact identified in the material: enjoyment, communality, comfort zone, and identity and roles.

Enjoyment

The most apparent effect of singing together is the perception of enjoyment. Enjoyment is experienced as something uncomplicated where smiles and laughter, fun, humour and happiness are in play. Participants describe their experience as joyful, with a zest for life and a sense of being refreshed and energized. There is something immediate and simple about the experience, but at the same time a rich and deep enjoyment. Musicking has the capacity to enable intimate involvement without exchanging information. The shared musicking opens up an avenue for communication not usually available to colleagues in the workplace: ‘[It is] uncomplicated, because for me it is easier to do something together than to smalltalk.’⁹ There is a certain ‘lightness’ in the experience that provides a most welcome release from the highly serious mission and mindset that characterize both workplaces: ‘[It was] great to loosen up, laugh at each other and not take yourself too seriously,’ explains one participant. The choir singing seems to combine and integrate two opposites – lightness and gravity – by being ‘fun’ and at the same time, *serious*: ‘I thought it was great to do something else than the grave, all the matter of fact, and the talking. And it was both seriousness, because we had things to learn, as well as great fun.’ Participants experienced enjoyment as mere activity as well as achievement. The joy of *doing* is immediate while the sense of achievement comes gradually. Participants were rather astonished about the level of their accomplishment: ‘We had rehearsed many parts and we had put effort into it. And it really became something.’ Sceptics too were eventually ‘taken by the singing’ in a very concrete, physical way: ‘It was challenging, a bit difficult to motivate myself. But it was fun when the tones came from up my chest, through my throat and out of my mouth.’

The sense of accomplishment has an element of technical mastery; learning the notes, being able to sing polyphonic music, and improving listening and vocal technique. For some, the mere mastering of the music material was a novel experience. However, the process also showed how music is not an object but a situational involvement and experience as this short story illustrates:

For me it was a strong experience the day we spent all the time on *Til Ungdommen*. The court trial had begun and there was a special communality being within that text. That was great. And then I sensed the pride when we performed for the new boss [everyone chuckles] – I thought that was really cool.

Enjoyment came from the blend of musical material, the shared musicking and the context. We observe how a given musicking situation comprises a host of specifics, ranging from the post-terror attack sentiment to the organisational pride, reminding us of how complex the effects of musicking interventions in the workplace can be (or any other place for that matter).

The axis of enjoyment may also involve the opposite as some participants in Case 2 did not entirely enjoy the choir, for two different reasons. A couple of participants simply state that singing is not their ‘cup of tea’. They are embarrassed about their own voices, believe that they cannot sing, and have no particular motivation to be proven otherwise. The other line of reasoning is about *utility*. A few people required evidence that the singing intervention contributed directly to their clinical work. ‘Every extra-clinical activity is a burden that reduces hours for treatment and care. Is this something we can make use of in our therapeutic workday?’ one of them asked. Another employee enjoyed the singing as such, but considered the choir as a luxury and felt guilty about not attending to their pressing work tasks or postponing a meeting: ‘[It was] nice to be part of this, but embarrassing towards colleagues on the outside with heavy workloads [...] we live in luxury and they have to bear the burden.’ We note that these reservations occurred in Case 2 which took place at a health department. The employees seemed dedicated to their work and genuinely concerned about helping people. Another difference between the two cases was that Case 1 took place during lunchtimes, while the choir sessions in Case 2 were part of monthly meetings. Singing during the lunch hour may be considered as using free time on a joyful and meaningful activity, while singing during a busy meeting may be considered as stealing precious work time.

Communality

It would not have been unreasonable to assume that the significant differences in competence and the experience of choral singing would create some difficulty when setting up a choir for all employees or a specific group in an organisation. However, the effect of the differences in question seems to have been quite the opposite; the experienced singers enjoy bringing the inexperienced ones on board and the inexperienced feel more secure by being helped by those with experience. Diversity becomes a source of unity. In addition, the perception of diversity changes. As one participant reflects on the collective achievement, he changes his view on diversity as he speaks: ‘I like that we have done this together, with such diverse... well, such diverse...? We may not be that different, except that we [as colleagues] don’t primarily sing together.’ The participants experienced a sense of community that seems to arise in two ways; by being in it together and by the shared accomplishment. Being *in it* implies meeting each other in an arena separate from normal professional contact and music is perceived as a sort of zone free of these professional concerns. At the same time, music is what characterized the participants’ progress and accomplishment. Being challenged together is seen as particularly

valuable. One participant, who is an experienced choral singer, articulates this duality of doing and being:

What I found most exciting, since there were many here who have not been singing before and are not self confident about it, was to see how it evolved and how people grew by coming forward to sing and be part of a choir. It is about listening, attuning and being attentive to others.

