



Benefits of Group Singing for People with Eating Disorders: Preliminary Findings from a Non-Clinical Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the possible benefits of participation in group singing for people with eating disorders in a non-clinical context. The creation of a group singing workshop for women that exhibited disordered eating provided the opportunity to explore the participants' experiences as perceived by them. A qualitative approach utilizing a semi-structured interview was employed to explore in depth the women's perceptions regarding the group singing workshop. A thematic analysis of the data identified four main categories concerning the benefits of group singing for the population under study. The theoretical model of Sears (1968) of the processes in music therapy and its application on anorexic clients (Parente 1989) informed the discussion of the empirical findings.

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Introduction

Music has a long history of use in formal and informal therapeutic settings. In the discipline of music therapy, there is substantial evidence that music is an effective tool in treating a multitude of physical, mental and affective disorders. However, the therapeutic effects of music have also attracted considerable attention from academic domains outside the field of music therapy. Music sociologists and music psychologists have started investigating the functions of music in contemporary society and discovered that people use music in everyday life as a form of 'self therapy' in order to deal with their emotional and health needs (DeNora 2000; Sloboda & O'Neil 2001). Recently there has been a growing literature on the potential benefits for wellbeing and health of

active participation in musical activities in everyday life and there is considerable evidence to suggest that participation in group singing promotes therapeutic effects (for a comprehensive review, see Clift, Hancox, Staricoff & Whitmore 2008). This paper describes a study on the benefits of group singing for a specific clinical population, namely, people with eating disorders, outside a clinical context. The preliminary findings and discussion follow a brief introduction to eating disorders, a review of the existing literature concerning the effects of music therapeutic methods on this population and the uses of group singing in therapeutic contexts, a discussion of two theoretical models on the functions of music in music therapy, which apply to the present study, and a brief review of the non-clinical research on music and health that motivated the study.

Literature review

Eating disorders: A brief review

The American Psychiatric Association (1994, cited in Garfinkel 1995) distinguishes four eating disordered syndromes with separate diagnostic criteria: anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN), binge eating disorder (BED) and eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS).¹ Difficulties with food are seen as a symptom and are understood as an expression of the underlying issues of a pathology. Ego deficits such as, low self-esteem are considered to precede the eating pathology (e.g. Johnson & Connors 1987; Polivy & Herman 1995). Deficits in self-identity and autonomy (Bruch, 1974) as well as social self-deficits (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein & Rodin 1993) are also described as being central to the development of disordered eating in women. Finally, cognitive distortions have also been regarded as part of the psychopathology of both anorexia and bulimia nervosa (e.g. Fairburn 1997; Wilson, Fairburn & Argas 1997).

Clinical reports depict the premorbid personality of restricting anorexics as obsessional, perfectionist

¹ According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) [American Psychiatric Association (APA) 1994], the diagnostic criteria for AN are maintaining a body weight at a level less than 85% of normal weight for age and height, an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, a disturbed perception of body weight and shape and the absence of three consecutive menstrual cycles. There is a distinction between the restricting type of anorexic patient, who mainly refuses to eat and the binge-eating/purging type, who regularly engages in binge-eating or purging behavior.

The DSM-IV for BN includes recurrent episodes of binge-eating (i.e. eating in a discrete period of time a larger amount of food than most people would eat during a similar time and circumstances and a sense of lack of control over eating during the episode), recurrent inappropriate compensatory behavior to prevent weight gain (i.e. self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, diuretics and enemas, fasting, or excessive exercise). Both binge-eating and purging must occur, on average, at least twice a week for a minimum of 3 months. In addition, self-evaluation must be overly dependent on body shape and weight and the above disturbances must not occur exclusively during periods of AN. The two subtypes are the purging type (i.e. the person regularly engages in self-induced vomiting or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas) and the non-purging type (i.e. the person uses fasting or excessive exercising but not vomiting or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas) (American Psychiatric Association 1994, cited in Garfinkel 1995).

It should be stressed that actual weight is not a criterion in bulimia as it is in anorexia; people suffering from bulimia usually range from normal weight to underweight. They can be distinguished from the bulimic-type AN in that BN patients are unable to suppress their weight below the 85% weight limit and thus do not display amenorrhea (Polivy & Herman 2002).

Finally, BED has the status of 'Diagnostic Category in Need of Further Research' in DSM-IV (APA 1994, cited in Hoeken, *et.al* 2005).

and emotionally restrained (Wondelich 1995). People with bulimia are often described as impulsive, and emotionally unstable (Johnson & Connors 1987) and they have been shown to hold general expectancies that reinforcements are dependent on external factors (i.e. external locus of control) (Katzman & Wolckit 1984; Weiss & Ebert, 1983, cited in Rebert, Stanton & Schwarz 1991). Another characteristic of this population is their difficulty in identifying and articulating their internal states, which results in a difficulty in controlling those states (Bruch 1973). Finally, social anxiety and social isolation are also characteristics linked to anorexia and bulimia nervosa (Fairburn, Jones, Peveler, Carr, Solomon, O'Connor, Burton & Hope 1990).

In spite of the extended research so far, a clear understanding of the source of these disorders and especially of how to treat or prevent them still remains elusive. Generally, the therapy focuses on the physical well-being of the patient (i.e. especially for anorexic people) and on understanding the issues that underlying the problems with food (Dokter 1995). It appears that in the last case, creative therapies, such as music therapy, can play a very important role in patients' recovery.

Music Therapy and eating disorders

In the art therapies, where creative methods are utilized, the focus shifts away from the patients' preoccupation with food and weight related issues allowing them to explore alternative ways of being. Winn (1995) states that because art therapies are not dealing directly with the eating problem this can help the patient to enter more deeply into the underlying difficulties that have manifested in an eating problem.

Music, for example, can offer alternative, non-verbal means of communication and self-expression; therefore, it is particularly useful for patients who find verbal work intimidating. It is observed, though, that sometimes eating disordered patients may actually prefer verbal to non-verbal expressions because the latter could be perceived as more frightening (Jacobse 1995). People with anorexia, for example, find it safer to discuss things intellectually and avoid getting in touch with their feelings (Dokter 1995). However, rather than using only language and thinking, music therapy, like every other art therapy, encourages a combined use of language and thinking with action, in this case, through musical performance. Dokter (1995) explains why this kind of therapeutic approach seems to be effective:

“Verbal therapy demands the transfer from action into thinking, followed by verbalization. In the arts therapies the intervention can communicate with the primary process thinking through symbols and metaphors. The fact that this communication is through action and can at a later stage be translated into secondary process through verbalization, may demand less of the client’s ability to tolerate frustration” (Dokter 1995: 19).

Moreover, the unique power of music to elicit affective responses to people through extrinsic cues (e.g. reminding people of situations, past events, places or familiar faces somehow connected with a specific piece of music) or intrinsic cues (e.g. the ebb and flow of tension, expectations or resolutions in a musical piece or improvisation) appears to be one of the most significant contributions of music to therapy with eating disordered patients:

“The nonverbal and nonspecific characteristics of musical expression allow for the most subjective involvement possible without environmental and structural restrictions or limitations. The ability of music to elicit extra-musical associations and images is one of the bridging processes between musical expression and the conscious awareness of feelings” (Nolan 1989: 174).

