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Addressing the Global Crisis of Social Connection: Singers As Positively Energizing Leaders Who Create Belonging in Our Communities

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ABSTRACT

Social connection is fundamental to good mental and physical health, yet globally we are experiencing a crisis of connection. Singers exhibit leadership qualities which can be harnessed to rebuild social connections through community group singing activities. Increasingly, music and singing are understood and enacted as a practice of care. Despite this, and partly due to the predominance of performing and teaching within singers' working lives, community music practices such as group singing for social connection remain on the margins of singers' career portfolios. This article introduces a range of perspectives not often considered within the singing voice research literature—from leadership theory and social psychology—to position singers as "positively energizing community leaders" who can help address this crisis of connection. Singers' embodied, aesthetic practice, coupled with their natural desire to connect with others and share human experiences, enables them to build positive, caring relationships and health-enhancing social identities within community singing groups. The article concludes with discussion of the opportunities and challenges for singers in taking up the mantle of positively energizing community leadership, and a call for robust research to establish how singers contribute to addressing the social connection crisis across diverse contexts.

Introduction

Singers and singing teachers exhibit leadership qualities which can be harnessed in community settings to build a sense of belonging in those they work with. In the context of a global "crisis of social connection" (Way et al. 2018) such work by singers will become increasingly important. Globally, it is estimated that one in four older adults experiences social isolation and between five and 15% of adolescents are lonely (World Health Organization 2023). In my country, Australia, only 51% of the people feel part of a community (Mental Health Australia 2023). There is a vast body of literature demonstrating the devastating effects of loneliness and social isolation on both mental and

physical health. A meta-analysis of 148 studies (comprising 308,849 participants) found lack of social relationships is a mortality risk comparable to other physical risks such as diet, exercise, alcohol consumption, and smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010).

Industrialization has greatly reduced both the quantity and quality of social relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010). This situation has been exacerbated in more recent times by social media, the COVID-19 pandemic, the polarization of public discourse, the decline of religion, and our divorce from and degradation of natural ecosystems (McGilchrist 2021). In a world of diminishing resources, we compete for necessities which promotes hyper-individualism rather than a concern for the collective (Way et al. 2018). Compounding the issues, human beings are venturing forth into the realms of virtual reality and generative artificial intelligence with already vastly depleted levels of social connection. These rapid and far-reaching technological advances threaten to further deepen the crisis of connection—McGilchrist (2024) asks, "As machines gradually displace people, what happens to human flourishing?" Indeed, what happens to social connection if the world that humans inhabit becomes a mere representation of reality?

It can be easy to dismiss the arts, music, and singing as trivial, frivolous antidotes to this epidemic of social disconnection. However, to do so may be shortsighted and denies our evolutionary origins. Our brains are biologically wired to connect (Allen 2021; Lieberman 2013). Social relationships are "critical for development, reproduction, health, and survival" (Chen and Hong 2018; Holt-Lunstad and Steptoe 2022, 233). There is a strong cross-disciplinary hypothesis that music and singing together have evolved biologically and culturally to promote social bonding among humans (Savage et al. 2021; Shilton, Passmore, and Savage 2023).

Singers play a vital role in our collective health and wellbeing by facilitating group singing activities which have been shown to build social connection. Known as the "ice breaker effect," singing together creates social bonding faster than other group activities (Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar 2015). Group singing has been described as a "resource" for a "healthy public" to promote social cohesion, trust, and interpersonal attachment (Camlin, Daffern, and Zeserson 2020). Group singing can improve social connection and reduce loneliness and social isolation (e.g. Bailey and Davidson 2005; Clift, Nicol, and Raisbeck 2010; G. A. Dingle et al. 2013; G. A. Dingle et al. 2021; Lamont et al. 2018). A broad range of people can benefit from the social engagement offered by group singing, including disadvantaged adults with mental health conditions (G. A. Dingle et al. 2013), stroke sufferers (Tamplin et al. 2013), and Parkinson's caregivers (Forbes 2021b), to name but a few. These social benefits appear to depend to some extent on singing together in person, although some benefits do flow from virtual get togethers (Draper and Dingle 2021; Leiper 2023).