Such sensitivity to one's colleagues is worded in a number of ways: to 'unify'; 'weld us together', 'strengthen solidarity', 'stir us together', and to 'make us want to pull together'.

Although some questioned the usefulness and workplace relevance of the choir, others reflected explicitly on the direct application to everyday organisation and communication, as in the following statement:

There is something about learning to know people's voices. Fabulous. It is transferable to everyday cooperation – being attentive, complementing each other – that the whole is more than the individual voices. I find this very valuable when it comes to being colleagues.

Comfort zone

Participants see the choir challenge as an opportunity for learning and development where they discover aspects of themselves. It opens up their view of self and others and forces them to do things they have not done before, also outside the choir setting: 'The choir is a good place to challenge boundaries: I have gotten a stronger belief that I *can* [with humour] ... I can always hide among the others.' The notion of boundary suggests that there are zones where participants are not comfortable or have not been before. Workplaces operate within and outside such individual comfort zones. However, a choral intervention at work operates for the majority outside the comfort zone. The intervention is a forced displacement of everyone outside their comfort zones, in a fairly safe setting. Most participants describe how the singing was a positive experience. However some expressed their discomfort: 'I did feel some "angst" at first, but despite resistance and a poor singing voice, it has been fun.' During the singing sessions, a journey from a place outside the comfort zone to the inside occurs. Alternatively, one can interpret this as if new stakes in the ground are set up in order to mark out an expanded arena. There are two equally important aspects of this experience, (1) expanding the comfort zone (as a general learning process) and (2) expanding the comfort zone specifically regarding choral singing. Being outside boundaries is an important notion, both in terms of individual perception of self and as observation of others. When colleagues see themselves together outside, they find themselves in the same boat. Their vulnerability enhances mutual empathy, which in turn becomes a key constituent of communality: 'It is good to see colleagues do something that they don't necessarily master.' Even the experienced choral singers

felt that they broke into new territory. They experienced excitement and anticipation by singing together with people with whom they do not normally sing. This is an important observation when we set up workplace choirs – it is a new situation for everyone across the entire competence range.

Participants used different coping strategies in order to handle the situation. The female participants self-selected into soprano and alto groups (although many probably didn't know the difference or the notion of voice group). This self-selection served as a coping mechanism for dealing with the uncomfortable. Being less visible in a big group is one way of approaching the situation: 'It was best for me to stand where there were most people. I wouldn't have dared to be in the other group.' This participant was afraid of being heard by the conductor. She told herself that she would not be heard or exposed. The self-selection of a group with colleagues known and trusted is another way to reduce feelings of discomfort. These non-musical selection criteria dominate musical considerations. For example, one participant self-selected the alto group because she knew the participants in this group best, not realising or paying any attention to the fact that the alto part is usually more difficult to learn than the soprano part.

There are several testimonies concerning experiences of mastery as the singing sessions proceeded, for example: 'Little by little I started to think that I might be able *to learn* to sing. Yes, honestly. That was new to me [...] It was wonderful. Absolutely.' The line manager of the group in Case 1 was, in musical terms, within his comfort zone, but outside in terms of role, because he was temporarily replaced by the conductor. He was, nonetheless, comforted by seeing that people were enjoying themselves and was reassured by the rapid progress made:

[I was surprised] that it was this good, and that we were this good and got it right this rapidly. And that there was so much enthusiasm around it – that I had not expected. I believe that we were inspired by how we saw the product of our efforts so quickly. We heard that it sounded nice, and it gave us a feeling of mastery. This is going to be something.