Despite the above, there remains a void in the literature regarding the effects of music therapy on people with eating disorders, although the existing evidence suggests that the benefits may be significant. In the reviewed literature, many authors are analytically informed and use clinical improvisations in the therapeutic process (e.g. Robarts 1995; Rogers 1995; Sloboda 1995) with the exception of one, who focuses on cognitive-behavioral strategies (Hilliard 2001). The aims of the music therapy process often include the enhancement of self-esteem, the exploration of family relationships, the expression of negative feelings and the development of self-acceptance (Sloboda 1993). The musical therapeutic relationship with the client, which can be the medium of personal transformation towards individuality and healthy autonomy, is the focus of Robarts and Sloboda’s (1994) work with anorexic clients. Nolan (1989a), on the other hand, considers musical improvisation to provide opportunities for challenging the patient’s cognitive distortions. The majority of the music therapy literature on this topic describes individual clinical work with clients; there is some reference to group work, although this is sparse (Loth 2003; McFerran 2005; Nolan 1989; Parente 1989). However, group work

can be very beneficial for this population since it provides them

“with a social context in which they can develop a more healthy identity within the context of the network of group relationships, an arena to practice and develop interpersonal skills, and a shared experience in which the importance of relationships and communication is supported and reinforced” (Piazza & Steiner-Adair 1986: 29, as cited in Nolan 1989b).

Group singing in Music Therapy

Despite the aforementioned studies, a sporadic picture is provided of what constitutes a successful music therapy intervention when working with this population. Singing is often used in music therapy as an effective way to help patients access and express their feelings while providing them with an experience that is creative and also pleasurable. As Austin (1999) proposes, singing or just vocalizing can be a valuable tool in music psychotherapy in working toward an integration of body, mind and spirit. However, it may be the case that vocal improvisation techniques can make some patients feel uncomfortable, especially if they are in a group situation; improvisation can be extremely overwhelming and anxiety provoking particularly for eating disordered patients, where feeling in control is a major issue. Therefore, a more structured musical experience, such as singing pre-composed music, may be more appropriate, at least at the initial stage of the therapeutic process.

Actually, singing pre-composed songs in a group has been successfully used as a music therapeutic intervention in some instances, for example, in improving the physical and psychological functioning of Alzheimer’s disease patients (Kenny & Faunce 2004) or in enhancing the quality of life of chronic pain patients (Olderog-Millard & Smith 1989). In an early study, Anshel and Kipper (1988) showed that involvement in group singing can stimulate or even promote trust and cooperation among the members of the group. Since evidence from studies on group dynamics strongly suggest that both trust and cooperation contribute significantly to the formation of group cohesion, which is necessary in order for the group to work constructively (Cartwright & Zander 1968, cited in Anshel & Kipper 1988), the application of group singing as a therapeutic intervention in conducting group treatments seems to be appropriate. In fact, group singing is proposed as a useful music therapy group technique in working with eating disordered people in an inpatient setting (Justice 1994) but its impact on eating disordered people has not yet been investigated separately.

Processes in Music Therapy

Sears' (1968) provides a model for a theoretical understanding of the functions of music² in music therapy. According to this, there are three basic processes through which music is used to elicit positive behavioral change: experience within structure, experience in self-organization and experience in relating to others. Experience within structure refers to those behaviors required from the individual that are natural part of the musical process, while the structure discussed here refers to that inherent in the music (e.g. pitch, melody, harmony, rhythm). That is, "the motivation for this experience tends to be an intrinsic quality of the music" (Sears 1968: 34), which facilitates the behavioral requirements. Experience in self-organization is concerned with individuals' attitudes, values, personal identity and personal regard for self and life that can be restructured through the experiences that music provides (e.g. opportunities for self-expression, socially acceptable reward and non-reward and enhancement of pride in self). According to Sears (1968), at this level "the individual is required to expand himself, to discover some of his own potentialities, and to govern himself" (Sears 1968: 34) within the musical environment. Finally, experience in relating others refers to the individual's range and flexibility of behavior in relation to other individuals in a musical situation. As a socializing agent, music provides opportunities for healthy group interactions in a situation where "music is the reason for being together" (Sears 1968: 41).

Parente (1989), based on the above theoretical framework, suggested a therapeutic model where the three aforementioned music therapy processes are systematically applied to the specific issues of anorexia nervosa. In particular, she proposes that the structure of the music can help the anorectic client to achieve a sense of self-control since "at all times, the focus is placed on the reality of the *music* and what the client achieves *musically*" (Parente 1989: 308). She further theorizes that through the music and its extramusical associations reality orientation and correction of the client's distorted image of their body and self can be addressed. For instance, calm and soothing music can be used when patients picture 'fattening' foods or visualize themselves as heavier and favorite musical selections can be employed to accompany images of normal weight or the act of eating. That way, the

association-provoking quality of music can be used to reinstate or teach the anorexic client with healthy standards and forms of behavior (e.g. healthy weight, self-acceptance, trust in self and others) and, that way, to desensitize her/him to antagonistic ideas, values and beliefs. Also, appropriately chosen music can be used as a means of reducing stress and contributing to a relaxed and focused body and mind. At a second level, music participation can help anorexic clients experience personal success and accomplishment through the performance of music rather than weight control, and thus it can contribute to the enhancement of his/her self-esteem. Since "music has no set societal restrictions, no absolutes, no 'shoulds', all of which are found in external systems" (Parente 1989: 313), involvement in musical activities can help the patient to develop an internal orientation to life, while positive affirmations found in songs can contribute to the effacement of negative thoughts that negate the patient's self-worth. Parente (1989) stresses the need of anorexic patients "to accurately identify their internal feelings, to accept these feelings, and to reduce their discomfort" (Parente 1989: 314). Through music listening and performance patients can discover their inner feelings and find avenues for socially acceptable ways of affective expression. Finally, participation in group musical activities can help the anorexic client to relate to others more easily, and to feel needed and accepted as a musician. Musical interactions provide the patient with "opportunities for individual choice within a group" (Parente (1989: 317) and also with opportunities for reorganization of the self by identifying strengths, weaknesses and successes.

Therapeutic uses of music in non-clinical settings

The above theoretical models describe the functions of music in a music therapeutic context where the presence of a trained music therapist is implied. Although the role of music in the therapeutic process is emphasized here, the classifications and constructs presented above were founded "on the continuum from how much control of an individual's behavior is required by *the music itself* to how much is required by *the situation* in which music is used" (Sears 1968: 32), meaning the therapist's manipulation of the environment. Ruud (2002) points out that "paradoxically, theorizing about music itself is often left out; the communicative strength of music, the core phenomenon which give rise to the very effect of doing music therapy is often ignored" (Ruud 2002: 150). In view of this consideration, research on the functions of music and its therapeutic effects in

² It is important to note that in Sears's (1968) model 'music' refers to any musical situation, that is, the music itself, listening to music, having music in the environment, and music making.

non-therapeutic settings, such as community-based musical activities are of relevance to the theory and practice of music therapy³.

Group (or choral) singing is one of the most common music-related leisure activities practiced in people's everyday lives outside any formal therapeutic setting. A growing body of non-clinical research on the effects of group singing seems to suggest that participation in this activity promotes beneficial effects for the wellbeing and health of the people involved. As the emergent literature demonstrates, active engagement in group singing appears to elicit positive mood changes (Unwin, Keeny & Davis 2002), to promote adaptive behavior (Bailey and Davidson, 2002) and to enhance participants' emotional, spiritual, social, mental and physical health (Durrant & Himonides 1998; Beck, Ceasario, Yousefi & Enamoto 2000; Clift & Hancox 2001; Cohen, Pelstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth & Simmens 2006, 2007). Moreover, research has shown that the reported therapeutic effects of participation in group singing appear to be "similar to the holistic health benefits outlined from a music therapeutic perspective" (Bailey & Davidson 2003: 31).