Rather than consider the mechanisms by which group singing achieves these social effects (for reviews, see Clift, Nicol, and Raisbeck 2010; Daykin et al. 2018; G. A. Dingle et al. 2021), this part-narrative, part-commentary review article (Winter 2023) focuses on conceptualizing the role of the singing group leader or facilitator. Drawing on literature across the psychology of belonging, positive leadership, community music, musical care, and music careers, I argue that we will increasingly rely on singers (and by implication, other professional voice users, and creative artists) to connect us to our humanity, and to each other. The article makes a novel contribution by presenting singers as "positively energizing community

leaders" who can and do use their embodied leadership skills to help address the global crisis of social connection. I conclude with discussion of the opportunities and challenges for singers in taking up the mantle of positively energizing community leadership, and an acknowledgment of the limitations of the approach taken in this article.

Method

This article is comprised of a literature review which introduces a range of perspectives not often considered within the singing voice research literature. Through synthesis of key themes from disparate fields, it presents a vision for the role of singers as positively energizing leaders in our communities. The review method adopted in this article is part commentary and part narrative review, comprised of snapshots from a range of literatures to present a coherent argument. Winter (2023) outlines different types of literature reviews available to voice practitioner-researchers. Winter (2023, 132) argues that because voice studies is an interdisciplinary field, literature reviews play an important role in developing discourse which synthesizes different methods and perspectives. Drawing on the work of Green, Johnson, and Alan (2001) and Sansom (2019), Winter (2023) examines how narrative and commentary-type reviews can overlap. The current review is such a blend of both. The review is commentary because my intention is to construct an argument to broaden future practice and to promote scholarly dialogue on the issues raised among readers of the *Voice and Speech Review* and within the field of singing voice more broadly (Maxwell 2006 cited in Winter 2023). The review is also narrative, in that coverage of the literatures is necessarily incomplete, subjectively selected, without inclusion and exclusion criteria (Green, Johnson, and Alan 2001, as cited in; Winter 2023).

Winter (2023) argues that to make valuable and trustworthy contributions, reviews must be both rigorously conducted and relevant to the field. She suggests including a transparency statement (comprising of seven questions) that outlines the author's intent and bias. The following statements to responds to each of Winter's (2023) questions:

- *Is the purpose to promote scholastic debate?* The purpose of this review is to promote debate among scholars and practitioners on the inclusion of community leadership work within a singer's career portfolio. The bias inherent in this argument is that I have taken this pathway in my own practice—with a background as a jazz singer and singing teacher, I have moved into community work as a leader of a singing group for people with Parkinson's and their careers. My views are inevitably shaped by my personal experience.
- *How important is this debate?* The debate is critical if we wish address the connection crisis in our communities through broader uptake of beneficial group singing. I argue there is an ethical dimension to this debate—how can singers contribute more broadly to creating a society which is inclusive, respectful of diversity, and positively geared toward human flourishing and wellbeing?
- *Has the author fused multi-disciplinary strands, and if so, for what purpose?* The review braids strands from multiple disciplines to highlight the opportunities for singers to

be working beyond the traditional career boundaries of performance and studio teaching.

- *Has the author substantiated their claims with rigorous referencing?* The review is referenced throughout referring to empirical, theoretical, and philosophical literatures. The reference list provides a useful starting point for readers interested in exploring the ideas in this review further.
- *Does it have the capacity to shape practice, and if so, are the claims appropriately substantiated with evidence?* The review is intended to shape practice and presents supporting evidence from extant research on the impact of group singing on health and wellbeing, and singers' unique skills in facilitating these outcomes. However, it is acknowledged that more robust evidence is needed to establish causality between singing leadership and group outcomes.
- *How exhaustive were the searches for substantiating literature? Is this limited because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the work?* Due to the review's coverage of several vast fields, the literature review was limited to providing a brief snapshot of each area (Thomson 2017).
- *If the research was not exhaustive, did the author reach a point of theoretical saturation where further reading elicited little new material?* While the search for literature was not exhaustive across each field, sufficient material was reviewed and included to support the arguments being made. Due to the breadth of literatures covered, each section is presented as a snapshot or introduction to a much larger body of knowledge.

Literature Review

The Risks of Social Isolation and the Psychology of Belonging

Social isolation is considered a relatively objective measure, indicated by aloneness, few social contacts, and little social involvement; it is a serious risk to physical health, and is predictive of early death, independent of the subjective feeling of loneliness (Holt-Lunstad and Steptoe 2022). A meta-analysis of the evidence base demonstrated that the risks to physical health posed by social isolation are comparable to smoking and alcohol consumption with the researchers arguing social isolation should be taken just as seriously as other well-known public health risks (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010).