Identity and roles

The choir represents a sort of 'level playing field', different from relationships in the workplace organisation. Choral singing as an activity resets relationships from the point of view of competence:

Choral singing is an arena where most of us don't have a particular advantage. I think that is a good thing in a workplace environment. It loosened us up to do things that nobody is very good at and to look at each other in that way.

Participants enjoy discovering new aspects of colleagues, finding them to be different, funny, and creative, and where the unexpected might occur in a positive way. An interesting question arises when normal hierarchy is disabled: what it does to individuals in an organisation to see their boss removed from his or her role and literally be replaced by another boss (the choral leader):

I was reflecting on the fact that we are colleagues and doing this together in fact erases other roles and responsibilities. I found this to be very liberating [many approving nods in the group]. I did not think about NN as leader or boss, but someone I was singing with.

It is interesting to note that the manager in Case 1 also noted a liberating experience, stepping outside the normal hierarchy for an hour. He had a wonderful time letting himself go and simply having fun with his team. The straightjacket that is the normal hierarchy prevents him from playing out the full range of relational aspects. He reflects on this leadership issue:

In a group that doesn't have sufficient knowledge, you need a leader who controls more distinctively. When you [the choral leader] came in, we knew that we didn't know enough, and you took complete control. A very knowledgeable group needs more leeway [approval in the group]. We came to the sessions thinking... 'what is this?' It was very important that you assumed clear leadership and demonstrated that you knew that this was necessary.

A related issue is what it did to the team to see their boss outside his normal position, in a sense replaced by a choral leader. It seems clear that it was not uncomfortable for the participants to see him temporarily disempowered, possibly because it was (1) temporary and (2) represented a distinctly different leadership skill set which arrived from the outside world:

I liked the distinctive leadership on your [the choral leader] part – that we had to do what you said. With this crowd, that was absolutely necessary [with humour], because there are a lot of opinionated people here. But in this specific situation, we were all on equal terms and had to comply with what you said.

Being on equal terms means that roles and identities are changed from the non-equal terms of the normal organisation. It was non-threatening because they were taken care of while being in a temporary mode, and were probably helped by the fact that a number of the participants had known the manager for some time and knew about his playful sides.

When we designed the interventions, we knew that the participants would experience varying degrees of challenge. Set-up and execution therefore paid particularly careful attention to taking care of the participants. Key elements included the choice of musical material, coaching without evaluation, and a playful approach to musicking. The sessions aimed at rapid progression and making participants feel good about it. Participants' reactions confirmed that the set-up worked and they were surprised about their own achievements. Although people tend to dislike being told what to do, participants accepted clear instructions from the conductor, which were easier to accept because they were external and clearly based

on competence. One participant states:

I thought it was really scary to begin with... The first meeting with you [the choral leader] in the rehearsal, you were very clear and gave very specific instruction, so the unease and the feeling I had, just threw me out into something, to sing in a way that I never pursued.

Discussion

The case choirs can be viewed from several perspectives; as musical performance (a musicological view), as treatment or health promotion (a health view), as social structure (a sociological view), or as teaching (a music education view). All these angles are relevant and they overlap, but each also favours certain types of research questions. They provide different blends of individual perceptions and exchange (meaning, power, capital) between individual members. With a focus on the workplace singing as a form of occasional community music project (Veblen 2013), Wenger's (1998) notion of *communities of practice* and the concept of *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991) are chosen as our approach to understanding the case choirs. This approach attends to the interplay between *action and belonging*. A community of practice refers to the social learning that takes place when people cooperate around a particular mutual interest over a period of time. Learning is a key constituent of social practice and takes place through participation. Learning is a generative process – it does something to us: it transforms who we are and what we do. Consequently, the community of practice also changes. The subjective experience of the belonging subject is immediately and continuously negotiated in real time and shapes the practice as it evolves.

An organisation is a social design directed at practice, but in itself not necessarily a social practice. A practice community negotiates its own enterprise, possibly in response to institutional prescriptions. It arises, evolves and dissolves according to its own learning and shapes its own boundaries (Wenger 1998). The theory does not concern formal institutions but rather the localized instances that the participating singers represent. Within the confines of institutions, the employees can be seen to form and engage in a workplace oriented community of practice. The practice is targeted towards workplace tasks, but the community shapes and is shaped by how its members engage with the tasks and each other.