The study

Motivation and objectives of the study

Given the aforementioned benefits of participation in group singing and its therapeutic implications and taking into account the particular characteristics and therapeutic needs of people with eating disorders it seems worthwhile to examine the potential therapeutic value of the group singing activity for this population. Group singing constitutes a musically structured experience that offers a vehicle for the creative exploration of both individual and group processes, which may apply the therapeutic effects of music, outlined by Sears (1968) and Parente (1989) and may be of great significance for people with eating disorders. The objective of the present study is to examine the

possible psychological benefits of participation in group singing for this population in a non-clinical setting, that is, outside a formal music therapeutic context.

Method

The study took place in Sheffield, UK. The creation of a group singing workshop for women who were experiencing difficulties with food provided the opportunity to investigate the possible benefits of group singing for people with disordered eating. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the workshop participants as perceived by them. Therefore, a qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate format for this investigation and was used to describe and explore in depth the participants' lived experiences of the singing workshop. The theoretical models of Sears (1968) and Parente (1989) informed the subsequent discussion of the empirical findings.

Participants

Because eating disorders affect mainly women, and in order to have a more homogenous sample it was decided to include only female participants in this research project. Women were invited to join in a study that would explore the role that singing can play in supporting healthy living and were offered a free singing workshop. The participants were recruited from the local community through advertisements in local venues and through a mass e-mail to students and staff at the University of Sheffield. Eight women agreed to take part in the project and to be interviewed (see Table 1). Their ages ranged from 18 to 62 years. All of the participants had experienced episodes of disordered eating that extended over periods of 2 to 10 years. However, the diagnoses varied; 3 women had clinical symptoms (i.e. 2 diagnosed with bulimia nervosa and 1 with anorexia nervosa) while the rest of the group had mixed symptoms that ranged from mild preoccupation with food and continuous dieting to more regular binge-eating and alternate periods of binge-eating and fasting. Of the 8 participants 5 had no formal music training, 7 had participated in group singing activities in the past (e.g. in school choirs or in church) although they mentioned not being very confident singers, and 2 were currently involved in another choir.

³ In fact, the recent music therapy literature shows an increased interest in the power of music to affect people in everyday life (e.g. Ansdell 2004; Procter 2002; Ruud 1997; Stewart 2004; Stige 1993).

Participants' pseudonyms	Ages	Symptoms	Music Training	Past group singing experience	Current involvement in other singing groups
<i>Rachel</i>	20	<i>Bulimia</i>	<i>Yes-violin</i>	<i>school choir</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Martha</i>	20	<i>Bulimia</i>	<i>Yes-trumpet</i>	<i>none</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Elisa</i>	20	<i>Anorexia</i>	<i>Yes-violin</i>	<i>school choir</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Mia</i>	18	<i>Binge eating/fasting</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>church choir</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Nelly</i>	57	<i>Chronic dieter</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>church choir</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Eva</i>	40	<i>Binge eating-Depression</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>church choir</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Kathy</i>	62	<i>Emotional eating</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>school choir</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Nina</i>	51	<i>Emotional eating</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>school choir</i>	<i>No</i>

Table 1: Participants

Procedure

The group singing workshop took the form of 6 sessions, held twice a week. Each session lasted for one and a half hours with a short tea-break in the middle. The singing sessions typically started with some stretching, breathing and vocal exercises similar to warm-up techniques found in most community singing groups in the UK. The workshop began with some easy songs while more musically challenging songs were gradually introduced over the sessions. The repertoire included English rounds, modern and traditional songs from around the world that were performed in existing singing groups in the local community. All the songs were taught by ear. The main criterion for choosing the repertoire was complexity; the songs were selected to be simple in structure, melody, tonality and rhythm, since participants were expected to be inexperienced or not confident singers. It is also important to point out that the aim was not to explore or develop new singing material for workshops for people with eating disorders, but merely to investigate the effects of provision that is already available publicly.

The author was the leader/conductor of the group for the four out of the six sessions. Two music teachers from the Sheffield area led the other two sessions. This change in the facilitators of the sessions happened for several reasons. First, there was the concern that the fact that the author was both the workshop leader and the researcher/interviewer might influence the responses of the participants; having someone else apart from the author leading the singing sessions would increase the chance of the participants being more objective about their experiences. Also, the

invited leaders were professionals with long experience in running singing workshops; it was hoped that that their experience would bring new elements into the workshop. Finally, the two invited leaders shared their own repertoire with the group (one of the teachers was specialized in South African music, while the second taught modern English songs of her own arrangement); that provided the group the opportunity to perform an eclectic assortment of different musical styles.

Data collection and analysis

A semi-structured interview was employed as the main research instrument of the study to determine the women's perceptions regarding the singing experience and to gain in-depth information about the effects that group singing has on women's lives. Semi-structured interviews are especially suitable when the researcher is particularly interested in exploring the complexity of a phenomenon or where the object of study is personal and highly individualistic (Smith, 1995), as it was the case in the present study. Participants were also invited to keep a short diary, the week before and immediately after the end of the singing workshop, in which they were asked to record the important events of their day and things that they thought or felt about themselves. The diaries formed the starting point of discussion in the subsequent interviews. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded on audiotape. The interview guide was designed to generate responses related to participant's impressions and perceptions of the group singing workshop and consisted of jargon-free, neutral and open-ended questions constructed to encourage respondents to speak

about the topic with as little prompting from the interviewer as possible (Berg 1989).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to ensure authentic records for the subsequent analysis. In the transcriptions, participants' names were replaced by fictitious names to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts were analyzed in a series of stages to identify themes from the data following the example of Marshall and Rossman (1999). Each transcript was coded separately looking for patterns in the data. Codes were then grouped into categories or sub-themes and, subsequently, a list of major themes was emerged which seemed to capture most strongly participants' perceptions regarding the benefits of their participation in group singing.

Ethics

In all the handouts, emails and announcements it was clearly stated that any information that participants provided would be kept confidential. Participants were also assured of anonymity outside the group and that their names would be replaced by a pseudonym in every reference to personal information from the interview or the diary in subsequent reports. Prior to the first session participants were contacted individually in order to explain the study, to distribute the diaries and to describe the format of the workshop. Each participant was asked to sign a form giving informed consent to the research. The contents of the consent form explained the nature of the study and participants' right to discontinue at any time.

Results and discussion

The participants' perceptions of the benefits derived from group singing were found to fall within four main categories: (1) benefits that derived from the active singing experience; (2) benefits related to changes of the self through the rehearsal process; (3) benefits that derived from the group experience; and (4) benefits in participants' everyday lives. The evidence of the development of these categories is provided below. The results are illustrated by short extracts from the interviews of the participants.

1. Benefits that derived from the active singing experience

The workshop participants consistently expressed during the interviews that through the singing activity they experienced a re-connection with bodily sensations, which provided physical

relaxation and awareness of their body, mental engagement, which helped them to distance themselves from their everyday problems, and emotional release through the performance of music.

As explained earlier in the paper, the workshop involved physical warm-ups, stretching, breathing and vocal exercises at the beginning of every session. These physical components of the group singing activity resulted in participants feeling more relaxed and more aware of their bodies. The following comments indicate that through these exercises, participants were able to relax physically and release the tension from their bodies, while at the same time they were forced to pay attention to different body parts and to how they felt physically:

Nina: I think it sort of loosens you up, you're more relaxed, the physical warm ups...Some of them they just make you laugh, you know, and they make you feel good and they put you in a good mood to sing...others, where you use your voice, you can feel it loosen things up...

Kathy: Err...I mean you did the relaxation thing first, which it was relaxing and...all the preparation before we actually learn anything...but at the end of all that I felt...fabulous! I felt really good! [...] Yes, I thought that was really good...that obviously relaxed you before you actually started...the session...and...it got you feeling quite good because...it sort of got all the tension out of your body...