The antidote to social disconnection is belonging (Allen 2021). As a species, we have a "persistent inner drive to belong" which is both personal and universal (Allen 2021, 3; Baumeister and Leary 1995). According to positive psychology, to cultivate belonging, we must cultivate "meaning," If life is experienced as meaningful, we feel that we belong to and serve something bigger than ourselves (Seligman 2011). As Allen (2023) argues, and the evidence on social isolation demonstrates (Holt-Lunstad and Steptoe 2022), belonging is not "psychological luxury" but a "biological necessity." Belonging shapes our interpersonal relationships both near and far, our sense of community (Allen 2021) and even, some argue, our relationship to the planet (Camlin 2023). Moreover, as Allen (2021, 63) cautions, "technology effects the way we socialise, and this influences how we bond with others and develop a sense of belonging."

The evidence clearly establishes that social isolation poses a significant risk to the health and happiness of a species hard-wired to feel a sense of belonging with others. What role can music, and specifically group singing led by experienced singers, play in helping the socially isolated re-ignite a sense of belonging and meaning in their lives?

Music and Singing As Caring Practices

There is now a substantial body of evidence that supports the health and wellbeing benefits of group singing, including fostering new social connections and a sense of belonging in participants (Daykin et al. 2018; G. A. Dingle et al. 2021; see, for example; Leiper 2023). In light of this evidence, there are movements within music practice and research to promote music and the creative arts more broadly as a public health resource (Camlin 2023; Camlin, Daffern, and Zeserson 2020; Clift 2012). Music therapist and researcher Even Ruud (2013, 2) has conceived of music as a "form of self-help technology" and "self-care," arguing that, just as brushing our teeth or wearing seatbelts are examples of behavioral immunogens (or protective behaviors), so too is music a "cultural immunogen" against issues such as social isolation and loneliness. More recently, the term "musical care" has generated a new international network for researchers and practitioners to examine the ways in which music supports development and health across the lifespan (Spiro and Sanfilippo 2022; Spiro et al. 2023). Music care professionals can include music therapists in the traditional and professionalized sense, but the term extends to musicians and educators working in community settings.

The act of singing itself has recently been conceptualized as a mechanism of care, both for oneself and for others (Cassidy Parker and Hutton 2023). Singing with and for others develops "singing-caring relations" which deepen social connections (Cassidy Parker and Hutton 2023). Importantly for the current discussion, Cassidy Parker and Hutton (2023) argue that inclusivity is vital to singing-caring relations and that if singers are looking to foster inclusion within singing groups, they will need to look beyond the Eurocentric model of bel canto pedagogy and draw on contemporary pedagogies, such as Somatic Voicework(TM) The LoVetri Method.[1] Singing-caring relations are built on a foundation of affirming each singer's unique vocal timbre and skill level (Cassidy Parker and Hutton 2023; Forbes and Bartlett 2020a).

How We View Singers' Work

If group singing is to be fully leveraged as a public health resource to address the global crisis of social connection, what role do already experienced singers and singing teachers play? Singers from performance or pedagogy backgrounds are ideally placed to lead in this space, but anecdotally, this type of work currently remains on the margins of many singers' career portfolios. This is largely because in Western, postindustrial societies, music making and singing have arguably become more "presentational" than "participatory" (Shilton, Passmore, and Savage 2023, 2). In modern Western societies, the ancient act of singing is now predominantly viewed as a performance to be "consumed" rather than as an experience to have and to share. There is a pervasive cultural narrative of music as an "autonomous 'art' form" (Proctor and DeNora 2022, 98) in which, to be considered

successful, singers must pursue performance careers as individuals, and supplement performance careers through singing teaching.

The presentational view of music prevalent today has created an incredibly narrow view of a singers' work. In some countries, this almost singular focus on performance has had devastating impacts on musicians' and singers' mental health. For example, in their book *Can Music Make You Sick?* Gross and Musgrave (2020) report on UK musicians' mental health, giving examples of singers facing legal disputes, performance anxiety, panic attacks, lack of respect for their work, poor pay, long and irregular hours, financial insecurity, competitiveness, and negative impacts on family and other relationships. Arguably, this is what results when social connection in the form of singing is commodified but then not fully supported by the market. This is not to say that singers cannot or should not benefit financially from performance experiences or careers. However, current social, cultural, and economic structures are far from conducive to most singers' making a living entirely from performance or the sale of recordings in a way which is financially and personally sustainable.