A choir can be seen to satisfy the conditions of a community of practice (Balsnes 2009) and it is reasonable therefore to consider the singing groups set up as choirs. With Karen Ahlquists definition in *Chorus and community* (2005) as a point of departure, a choir assumes more or less fixed membership, coming together for a certain period of time with some mutual interest, and with an acknowledged musical leader and a chosen repertoire. A

choir assumes a distinction between preparation and performance.

Every human being is engaged in a variety of more or less connected and overlapping communities of practice, with different members. However, in each of our two cases, we have two superimposed communities of practice – that is, distinct practices with the same members – the workplace and the choir.

According to Wenger, a practice community is comprised of four ‘pillars’: meaning, community, learning and identity. These pillars are used to structure the following discussion.

Pleasurable meaning

The most immediate experience was one of enjoyment. Among various ways to create meaning, enjoyment stands out. The fact that the singers found themselves temporarily out of their comfort zones did not prevent the choral experience from being fundamentally pleasurable. Creating meaning goes beyond the conscious thought process – it is not a cerebral but an embodied experience. Bowman suggests that music’s corporeal basis affords a certain ‘genius for ambiguity’ (2004: 37) – a multiplicity of meaning. It is ambiguity, not certainty, that holds the most prominent place in human life and represents the most promising source of insight. Sensemaking is ongoing and social (Weick 1995), hence negotiation of meaning is central to the process. When Wenger defines meaning as one of the cornerstones of a practice community, a music centred community opens up a wide spectrum of meaning-making possibilities. When the participants make sense of the choir sessions, they thus have access to a wider set of meaning-making possibilities than when making sense of their everyday work. Although vague sensation and the spark of intuition rightfully govern human endeavour as much as logic inference, this is easily accepted in the choral practice community. In other words, superimposing a choral practice onto a workplace practice (where the members are the same) expands the ‘sensemaking’ repertoire (Jansson 2013) of the participants.

Choral singing appears to have the potential to maintain and integrate two opposites; gravity and lightness. It is easy to imagine a number of off-task activities that might create diversion and release, whether they be parties or outside games. However, choral singing was experienced as a particularly strong combination of being and doing, as the sessions were relaxed while at the same time participants quickly got a sense of achievement and mastery (Massimi & Carli 1988). Furthermore, the singing was fairly unobtrusive and did not disrupt the ongoing work of the organisation. It existed separately from everyday tasks, but retained

some of their existential depth. The shared musicking allowed a concentrated, dense experience that, although new, remained within the realm of the workplace.

Community from diversity

These cases show how choral singing is about communality. The belonging that arise in many community musicking programmes is referred to as *communitas* by Veblen and Waldron (2013). *Communitas* is sensed as moments of transcendence of day-to-day routine and absorption into a shared experience. In a choir, this plays out in a very literal way, but community (*comme un*, as one) in the workplace is not self-evident. It is worth noting that the sense of community did not arise from having the same opinion, singing the same part or being at an equal level of competence. Community in fact arose from simply engaging in the choral practice. In fact, varying competence levels were explicitly recognized and reflected on. These cases illustrated how diversity is not at odds with unity (Simmel 1955; Cohen 1985). Diversity at one level (competence) creates unity at another (the mutual acceptance of varying competence). The embodied nature of musicking seems to evoke empathy. When singing with the boss on equal terms, and seeing him in a non-hierarchical position in the choir, a sense of unity was created.

From the outset, varying competence and experience level with choral singing sets the initial range of engagement, from peripheral to full participation in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). According to Lave and Wenger, there is no distinction between core and periphery in terms of defining and shaping the practice community. Considering the fact that participants entered with different levels of confidence, anticipation and fear, as well as their relative sense of ownership of the choir, some made up the periphery and some the core. However, the process of rehearsing makes concepts of periphery and core fluid and every level of participation is legitimate. We could even say that the co-existence of highly competent and less competent singers appeared as some sort of symbiosis, in that it created meaning for both groups, in a meaning domain that would not have been available if everyone had been on an equal footing. We do not in any way claim that this is a symbiosis found more generally, but it is at least something that can arise when a musical practice is superimposed on another practice. The intersubjective space between choral singers that is created in and by the musicking moment is experienced as deep involvement, as a dense moment of meaning-making (Jansson 2013). Such intersubjectivity is enabled by shared musicking and music has the capability to blur role boundaries and make differences between the participating

individuals fade – in other words, to create unity from diversity.