Nelly: I though that was great, I really enjoyed it, it make me think how tense I probably am all the time (Laughs) [...]...really relaxing, and also made me think "gosh, I'm really tense physically". And it also made me think "can I actually do some of those when I'm feeling a bit head up (Laughs), so, should I take a deep breath and breath out again, and what ever...so that was useful, it was really good.

Mia: I liked the fact that we warmed up our bodies as well as our voices...I think that's really important...[...] Because...my body wasn't used to that, like bending down and stand up! (Laughs) I never do that! So, that felt good! And I did feel that it made a change in my voice as well...and then the way I felt...it's like when you warm up your body feels better, you know...it feels more relaxed...yea...

Parente (1989) proposes the activity of singing as a means of practicing breath control in her examples of the therapeutic use of music for the purpose of stress reduction in clients with anorexia. Group singing involves conscious breathing during the warm-ups or the performance of the songs that can help the patient to relax and to reconnect with bodily sensations. Indeed, Siegel (1984, cited in Stark, Aronow & McGeehan 1989) argues that "the most basic awareness of the self comes from

breathing” (Siegel 1984: 130). Also, since eating disordered people (especially anorexics) have to cut-off any sensation of hunger in order to maintain their unrealistic diet routines, body awareness is an essential step towards recovery and an important task in music therapeutic approaches with this population (Justice 1994).

Although the stimulation of body awareness is important, directing the attention away from the self and the eating-related issues is also helpful for people suffering from disordered eating. Group singing can provide opportunities for cognitive stimulation, and indeed, participants reported being focused since they were required to learn the diverse singing material. The experience of group singing also required intense concentration on the structural components of the music, the harmonic coordination of the voices, the lyrics, and the movement that accompanied the songs:

Nina: ...it was interesting...so many new songs...there was an awful lot to learn...for instance there were the words to remember...just thinking about that, you know, you didn't have really much time to think what's going on here...[...] and it really focuses the mind...you're so busy concentrating on what you're doing, and the singing and...that you forget anything else, and, you know, anything else doesn't really matter...

Nelly: I mean... we didn't have anything to look at, it was just all listening...[...] I think part of it is that you have to concentrate quite hard, don't you, well, I did, to remember the words and the way the music was going...So, other things that would maybe bother me just went out of my mind, just because of the concentration. [...] Sort of things that happened during the day, that were a bit of a worry, a bit of a concern...found...because I'd cleared my mind, because I had to concentrate they were gone... which was good! (Laughs)

Rachel: I quite felt relaxed after the sessions, cause it was just a good hour or so of doing nothing but music and chatting to people and you could forget everything else that was going on outside...[...]...yea, but I think when you're singing as well you're concentrated in what you are doing so you can't really think of anything else...

Martha: Mmm...it was a bit like...escapism in a way because you just focus on one thing and just ignore like anything else that you might be thinking during the day...so when I went to the sessions it was sort of...something completely different, like away from reality in a way...yea...so it was nice to be able to do that...

Mia: ...but I must say that during the whole time I didn't feel self-conscious too much...compared to how I do usually...

The above quotations suggest that participants' increased concentration on the singing task rather

than the self helped them to distance themselves from their everyday problems and escape to a musical reality. Actually, Parente (1989) suggests that

“the music therapist' role is to utilize the structure of the music to temporarily take the client's attention away from her thinness and compulsive energy-burning, and enable her to experience strong feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment through influence over the music and the musical environment” (Parente 1989: 308).

For Elisa, an anorexic girl, the external focus of mental energy through group singing resulted in diminishing her painful self-awareness and allowed her to relinquish herself to the musical experience:

Elisa: Yea, I think that's why I liked the singing cause I just felt free from...like, worrying about how I was appearing to other people or...how...like, when we were just getting lost in it and it was just all making...just singing as a group and making music together and there was just, like, having fun...that was what I enjoyed about it cause I just wasn't worried about “Am I doing it right?” or...I don't know...like, I wasn't thinking too much about anything and that was what I enjoyed about it...[...]...it was like escaping...and...not focused on...food and stuff...

The interviews also revealed that, through the performance of a variety of songs, which spanned a wide array of emotions and through the extra-musical associations that these songs had created, participants were able to experience emotional release and positive mood changes:

Elisa: I felt, like...like more uplifted when we were doing the singing and stuff...[...]...and like, the swing songs and stuff we did, it was great fun, I just felt that I was having fun while doing it...so, yea, it put me in a good mood...

Nina: I think the feeling of...what I would call euphoria, you know, the feeling that we had good time, came towards the end of the evening, you know, this sort of sense of well-being...

Mia: I think the sound was really powerful and just repeating and repeating [...] I feel really powerful when I do that, and you think...and I can get so touched when I do meditative singing, sometimes I'll just cry and I don't know why, and it really helps me, cause I'm religious too, it helps me connect with God...So, anyway, that's why I really liked the repeating songs and stuff, the Africans that just go on and on...

Nina: It was the words...and the music. You know, you could sing them with feeling, I think it touched everybody...We were all absolutely knocked out by it because the words were pure poetry...you

could almost feel this shivering in the spine, that sort of thing...it reached you...it was a combination...and everybody took it very personally...we were moved...in the heart, I think that was what it was...We were quite shocked by how we felt, everybody felt the same...

Elisa: Err...yea...I think it was with that one (*the Rumanian*)...it was the overall feeling of the music as well...but...I think...like...it was sad because of the words, the idea of, like...mourning and leaving people behind...and things getting done in your lifetime...

Kathy: And then the (*verse*) about (*the mother*)...that obviously makes you think about your mother...oh dear (crying) [...] Yea, the bit about, you know, “my mother sang to me”...and of course you remember your mother singing to you...you know...and of course she’s no longer here, is she...[...] Oh yes...that made me cry...you know when you sang it for the first time...I got a tear rolling down my eye and it was dripping at the end of my chin! And one of the other ladies she was the same...but it was like...it was beautiful!

The above quotations clearly show that, for many participants, the meaning of the musical pieces and the extra-musical associations elicited by the lyrics were very important aspects of the emotional effects that resulted from the singing experience. Indeed, lack of personal meaning, understanding and connection with the singing material can result in lack of emotional reaction, as some participants explicitly reported in their interviews:

Nelly: I was thinking about say singing a hymn in church, where I would know it, and where there would be something in the words that would speak to me, and move me...That workshop wasn’t that experience at all, I’ve being moved by music or being prompted to be different, or the other effects that music might have on me...You know, if I was listening to my Elvis tape to cheer me up or whatever. Yea, though it did lift my spirits...but not quite in the way that happens when you listen to someone else...for me anyway!

Martha: I didn’t find it very personally appealing, when I listen to some music that is personally appealing I do listen the words, like pop music or what ever...but in this case no...I didn’t find it very personal to me so I wasn’t bothered by the words...

To this point, the reports of the participants indicated that the experience of active singing in the group had benefits that derived from the structure and qualities of the music itself (e.g. melody, rhythm, harmony, lyrics of the songs and its extra-musical associations) and from behaviors required from the members that are natural part of the musical process (e.g. breath control, learning/memorizing the songs, splitting in parts to

sing in harmony, dancing/moving along the music) in a process similar to that defined as experience within structure by Sears (1968). This somatic aspect of group singing, however, constitutes just a first level of beneficial effects. As the analysis of the interviews showed, during the singing sessions some meaningful personal changes occurred in participants’ attitudes and behaviors, which are examined next.

2. Benefits related to changes of the self through the rehearsal process

The interview material determined that the musical process offered to the participants the opportunity to re-organize themselves within the group. In particular, participants were able to express themselves freely, to enhance their self-esteem and to value and appreciate themselves based on the critic of others and more importantly on their own perceptions.