Market forces are also having an impact on the nature and purpose of music education, particularly at the college level. The last 10 years or so have seen increasing self-awareness within conservatoires and post-school education that the traditional remit to train performers may be too narrow to ensure sustainable careers in the long-term for the majority of graduates including singers (see e.g. Carey and Lebler 2012; Forbes 2016, 2020). There has been a shift toward preparing students for portfolio careers comprised of multiple roles such as performance, teaching, and even non-music work (e.g. Bartleet et al. 2012, 2019, 2020; Kjar, Allegra, and Kerry 2022; Waddington-Jones 2022). Despite this, there has been little consideration given to how music education might prepare musicians and singers to include health-related musical care work in their career portfolio.[2]

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global crisis of social connection, it is timely to reconsider the components of singers' career portfolios. The COVID-19 lockdowns devastated the arts sector (Spiro et al. 2021) and musicians' income was severely impacted, leaving many with a negative outlook for future opportunities (Crosby and McKenzie 2022; see also Zhukov et al. 2023). These calamitous results have precipitated a further paradigm shift in thinking about work opportunities for musicians. Canham (2023, 3) argues that the pandemic revealed the vulnerability of creative workers like musicians, many for whom "work in music has gone from challenging to untenable resulting in altered priorities." Canham (2022) identifies a "post-portfolio paradigm" (Canham 2023, 13) of precarity with ever-diminishing opportunities for musicians to eke out a living doing the thing they love. The resulting challenges to musicians' health, wellbeing, and identity in navigating precarity are not inconsiderable (Breakwell and Jaspal 2022; Forbes, Goopy, and Krause 2024; Canham 2022, 2023; Spiro et al. 2021). In this sense, some of the greatest challenges of our times—social disconnection, precarious work for creatives—also present some of the greatest opportunities for singers to build career portfolios which include leading singing groups for social connection.

Singing As Leadership

Thus far, this review has canvased literature across domains of public health, psychology, musical care, and musicians' careers to suggest that it is timely and

important for singers to consider community singing work as part of their career portfolio. This is not merely an opportunistic argument, but rather one which is built on a fundamental premise that such work is an excellent match to singers' skillsets, strengths, and oftentimes, personal values (Forbes and Bartlett 2020b). Applying ideas from the leadership literature and social psychology, singers' aesthetic practice can be seen as bearing the characteristics of embodied, authentic, relational leadership (Ladkin 2010; Ladkin and Taylor 2010), identity leadership (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, and Michael 2020), and positively energizing leadership (Cameron 2018, 2021). Drawing on these theories, singers can be understood as community leaders who are ideally placed to embody and nurture singing-caring relations to build social connection.

Leadership As Embodied, Authentic, and Relational

Management and leadership researcher Donna Ladkin (2008) first combined the idea of singing with leadership in an article which presented Bobby McFerrin as a case study to formulate Ladkin's concept of "leading beautifully." Rather than focusing on leadership behaviors (as is usually the case in much of the leadership literature), Ladkin chose to consider the embodiment of leadership as aesthetic practice through an exploration of McFerrin's performances. According to Ladkin, McFerrin's ability to "lead beautifully" draws on an embodied mastery, congruence between form and content, and clear, unwavering sense of purpose. Ladkin observes in McFerrin an ability to communicate through discreet and unobtrusive gestures to invite audiences and his fellow musicians into a creative exchange of spontaneous music making. McFerrin's leadership is described as "inclusive, accepting, and creating a safe environment" (Ladkin 2008, 33). She writes:

> The concept of "leading beautifully" brings our attention to that often un-articulated, but nonetheless powerful aspect of how leaders embody their role. Leading beautifully speaks to a quality of being-one honed through the development of self-mastery, and quickened through the congruence of one's acts with their "measured" expression. It also alerts us to the possibility of a leader's goals being directed towards the best of human purposes. (Ladkin 2008, 40)

By referring to the singer's discreet and unobtrusive embodied appeal to the "best of human purposes," Ladkin hints at the relationality which underpins embodied leadership.