Learning to survive outside the comfort zone

Learning took place on multiple levels; learning the songs, learning about each other and learning to cope with an unfamiliar situation. The choirs took participants out of their comfort zones, since a completely new community of practice was launched. Although mastering the music is an enjoyable learning process, transcending one's comfort zone is a type learning with more far-reaching impact. One way to understand the notion of the comfort zone is through the identities of participation and non-participation, where non-participation is not only legitimate, but is an inevitable part of life. As we live in a world with interlocked communities of practice, 'we are constantly passing boundaries-catching, as we peek into to foreign chambers, glimpses of other realities and meanings' (Wenger 1998: 165). Learning is to survive outside one's comfort zone and to discover that they are expandable. This changes conceptions of what is possible. Learning trajectories move participants from periphery to core (and potentially the reverse as well) (Lave & Wenger 1991).

The choir situation is a forced learning opportunity. The learning itself is very much 'doing'. It is interesting to note that despite the highly didactic nature of choral conducting, the choral learning is first and foremost an individual, embodied learning experience. Seeing colleagues in an unusual setting, inside as well as outside their comfort zones, expands and possibly shifts our image of who they are. It is not only the mere modification of the perceived identities as such that matters – equally important is the vulnerability that arises from being exposed, and which enables a deeper sense of learning about each other and builds empathy. The learning trajectory is consequently connected to the evolving identities of the participants. Learning transforms us and there is therefore a profound connection between practice and identity (Wenger 1998: 149).

Identities on the move

Some participants were not used to singing and certainly not singing together – being a singer was not part of their identity. A comfort zone is determined by the boundaries of what the participants are able to cope with or want to do. Being outside one's comfort zone means that these boundaries are transcended. It involves coping with the extraordinary, whether that is the sensation itself or the effects of coping. Having 'survived' an out-of-comfort-zone experience affects the image of self and role within the group. Consequently, the choir

experience affected the participants' identities. The suspension of normal hierarchies and teams somehow 'reset' the relationships, allowing participants to rediscover aspects of themselves and their colleagues.

The practice community molds identity as learning transforms who we are and what we can do. Participants negotiate their experiences and therefore alter the character of their community membership (Wenger 1998). Identity is also the nexus of multi-membership, where individuals reconcile the various facets of their identity. The participants describe a number of effects that are signs of enriched and changed identities. There is even a very overt negotiation of identities when they talk about how they feel differently about themselves in the group and see the boss as an equal member. In the choral situation, the interplay between the experience of self and of identity is a real-time negotiation. Identity defines how peripheral they see themselves in the choir, but the choral practice community immediately realigns the images of self and of co-workers. Participation reshapes identity in the process of engaging with the choir. Identities are on the move. This is probably the point where we can see the main difference between a regular company choir and a workplace unit that forms a choir. A regular choir offers some of the same learning opportunities (Balsnes 2009), but the singing workplace unit also provides two overlapping communities of practice where changing identities related to the choral practice community become indistinguishable from identities related to the workplace. The workplace unit choir would therefore be expected to be a particularly powerful intervention should one aim to affect the workplace organisation.

Enjoyment at the boundary of comfort zone

Clearly, the four preceding themes are interconnected – affecting one immediately affects the others. Enjoyment is subjective sensation, but is inextricably linked to singing together in the choir. The participants' learning trajectory is inseparable from the evolving identities. Identities are molded and negotiated in the group and the experience of identity shifts and creates a sense of togetherness. When the view of self and others is shaken, the imagination of that which is possible is changed and earlier preconceptions of colleagues fade. The sense of community grows.