As the following statements clearly show, the singing workshop gave participants the opportunity to express themselves through singing, improvising and dancing/moving along the music:

Rachel: Mm, it was really nice just to be able to sort of... express yourself like that...cause I suppose with...err... maybe with the violin it’s sort of... quite limited in a sense... obviously your technical ability limits how much you can express yourself but...[...] But... yea, I don’t know, I suppose it was very liberating to be able to just sing with the group...

Rachel:... cause I really like the idea of singing in harmonies, you know, with other people, so that was good to sort of inventing your own in a way, I really enjoyed that, not to think of something and invent... that is something that I’m not used at all with the violin, cause I don’t improvise at all with that, I just read what’s on the page...so that was really interesting...

Mia:...so I just stayed with the normal tune (Laughs), saw how people did it and then I did it and...yea, then I just let go, just left myself do whatever I felt like doing...that was nice...

Nina: I found probably the most moving session was the one when you taught us that...Rumanian love song...we were all crying (Laughs) Yea, I was thinking, why is everybody touching their eyes and, you know...and everybody was thinking of their mothers...it was absolutely lovely...I wanted to just go on and on, it was just so moving...

Elisa: Yea, I liked that, (*the dancing along the singing*) was, like, part of...what made it an uplifting experience, it felt like...just, like, free, expressing your self, being quite free about it...without, like, really thinking about what we were doing...

Mia: When you first said “Come on, let’s try and move a bit!”, like feel into it, that was something that I never did because, I was always been told that, you

know, always sung in a church and...you know, (*we were told*) "don't move"...so, that was really new for me...and I don't think that I could get used to it because it was really bizarre for me in the beginning...And I realize now that I've always wanted to move! It was like I freed myself...That was really interesting...

However, singing is a very intimate form of self-expression, perhaps because we embody the instrument, and it can evoke strong feelings. Hence, singing can be experienced as threatening by many people; for a person with an eating disorder, "it can be connected unconsciously with issues of letting sounds out of the body associated with issues of intimacy" (Justice 1994: 108). Nevertheless, singing in a group can help the patient by providing an experience that allows her to express negative feelings in a socially acceptable way and to be herself. The interviews showed that group singing allowed participants to express themselves freely through singing, improvising, dancing or even crying, in an environment where everything was acceptable. Finding alternative ways of self-expression is important for eating disordered people since it may potentially reduce the need for expression through symptomatic behavior like excessive weight control (Parente 1989).

Moreover, as Gilbert (2000) proposes, if patients broaden their repertoire of enjoyable or rewarding activities they will be more ready to give up eating disordered behavior since the problematic behavior will not be conceived as the only solution. Group singing seems to be an ideal medium for that. Sears (1968) argues that "the adaptability of music to learning, on many levels of required ability, makes it uniquely versatile for structuring situations leading to feelings of pride" (Sears 1968: 40). As the following comments illustrate, the singing workshop gave participants the opportunity to acquire and improve a skill, to feel pride for their musical achievements, experience success and, therefore, to enhance their sense of self-worth:

Nina:...and the sound we made...it was a real sense of achievement...because it was really short time, you know, the time always went so quickly!

Nina: When I was singing part of it was hard...trying to learn the words as we were told and...it was easy when we were doing it all together...but the minute that we started to be broken up to groups and then singing at different (parts)...it was actually...it was a huge accomplishment to be able to do it and it was enjoyable but it was quite hard going...you know, it was quite hard to concentrate...

Martha:...it was interesting to be able to develop a skill...[...] Yea, I mean...there is something about

when you do music and you're trying to perfect things...it's like when I play the trumpet, you do something and you're trying to get it perfectly right...it's like you improve on it...I think it was the same thing during singing...like the sessions as well...

Mia: ...I was amazed by how good we sounded...it's true because I...we were small group, you know, but we sounded quite powerful...especially considering (*that*) we weren't particularly professional people in singing, you know...[...]

Mia:...with Helen, that was really interesting when we all went out and did improvisation...and she said, you know, "if it goes wrong I'll stop you!", you know, but we didn't even need to stop, I'd thought that it would go wrong immediately, and...it sounded good actually!

Kathy:...and it was nice you got us harmonizing them as well, I thought that was absolutely brilliant! To actually think that we could...make that sound! You know what I mean?

Additionally, the fact that participants were verbally appraised for their performance by the leaders, as well as by their friends or family members that occasionally happened to be present towards the end of the sessions, gave them a boost of confidence, which promoted positive feelings. The following comments indicate the sense of accomplishment participants felt as the result of their participation in the workshop:

Nina: He was good...he encouraged everybody...he had...the other thing about him was that...he had a very nice way...of getting the best out of us...he was very generous with his praise and encouragement...so we wanted to try harder for him...because he was so good...I think in this life people don't...are quite mean with their praise, you know what I mean? They hold back...and they don't realize that if you...if they get the message across that someone is doing very good job...they won't stop...they'll just work harder because they're so pleased that someone is noticing that they're trying...

Kathy: I mean you were very enthusiastic about...sort of...how well we were doing and you gave us all encouragement to sort of...you know what I mean? And you kept saying that it sounded good and I thought "Oh, that's nice!" (Laughs) [...] And Simon and Helen were very enthusiastic as well...that makes you feel really good, someone to say "Yea, that's it! Very good!" and "You're doing well" and "It sounds good!" yea...that encourages you...to do it and have more...more confidence really... so...it gives you confidence! I felt much better...after the sessions...

Kathy: And...my husband came to pick me up and the door was open at the bottom so he said "I'm going to see if I can hear them!" and he said "Kathy it sounded fantastic at the bottom!" and I said

“Really??” and he said “Yes! It sounded wonderful!” (Laughs) Oh, I couldn’t believe it that he said that! And that was the first night!

This last comment brings up the subject of performance, an element that was absent in this singing workshop. However, it appears that the presence of an audience is an important factor in promoting feelings of success and self-worth as also discussed in Bailey and Davidson (2002). Some participants with previous musical experience stressed the importance of performance and reported that a ‘final’ performance can provide a clear goal for the participants and intrinsic rewards, such as pride in self:

Mia: Yea...I like that...I really like the thrill of it! [...] Because it’s so exciting! You’ve got everyone listening to you, and they’re thinking “Waou!” you know, and I like the feeling of anticipation and excitement and “we’re going to mess up completely!” but you know you’re not! Because you’re so good! (Laughs) Yea...I like it...

Rachel: ... cause it’s really good to be relaxed and enjoy yourself, but...it’s also nice to have a focus and have something to work up to towards and then feel an achievement for doing it...

Martha:...it’s like, before I used to do concerts and whatever so I was always really-really hyper, happy afterwards...cause it was sort of...it’s rewarding I think when you do something...

Self-organization is a result of what is commonly termed gratification (Sears 1968). Parente (1989) argues that “music can be used to achieve self-organization due to its capacity to provide personal gratification within the aesthetic experience” (Parente 1989: 315). It seems that group singing is a good medium for self-organization through the pride in accomplishment and the socially acceptable rewards that it provides.

Eating disordered patients rely primarily on acceptance from others as their criterion for positive self-evaluation (e.g. Garner, Rockert, Olmsted, Johnson & Coscina 1985). Rotter (1960, cited in Parente 1989) referred to this as an external locus of control or orientation in life. However, during the singing sessions participants had the opportunity to rediscover themselves, to value themselves not only on the basis of other people’s opinions but based on their own perceptions and to realize their strengths and also their limitations:

Martha:...well, I feel more confident with my voice...I’d be more willing to try and...pursue other things...yea...[...] ...and I would like to find out if...you know, I was thinking maybe I should do

some singing to see if...whether was right for me or something that I could do...