Ladkin and Taylor (2010) further articulate a theory of embodied, authentic, and relational leadership, which happens to map to singers' practice very accurately. Such leadership has three aspects: 1) self-exposure, which involves self-awareness of one's own feelings and being willing and able to express them in a way which is contextually appropriate; 2) relating to others authentically, particularly in situations which are unfamiliar, and 3) making "leaderly" choices. Let us consider these three aspects in the relation to singers. Self-exposure and authentic relating to others are fundamental to the singer's practice. Common to singers' performance experiences is a sense openness, emotional expression, vulnerability, and a desire for authentic connection with the listener/audience (see, e.g. Forbes 2021a; Forbes and Cantrell 2023; Hughes 2013; Welch 2005; Welch and Preti 2019). While the first two aspects of embodied authentic leadership seem readily applicable to singing, "leaderly choices" deserves

some detailed consideration, because one can display vulnerability and authenticity, and not necessarily be considered a leader.

Identity Leadership

In making leaderly choices, "a leader embodies the *identity story of the group* (Gardner 1995) and acts in ways that excite others to connect to the leader and follow him or her" (Ladkin and Taylor 2010, 72, emphasis added). This idea points toward leadership theories based on the social identity perspective which seek to explain the relationship between leaders and followers. This line of thinking contends that shared social identity between leaders and followers forms the foundation of leaders' influence and impact on others (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, and Michael 2020). The social identity perspective recognizes that our sense of self derives from group memberships and the social identities created from these memberships (Reynolds, Turner, and Alexander Haslam 2003). A leader who embodies the values, norms, and goals of the group is more likely to be endorsed by the group (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, and Michael 2020). Collective realization results from group members viewing themselves as part of a larger, meaningful entity with common goals that benefit the group (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, and Michael 2020). Identity leadership recognizes that leadership is social and context-dependent, and that effective leaders will skillfully adapt their approach the situation (S. A. Haslam, Reicher, and Michael 2020).

Importantly for the current argument, within the health context, a social identity is understood as a psychological resource in the form of connection and belonging, meaning, motivation, and agency (Greenaway et al. 2016; C. Haslam et al. 2018). Social identification with a group (facilitated through identity leadership) can have important implications for health because it creates a stronger sense of self as well as connection with others (C. Haslam et al. 2018). Group singing has been shown to create new social identities for participants, thus building their psychological resources including a stronger sense of belonging and social connection (e.g. G. A. Dingle et al. 2013; Forbes 2021b; Tarrant et al. 2018; Williams et al. 2019). For guidelines on how the social identity approach can be applied in practice to foster meaningful connections so that group membership becomes a mechanism for positive change, see Tarrant et al. (2016, 2020).

Positively Energizing Leadership

The theory of "positively energizing leadership" offered by American leadership scholar Kim S. Cameron helps to further articulate the relational aspects of singing as leadership and is well-aligned with the embodied aesthetics of authentic leadership and identity leadership. Positively energizing leadership is a nonhierarchical relational leadership model—it is not one's title or position which determines leader status, but rather the positive relational energy that a person creates with others (Cameron 2021). According to Cameron 2018, 2021) human beings flourish in the presence of positive energy. This is not mere "woo-woo"; it is an assertion based on extensive empirical research which demonstrates that positive energy in the form of relational energy—based in virtuous actions—enables individuals (and organizations) to flourish (Cameron 2018, 2021).

Cameron draws an analogy between positive relational energy and the heliotropic effect by which plants are drawn toward the light to thrive and flourish (Cameron 2018, 2021). Relational energy is created within interpersonal relationships and unlike other forms of energy, can be "self-enhancing and self-renewing" (Cameron 2021,

location 331). Positive relational energy does not rely on individual charisma but is a set of behaviors which can be learned and developed (Cameron 2021, location 479). Virtuous behaviors which are said to be heliotropic are the foundation of positive relational energy:

> Individuals who demonstrate generosity, compassion, gratitude, trustworthiness, forgiveness, and kindness toward others are positively energized and renewed. Virtuousness is heliotropic. Virtuous actions produce positive relational energy, so the probability of forming unbiased, authentic, supportive relationships is enhanced. Virtuousness is, by definition, absent motives of recognition, reward, or payback. Virtuous actions are genuine and expressed for their own inherent value, so recipients of virtuous actions do not feel manipulated or co-opted for other purposes. Unbiased, authentic, supportive relationships are enhanced. (Cameron 2021, location 673)

Positive relational energy created through virtuous behaviors is the very foundation of cultivating belonging social identity and belonging to combat the subjective experience of loneliness. Research has demonstrated that facilitators of singing groups for health and wellbeing are highly skilled in using their embodied aesthetic musical practice to build healthy, positive relationships with group members based on "immediate and unconditional acceptance, respect, trust, and an innate sense of belonging" (Forbes and Bartlett 2020b, 560). Singing group activities can be consciously designed to build social identity, social connection, and a sense of belonging within participants and singing group facilitators (Tarrant et al. 2016, 2020).