All of these changes took place during the course of fairly short amount of time – in Case 1, only a few weeks. As the choral practice community evolved, it also changed the workplace practice community by the mere fact that the individuals were the same. However, none of these changes altered the institutions in question, and we do not know the extent to

which any of the changes are lasting. As one participant put it: ‘If these five times are all there is I believe that we will quickly slip back into how it was before.’ What we *do* know is that choral singing as an intervention has the potential to challenge comfort zone boundaries, dampen preconceptions and unsettle identities – in sum *unfreeze* some of the images and schemes that rule the organisation and serve as blockages for change.¹⁰ From a change management perspective, a very important distinction emerges: 1) the expectation that a workplace choir can actually lead to certain desirable and lasting effects versus 2) facilitating the conditions for such effects, provided that they are complemented by other interventions. Still, it is possible to imagine that regular choral practice in the workplace over a long period of time is, in itself, such a dramatic intervention that lasting, desirable effects would necessarily take place. We should also be aware that a short intervention like these case choirs might also result in negative effects for the organisation in question such as, for example, in the case of it being discontinued.

Conclusion

Literature is emerging which documents the effects of choral singing and the range of choir types available, and is as extensive as the full range of social practices that humans engage in (Geisler 2012). Choirs in the workplace, rather than as company sponsored leisure activities – leadership-driven organisational interventions – have only been the subject of a limited degree of research. This article investigates the workplace choir as a community of practice, which is a wider notion than *a choir*. The article seeks to understand how this particular type of practice affects the employees, which is itself a wider notion than, for example, *wellbeing*. While wellbeing and health are recognized effects of choral singing (Clift et al. 2008), the workplace choir affords certain experiences that are uniquely related to the fact of being co-workers in an organisation. The workplace choir seems to be a direct and rapid way to unfreeze identities as established hierarchy and relations become temporarily suspended. Bringing participants out of their everyday comfort zones in a safe way enables learning experiences that, although outside the realm of workplace tasks, are central to effective workplace collaboration. As one form of community music, the singing nurtures the participants’ identities and strengthens their agentic skills, and thereby promoting growth and enhancing confidence (Veblen & Olsson 2002).

The scope of this study is exploratory and the data set limited. We are not able to make strong statements about any lasting effects of singing in the workplace, neither about what it

does to the individual nor to the organisation. However, the study does suggest that the workplace choir is immediately and instantaneously able to stir perceptions – how colleagues look at themselves and each other. Although choral singing is rewarding, it may not be the solution to organisational problems. Instead of looking at music as remedy, it might be fruitful to look at it as a liberating phenomenon upon which other inventions can be built. The joy of singing with colleagues may not solve every motivational problem, but it could help to reset a learning trajectory for a particular individual. Experiencing a ‘flip-flopped’ hierarchy might not change the organisation, but it could at least change views as to what is, in fact, possible within it. This might suggest that research on the effects of choral singing, and the workplace choir in particular should be just as oriented towards understanding the affordances of choral singing as to measuring the measurable.

Notes

¹ Retrieved 21.8.2013 from <http://www.musicinoffices.com/press/what-is-music-in-offices/>

² Retrieved 21.8.2013 from <http://www.musicinoffices.com/services/choirs/>

³ Retrieved 21.8.2013 from <http://www.musicinoffices.com/services/competitions-events/office-choir-of-the-year/>

⁴ Retrieved 21.8.2013 from http://www.cvsnewcastle.org.uk/assets/files/einformdocs/0816_sing_while_you_work.pdf

⁵ Retrieved 21.8.2013 from <http://www.musicinoffices.com/why-mio/>

⁶ Retrieved 21.8.2013 from <http://breeswitzer.com/cms/?p=i-norge>

⁷ Retrieved from *Aftenposten.no* 31.05.2011.

⁸ The programme *Sangløftet* was funded by the bank trust ‘Sparebankstiftelsen DnB NOR and managed by ‘Musikk og Ungdom’. Retrieved 11.10.2013 from <http://sangloftet.no>.

⁹ In most cases we have chosen not to identify which group the various statement come from, only if it is relevant to the discussion.

¹⁰ The term ‘unfreeze’ in terms of organisational change was first introduced by Kurt Lewin, one of the pioneers of social psychology, in 1947. See for example: www.socialpsychology.org.

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