Nina: I was pleased about...how I feel about my voice now...you know, I’m much happier about my voice now...[...] I think I feel quite...interested in developing it further, I think it’s...I mean it’s a bit worrying to say that it is better but, yes, I do think it’s better now, you know, I don’t want to be conceited but it’s better that I imagined, you know, there is some potential there and I’d like to see where I go with it...

Elisa: I surprised my self that I could do...that I managed to do things that...I managed to do it when it was just, like, two of us singing in a part and stuff like that...

Rachel: I mean I noticed things about my voice, like, which I probably knew anyway, like...I think I’ve got a quite low voice, for a woman anyway, and the high notes are difficult to get and my voice goes weaker after a certain point, which I don’t know what note is particularly but...yea, I’m much stronger in the low registers...

Kathy: Err... I think it’s because...it’s getting the right key...you know, you hear a song and you try to singing it in that key and “Rrrr!!” it’s like wailing sort of (Laughs) you know what I mean? Whereas if you can get the right key...then I feel that I can...I can get away with sort of...I feel more comfortable singing...on that key so...yea...

Nelly: There was one of the younger girls... I found if I stood next to her I could sing with her...she was sort of confident...that was good...

Rachel: I think I’ve really liked... my voice with other voices...just cause I really like, as I said before, singing with other people, and harmony and stuff like that, so it was really nice to hear my voice in context of other people’s, if you see what I mean...

Nina: I think everybody’s voices had a potential, everybody came with their sound and it worked really well together so...

All the above testimonials provided evidence that through the rehearsal process group singing gave participants opportunities to value and appreciate themselves as individuals with potentialities. The analysis showed that during the singing sessions participants had the opportunity to evaluate their performance without input from others, to compare themselves with the rest of the group members in a ‘reality-check’ and to acknowledge everybody’s contributions. Moreover, the analysis of the interviews revealed that, although the somatic aspect of singing (which was discussed in the previous section) could also be present in a solo singing situation, this reflexive element of the workshop depended largely on the existence of the group as an entity. As Sears (1968) argues, “only by self-comparison with the group can the individual become aware of his identity and his accomplishments” (Sears 1968: 41). Indeed, what is

unique about group or choral singing is that it is music-making in a group, and much of the lived experiences depends on, or is influenced by, the interactions with the other members of the group. Therefore the benefits of the group experience that facilitated the aforementioned experiences of the participants are discussed in the next section.

3. Benefits that derived from the group experience

The participants in this study reported being socially engaged despite the short duration of the workshop, feeling supported by the group and 'letting go' in the safe environment that the singing group had created. People with eating disorders are usually isolated and are characterized by poor interpersonal relationships. It seems that group singing can provide a forum for healthy interaction with others and can enable people to function successfully as a group.

In particular, it appeared that through participating in the group singing workshop, the group members had the opportunity to meet new people, to socialize and to interact with the members of the group during the sessions and the breaks. The following quotations exemplify participants' perceptions regarding the social element of the group singing activity:

Elisa:...(group singing) is, like, a way of meeting people as well...

Rachel: ...it was really nice, you knew that you're going to have a laugh and see the other women as well, so, it was really nice...definitely something to look forward to...

Rachel:...that's why everyone was more comfortable, cause we had these breaks for tea and chatting and stuff, so you felt more comfortable with everyone else...I suppose...we sort of built a relationship...

For Martha, however, a girl struggling with bulimia, the short nature of the group appeared to be an excuse for not investing in new relationships:

Martha: I think because I didn't go to as many sessions I didn't really get any chance to talk to anyone, so...[...] But I didn't really make any effort to talk to anyone because I wasn't really in the mood...yea, I was quite happy to just be on my own...

Martha: Whereas if I know that I'm going to see people every week for a year I will make a lot of effort to get to know people, like maybe see them outside the session...but because I knew that is just a short thing...I wasn't really bothered, I was quite happy to just...be on my own...

Martha's comments illustrate her difficulty to engage in a simple social interaction. As the literature indicates, individuals with bulimia nervosa feel ashamed of their socially unacceptable eating and compensatory behaviors and they often avoid socializing. Johnson and Connors (1987) report that many people with bulimia have become withdrawn and isolated as a result of their food-related behavior and their low sense of worth. Moreover, as they become even more enmeshed in the binge-purge cycle, their involvement in different activities narrows dramatically. Nevertheless, group singing provides an alternative means of communication and a musical experience that every member of the group can share. The singing "unifies the group for common action" (Parente 1989: 316) and encourages musical interaction that can help the members to relate to each other. Indeed, although the workshop was short, participants did report having created a bond through singing together:

Nina: I found there were two aspects; the singing was very enjoyable but the company was also enjoyable...the group of people were...almost instantly likable, you know, there was a very nice bond between us...on the first session! And it continued like that although some people didn't come every time...I think that everybody that came sort of felt...part of the group very soon even they missed (sessions)...

Elisa:...(the warm-ups) that was really good cause it helped, like, all the group bonding, like, feel comfortable with each other and get used to make sounds together...like, singing as a group rather than individual, all together...

Rachel: I really liked it, cause you know the same people which I'm in the group...cause other people had similar, you know, pitch to you or something, so people who sang in the high ones usually stayed together...

Nina: I think everybody has so much to contribute...I think that if we can have fun that's good...and that's how it was with everybody...

Furthermore, the experience of singing in a group resulted in participants feeling connected with the other group members and needed by others, as everybody's musical contribution was important for the overall musical experience:

Rachel:... it was good about listening to other people doing it as well at the same time, cause obviously you had to sort of take what they were doing to be able to do what you were doing I suppose as well...[...] Err, cause I suppose when you are in tiny little group you really do have to listen to each other and make sure that you're doing the same

things and at the right time, cause it matters to the overall sound more, if you see what I mean...

Elisa: ...I liked, sort of, when...like when we were all making one sound together and listening to all the other parts and how it sounded all together...

Nina: I think there was one...a couple of moments which were really magical...there was one that we were quite close, when the sound...actually...swelled around us...you could actually feel it coming...and that was really amazing!

Nina: ...but...I got a lot out of it...just...singing in a group...just being there with the group...and the way we were together...

Mia: ...you know, I was quite proud of what we were producing...as a group...

Mia: ... when you said, like when we were in a circle, to feel like we are in a bubble...at the beginning I didn't get it, but then...I really felt it, you know, it's really amazing...I didn't think I could feel like that, it's just...it really feels like one voice in a bubble, you know? It's really strange...I really liked that...

The above quotations suggest that, through singing in a group, participants felt a sense of belonging to something larger than the self and found a way to "be with others through music" (Ruud 1997: 16). The analysis revealed that the supportive environment created during the workshop was the reason that this musical connection took place. The singing sessions provided a friendly environment where people were able to laugh and have fun and created a non-competitive and a non-judgmental atmosphere that made participants feel relaxed, as the following statements illustrate:

Nelly: ...the group, they were great, weren't they, they were really cheerful and supportive, and we had a lot of laughs, and if it went wrong it wasn't a big deal, it was something to laugh about, and to enjoy rather than 'uhmmmm, dear it's all gone wrong!'

Nelly: I mean there were obviously one or two people with nice voices, who had sung more than I have, but I felt the atmosphere wasn't "oh, I can do it and you can't", it was very much supportive and "we are all in this to enjoy ourselves", which was really nice.

Rachel: I suppose it's all about trust, isn't it, and you know that no one is going to turn and say "he he!" (*sarcastically*) about you...