While we are all "deeply conditioned to provide a sense of belonging to others" (Allen 2021, 273), singers are especially so conditioned. Singing embodies virtuous behaviors such as generosity, compassion and empathy, gratitude, and trust. Singers have a natural desire to connect with others and to share human experiences; this desire is usually present in singers during the formative years of development and remains a north star in the lives of those who dedicate their careers to singing (Forbes, Goopy, and Krause 2024). The embodied voice of the individual singer forms a unique component of our being-in-the-world; for professional singers, the embodied voice is a highly salient aspect of identity (Forbes, Goopy, and Krause 2024). Just as those who sing professionally dedicate their lives to the pursuit of singing, so too is the cultivation of belonging something singers commit to long-term, whether consciously or not. To belong is "to be-long"—to be in something for the long haul (Allen 2021 quoting Turner 2017). In this sense, singing and leading the cultivation of belonging in others share the characteristics of the long-term, lifelong pursuit of belonging, which goes to the very heart of being human.

Discussion

The review of the literature presented in this article has drawn on the fields of public health, the psychology of belonging, musical care, musicians' careers, leadership theory and social psychology to argue that singers are positively energizing leaders who can help address the global crisis of social connection in our communities. I conclude here with a brief discussion of the opportunities and challenges for singers interested in exploring these ideas further in their own practice.

Opportunities

There has been an explosion of activity within the singing for health and wellbeing space in the last 20 years, and the evidence of singing's benefits are becoming more widely known and understood. This is reflected in formal government programs such as social prescribing in the United Kingdom, whereby people accessing health services may be "prescribed" social activities such as group singing to support their wellbeing (G. A. Dingle and Sharman 2022). Social prescription programs also run in parts of the United States, Canada, Ireland, and The Netherlands (Social Rx Connect 2024). Key to the success of social prescription is the role of "link worker," a person who acts as an intermediary between the health care provider, the client, and community programs (G. A. Dingle and Sharman 2022). In the future, there may be opportunities for appropriately qualified creative artists including singers to take on link worker roles (with additional training in a health-related field), as well working "on the ground" to deliver community arts programs such as group singing to support social prescription models.

Working in community settings to support social connection provides the opportunity for singers to re-imagine what performance looks like. Singing group leadership has been described as the performance of healthy relationships and "mutual recovery . . . because it can represent a very accessible and efficient way to co-create psychological resources that people can take with them out of the rehearsal room or the performance venue and into their everyday lives" (Camlin, Daffern, and Zeserson 2020, 12). In this sense, singing group leadership is as beneficial for the group leader as it is for group participants (Forbes and Bartlett 2020b). Community singing group leaders experience their work as meaningful, as a unique mode of performance, and ideally suited to their skills, values, and interests (Forbes and Bartlett 2020b). Therefore, taking on community singing group leadership is likely to support singers' own wellbeing and social connection.

Another recent and interesting proposal has been to train performing artists such as musicians and singers to work as mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) facilitators or "task sharers," to support their performing arts colleagues to navigate mental health challenges (Cid-Vega and Brown 2023). Task sharing has developed in low socio-economic countries particularly those faced with humanitarian crises. Performing artist MHPSS facilitators would be intimately acquainted with the unique needs and challenges of performing artists suffering mental health distress. It is not suggested they would replace formally trained mental health professionals, but that they could play a role in referral to professionals or other support services (Cid-Vega and Brown 2023). This suggestion is an example of the increasing awareness (at least within the field of mental health) that musicians' and singers' skill sets might be meaningfully deployed in non-traditional work contexts in which social care and building connection are paramount.