This trusting atmosphere appeared to be very similar to a safe therapeutic environment where people can feel accepted. The absence of peer pressure because of the presence of older women was a major factor in creating the safe environment. Also, the fact that almost all participants were new to singing and the fact that most of the members had similar difficulties (i.e. issues with food

created a feeling of equality and togetherness. So, participants seemed to feel free from worrying about others' opinions and to be themselves:

Rachel: ...well, the middle age women are not going to criticize your appearance anyway, so it didn't really bother me so...

Elisa: I might have felt more, like, self-conscious, more shy if it all have been, like...people with...like, peers...

Rachel: I think, when it's a group like that you don't really need to worry about your appearance as much, I suppose...

Mia: I did realize that, you know, these people don't really care how I look like...they're not judging me, you know...so...it was quite nice to feel safe in that group...compared to how you feel at school...here at the University...like, there's always peer pressure on how you look, and so...But yea, in the group it was ok...it was ok...

Rachel: And everyone, obviously everyone is in the same boat, so it doesn't really, in a sense, matter what happens, cause you know, everyone is going to be in the same boat with you...

Rachel: Sometimes are more competent than others, but you know, in that sort of situation where everyone there is doing the same thing for the same reason you don't really need to be worried about it, it's not like you're walking down a catwalk with the world's press on you saying "ah, she's put on a few pounds on a bottom!", you know... and you know that no one is really looking at you and everyone will be thinking probably the same sorts of things anyway...

Martha: Well, I think probably because we were all in the same position...we were all in the same place, so...it didn't feel...it wasn't really anything expected from us so...I didn't feel so...I didn't feel self-conscious...

Group singing, or singing in any form, may seem to be a difficult experience for some people with eating disorders; it is often connected with the need for perfection and a sense of inadequacy, as many express the feeling that they do not possess any musical ability (Parente 1989). However, in a supportive atmosphere patients can start to be less concerned with perfection and to enjoy themselves. Because of the supportive atmosphere and the safe space created during the rehearsals, participants felt free to 'let go' to the music without the fear of making 'mistakes' or sound 'bad'. Therefore, they were able to tackle issues of control, perfectionism and failure, which often characterize people with eating disorders:

Nelly: ...it doesn't matter not to be quite in control, and not to be quite your thing if it's in a supportive atmosphere that...you're not made to feel this isn't quite you...

Rachel:... but after a while it was alright and I didn't care anymore, especially because you felt very comfortable with everyone else, cause you have that... maybe... immediate reaction of feeling quite awkward and then remembering that you are in a company that you don't need to worry about, you know, I suppose you felt relaxed and went along with it anyway...

Elisa: Well, that was difficult, I think I was worried about doing things wrong...like, it would be frustrating for me if I couldn't do something...but...I sort of let go with that a bit as it went on because...it was, like, such a relaxed atmosphere that it didn't, like...it didn't matter if people made mistakes...

Mia: Yea, I know, but I felt very comfortable, even if I went wrong, I felt really comfortable in the group, especially towards the end...the last sessions...just, it didn't matter, you know? Just felt really comfortable...It's weird because I hadn't realize that, but now that you say it, now that I'm saying it, I realize that I did feel very, very comfortable in that group...it was very nice for me...

However, being in control is an important issue for eating-disordered patients, especially anorexics. A major goal in therapy with this population involves assisting them in achieving realistic self-control and experiencing such control through behaviors that are not related to weight issues (e.g. Garner *et al.* 1985). In group singing, though, the structure of the music and the overall structure of the musical process can create an atmosphere where people know what to expect, so they can feel under control. Moreover, in an informal setting, such as the group singing workshop presented here, participants are usually offered options, for example over the part of the music they wish to sing, according to their own vocal zone, or the members of the group they wish to sing with. Indeed, participants commented how the workshop gave them the freedom to choose and decide for themselves and how these options created the feeling of being in control of the situation:

Elisa: Err...I didn't feel that things weren't...like...were out of control really...because we had a choice to do what we want...

Nelly: I thought that worked really well...people didn't always split into the same groups, sometimes it was the three standing together, sometimes people could swap over...

Rachel: ... and as you were walking around you sort of thought of different random things and try the upper harmony or the lower harmony or something to it... it was really, really good...

Elisa: ...and we were just, like, having a go with different parts, like, it wasn't formal at all or anything, we were just sort of swapped around and did what we liked, if you felt like having a go with

one thing you could and then swap around...it was really good...

Elisa: ...like, it was mainly done at a pace where...you didn't need to pick up things strait away...like, we kept going over things until we felt we've got it...[...] everyone was just having a go and doing it on their own pace and...like, it was relaxed...

Sears (1968) proposes that "freedom to choose is sometimes more important than the choice" (Sears 1968: 42). By providing opportunities for individual choice within the group, group singing appears to be an activity that can help people with eating disorders to build the necessary personal autonomy and independence. As Parente (1989) suggests, through the performance of music "the client is helped to make her choices based on her own internal experiences, to accept those choices, and through music, to present them to the group" (Parente 1989: 317).

4. Benefits in participants' everyday lives

The interview material also revealed that participants were able to use what they have learned from the workshop in other situations of their lives outside the musical setting. Specifically, the analysis showed that the experience of the workshop made participants feel less stressful, more empowered and increased their global self-esteem.

In more detail, participants' comments indicated that group singing participation enabled them to feel more positive and less stressed during their everyday lives. Participants commented that group singing helped them become mentally engaged during the days between the sessions and it generated feelings of happiness for the participants:

Mia: ...yea...I think there was a difference...with all these songs in my head...[...] Because I'd remember the songs... and they'd just come back to me, at random moments, and I'd start singing...And all the time that I'd walk to the University...all of the sudden it would come back to my mind and I'd start singing it...And it was really nice!

Kathy: And the day after I would be sort of trying to think "Oh what was that song?" and a little bit would come to my head "Oh yes, that's it!" and I would piece it all together and sing it...so two or three days after I would...or even the whole week really I would still sort of think "Oh what was this song" that sort of thing, yes...

Rachel:...yea, so generally I felt quite relaxed and I suppose happier, after I've been singing for a bit err, yea I think I generally felt really good after the sessions...

Kathy: Oh yea, I felt...err...I feel I've been happier...

Martha:...it brought a high note on that day [...] Because it put me in a good mood after and before and it was something to look forward to...because everything has been very blunt the past few weeks, it has been really...err...nothing...bleak, that's the word...

What is more, participants reported that these positive feelings helped them cope more successfully with their everyday problems:

Rachel: Well, yea, I suppose when you feel happy you don't generally think about little things...you know, when you're a bit down you just...every little thing just seems to built up into a big thing, so...[...] Yea, I think definitively doing that (*group singing*) makes you...cause I think...it makes you a bit happier doing that...you don't sort of concentrate on little specifics, cause your mood was lifted a bit...I don't know...you don't notice the little things that much...

Elisa:...I knew coming to the singing group would just be like...a way to sort of relax a bit and get out some stress...and that was really good...cause sometimes I'd be at Uni all day stressing out about my work and then I'll have so much...I'll be, like, at home and then I'll be, like, exhausted cause I'm not eating properly...then...(started to cry)...[...]...so it was really good to...know that there is going to be something other than a stressful thing...

Nina: Yea, I think it made me feel quite positive, you know...it was a quite tough time for me so...(the *workshop*) came at the right time...because of the toughness of what was going on in my life...

So, the above testimonials suggest that the group singing workshop had a de-stressing effect for participants and that it provided support in these women's daily lives. It appeared that the overall experience of group singing made participants perceive things more positively but also helped them to cope with their everyday problems and to look at life stresses from a different viewpoint. The findings suggest the existence of a transformative potential of music-making, an idea which is consistent with recent music therapeutic research that shows "how music can be both a reflection of reality and a forum for creating it" (Stewart 2004: 295).

Furthermore, participants reported that by participating in the singing workshop they were able to challenge themselves, overcome their fears (e.g. fear of the unknown or fear of meeting other people) and manage to get out of their 'comfort zone', as one participant put it. As a consequence, active participation in the group singing workshop made participants more confident about their

abilities in general and enhanced their sense of self-worth:

Nelly:...the think is it's important to me to sometimes just go a bit outside my comfort zone...[...] So, this is what I felt about the music, that it wasn't quite me, but...I've done it, you know [...]

Nelly: Because if I never do things that are difficult...then somehow...how I feel about myself...is diminished...

Rachel: I really enjoyed it, it was such a fantastic opportunity for me anyway, cause I always thought it would be interesting to sing but never had the guts to sort of go anywhere really...

Elisa: I've manage to sort of challenge myself to take part even though I felt a bit awkward and a bit embarrassed at first...that I've manage to go on with it...I felt, like, more confident because I achieved...I felt that I achieved something...

Elisa: I was pleased I did it most because It helped me...it showed me that I can challenge the things I normally think that put me off and try new things...like, I wouldn't normally go along to something where I didn't know anyone else was going...or like, trying and do singing with other people...I would be too worried to do it so...I was pleased that I did...

Kathy: And I mean...there were only little singing sessions but I just feel...yea, I feel better about myself...I do feel more confident, I definitively feel more confident...

Elisa: Well, before I would have thought that I just prefer to listen so...like...but performing was different...because...I was actually, like, having a go with something myself and it was, like, challenging myself but showing that...it showed me that I could do some things...

Rachel: I don't know...in some ways I feel more confident about doing things in the future, it' given me that for the future in a sense...but it's not generally changed anything now...I think...

More importantly, the feelings of self-worth generated from participation in the singing group appeared to have an indirect effect on the disordered eating, as Elisa reports:

Elisa: I don't know if it had a...a direct impact on my eating habit...but...like, it did have an overall effect on, like, how I felt about my self...I felt better about myself, more confident, so...I don't know...like, when I'm feeling more confident and better about myself I just...I'm more likely to have a good time about eating...

Interestingly, in the first step of their treatment approach for the symptom management of eating disorders, Johnson, Connors and Tobin (1987) promote the use of self-enhancing activities as a means of positive self-investment. As already

demonstrated by participants' remarks, group singing appears to be an ideal activity for self-enhancement because of the intrinsic rewards that it provides.

Finally, active participation in the group singing workshop gave participants the opportunity to reflect upon their needs, to realize them and accept them. Also, as one participant put it, this workshop gave participants a "little leg-up" for the future, an incentive to pursue things that are good for themselves:

Nelly: ...I'm trying to think since then, having being aware through the relaxation exercises and the singing, that...maybe I don't relax enough and maybe, I thought, maybe I should look after to myself a bit better! (Laughs) Because there is bit of a sense of me thinking, you know, two evenings just to do something you like, gosh, you know!

Rachel: ...so I think it's given to everyone a little leg up to do something, you know!

Nina: I don't know why they were there or how stressed they were in their lives but certainly I think we were all looking for something...to enjoy...and benefit from it, I think that was really evident...that was what we got...

Nina: ...and you know, I regret that I don't take time to sing and...that I didn't realize how fun it was and...you know, I really do want to join a group...

Martha: It did make me think about...maybe I want to try and do something with singing next time and see...how I might do or if I want to take up something else...yea...

Kathy: And it's got me thinking now you see...[...] Well that I'd like to do something like that, you know...I'd like to sort of...join something like that...just go down there and have a little singing...

By taking part in this workshop participants took responsibility for themselves. As a consequence, participants were able to feel stronger and in charge of their lives:

Mia: I was very happy that I actually made myself, you know, go out and do something else in my life and...that was really nice...err...It made me feel good about myself!

Kathy: I mean I keep thinking back to it, what we did and the songs we sang and all that and it just...yes...I do feel better about it...better about myself...cause I feel as I've done something instead of thinking "Oh, I should have done it..."

Elisa: [...] I don't know...err...I think that doing music helps because we're, like, actually making it ourselves...you get more confidence when you're doing something that is actually expressive, not being afraid you know...actually physically make some noise, do something with your body...that was all part of it I think...

Martha: I think because it's a group activity and you develop a skill and you can do something well and then it gives you a chance to express your self, and to meet new people, and to be involved in something...yea...

All the above quotations illustrate participants' perceptions that group singing provides opportunities for individuals to acknowledge their abilities and potential and that also promotes experiences that allow the development of that ability and potential. It appears that participation in group singing provides opportunities for action but also for taking responsibility for one's actions and, thus, it can result in feelings of mastery and control over one's life. These ideas appear to parallel the notions of music being a source of *empowerment* and *enablement* (Procter 2002) or *agency*, a term that includes "those aspects of our contact which are related to achievement, competency, feeling of mastery and empowerment" (Ruud 1997: 14), as discussed from a music therapeutic perspective. People struggling with eating disorders usually accept an external locus of control, as discussed in the beginning of this paper, which results in feelings of helplessness that contribute to the maintenance of their problem. However, if they develop a sense of mastery or competency and a stronger sense of self-concept, they will be able to view their life events as self-directed and take an active role towards their recovery.

Conclusions

The preliminary findings of this study reveal that participation in a group singing workshop resulted in positive outcomes relevant to the particular needs of the group members. Commensurate with Sears' (1968) music therapeutic model, the benefits of the singing experience in combination with the benefits of the group experience of the workshop appeared to help participants to reorganize themselves during the singing sessions. It appeared that through the group singing experiences some specific clinical issues for eating disordered patients were addressed (e.g. control, self-esteem, external belief system, affective expression, perfectionism, autonomy), congruent with the suggestions of Parente's (1989) music therapeutic model for treatment of anorexia. More importantly, it appeared that, as in therapy, participants were able to transfer some of their valuable experiences away from the singing sessions and incorporate them into their everyday lives. Consequently, participants' insights suggest that active participation in group singing may have therapeutic effects for people with eating disorders

and that this activity may be a useful therapeutic intervention for this population in the hands of a trained therapist. So, the above results are of interest to music therapists, while they contribute to the growing literature on the therapeutic uses of music in everyday life.

Although the evidence presented here provides some merit to the hypothesis of group singing as a therapeutic instrument for people with eating disorders, this study had a number of limitations that need to be considered. The participants of this study were not all clinically diagnosed but rather identified themselves as having some form of disordered eating. It would be useful for future research to consider only clinically diagnosed population. In addition, as in other qualitative studies, the number of participants was relatively small and, thus, limits the external validity of the results. Indeed, the findings presented here are applicable to the specific setting described earlier in the paper. However, the qualitative format adopted in this research provided an ideal approach for the exploration of the possible benefits of group singing for the population in question since it generated a great amount of data, which shed light on the individual experiences of the women that got involved and the personal value that the group singing activity held for them. Moreover, since the singing group described here was set up specifically for the purposes of this research, it consisted exclusively of people with eating-related difficulties. An interesting extension of the present study would be to examine whether the benefits of group singing identified here generalize to participation of people with eating disorders to any existing singing group in the community. Furthermore, the present study investigated the immediate impact of a short musical intervention on the population in question. Future studies could also inquire into the potential long-run effects of the group singing activity on this clinical population. Finally, research in this area could also determine whether group singing can offer something different from other forms of enjoyable group activities or other music therapeutic interventions.

Undoubtedly, further empirical research into the impact of group singing for this population and into the role of this activity in both clinical and non-clinical settings for this client group is needed. The emergent themes from this study provide a useful framework for future investigation in this area.

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