Challenges

There are several challenges being currently debated within the arts in health sector which warrant consideration in the context of the argument that singers are well-placed to take on more community leadership work to build social connection. The first is remuneration, with models varying according to availability of government or philanthropic funding, or user-pays (which brings issues of equitable access to the fore). Anecdotally, singing group

leaders report working voluntarily or sometimes for little pay depending on funding availability. This issue warrants serious consideration if we are to build sustainable models for community and social prescribing programs which rely on the availability of high-quality programs which including group singing for social connection.

The issue of program quality raises related questions around training and competencies required of singers in positions of community leadership to build social connection. A recent report by the peak arts body in Australia has found that artists working in community mental health are often working in isolation in complex contexts with a lack of formal training and professional support (Creative Australia 2023). This raises serious issues of risk of potential harm to both singing group leaders and group participants where community arts leaders may lack the skills and training to deal with participants' complex mental health issues. Other studies have considered the skills and attributes required of singing group leaders and found that this work requires strong musical, technical, and interpersonal skills (which need to be readily adapted to context), as well as a good working understanding of health conditions (where relevant) (Forbes and Bartlett 2020a) and the social determinants of health, such as the role of social connection in mental and physical health. The topic of formal training to engage in community work for musicians and singers is in itself very complex, and is merely flagged here, but beyond the scope of the current article.

Scaling up group singing activities for social connection may require identity adjustments for both singers (as group leaders) and those who do not see themselves as singers (group participants). Singers may need to do identity work to envision a way for them to accommodate new community leadership roles into their existing identity structure in which performance and teaching are likely to be salient features (Forbes, Goopy, and Krause 2024). Similarly, many in today's modern Western societies do not consider themselves "singers" and as leading singing voice pedagogue Janice Chapman has observed, people have lost their birthright to sing (Chapman 2017). It will require considerable leadership on the part of singers to entice self-described non-singers back to singing to fully reap the benefits of singing for social connection.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current article. As a primarily theoretical piece, it seeks to conceptualize singers as community leaders but does not make definitive claims about the efficacy of singers as leaders in this context. Undoubtedly more evidence is needed to establish robust causal links between singers' leadership qualities and improved social connection outcomes via community singing groups. Further, it is not possible to comprehensively address all relevant aspects of this complex topic, such as practical guidance for singers, the role of other music professionals and creative artists in building social connection, issues of cultural diversity, and the importance of appropriate monitoring and evaluation frameworks (for an example of the latter that includes leadership considerations, see Warran, Burton, and Fancourt (2022)). While these issues are important and warrant further investigation, they are beyond the scope of the current article, which aims to provide a conceptual foundation for understanding singers' role as community leaders in fostering social connection. Future research can build upon this foundation to provide evidence for the ways in which singers can effectively contribute to addressing the social connection crisis across diverse contexts.

Conclusion

The evidence for the positive impact of the arts on health, including group singing, has faced criticism for its lack of robustness (Clift et al. 2024; Clift, Phillips, and Pritchard 2021). It is not yet possible to state categorically that there is a causal relationship between an activity like group singing, the singer as group leader, and social connection. However, from an experiential perspective,[3] regular singers do not need evidence from randomized controlled trials to convince them that singing builds belonging and connection. Our ancestors did not have this evidence, yet they sang (Norton 2016). Taking a pragmatic view, however, it is acknowledged that in modern market-driven societies, high-quality evidence *will* be necessary to garner policy support and institutional funding for the vital role of singers in fostering social connection. This needs to be the subject of large-scale, robustly designed, interdisciplinary research.

In the meantime, addressing the crisis of connection cannot wait for the cumbersome machinery of government or generously funded research projects to kick into full gear. Singers and singing teachers are an untapped public health resource who can be mobilized now to help address some of the most pressing health concerns of our time, including the crisis of social connection. Singers are positively energizing leaders who naturally embody the aesthetics of leadership, building singing-caring relationships with themselves and those they work with. This narrative review is a call to singers to embrace their leadership potential and join the global cause to rebuild our social connections, one voice at a time.

Notes

1. For the value of a singing voice pedagogy background to community singing group facilitation, see Forbes and Bartlett (2020a).
2. Cf. Camlin (2022) who highlights the challenges for conservatoire students in participating in socially engaged music practices as part of a career portfolio.
3. The experiential perspective has been greatly devalued in modern society (McGilchrist 2021) and in singing voice research (Forbes 2024).

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Notes on contributor

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