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‘We’re all in the same boat’: How participatory songwriting might enhance Singing for Breathing’s psychosocial benefits

ABSTRACT

Within arts and health, participatory songwriting is recognized as an enjoyable and effective way to encourage emotional connectedness and social cohesion. This study used phenomenological ethnography to consider how collaborative song-writing might enhance the participatory experience of a Singing for Breathing group for people with breathlessness and chronic lung disease. Participants used

KEYWORDS

songwriting
singing
Singing for Breathing
breathlessness
COPD

art-based research
phenomenology
ethnography

the songwriting process to celebrate and develop their shared identity, musical and cultural heritage. Songwriting enabled participants to share their lived experiences of the anxiety and social isolation of chronic lung disease, and thereby to explore their being 'all in the same boat' musically, culturally and existentially. When considered within the context of similar singing-based and writing-based research, this study suggests that participatory and collaborative songwriting projects might confer psychosocial benefits to a group and to its members. While further research is needed, we propose that singing groups aiming to improve health should include songwriting.

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INTRODUCTION

The arts possess a unique capacity to convey what everyday life with chronic illness looks, sounds and feels like. By communicating their experiences through creative processes potentially cathartic and instructive, people with chronic illnesses may discover affirming ways to relate to and live with symptoms (Wilton 2017: 13). This article reports phenomenological ethnographic findings from a participatory songwriting collaboration (Figure 1) between the Breathless Singers Singing for Breathing (SfB) group, the musical practitioner who facilitated them (Durant) and the Life of Breath (LoB) research team at Durham University (Yoeli, Macnaughton, McLusky). As co-production, this research aims to breathe new life into understandings of the potential of participatory songwriting to enhance the psychosocial benefits of SfB.

BACKGROUND

Breathlessness and the arts

Breathlessness can feel a particularly lonely symptom (Williams and Carel 2018: 152). Singing relies upon the creative production and control of breath. For people with breathlessness (PwB), singing, and singing with others, may therefore prove enjoyable and empowering, as well as beneficial to breathing. The SfB model developed at Imperial College London (Philip et al. 2019: 118) combines breathing, vocal exercises and singing to maximize all benefits.

Breathlessness often renders the exertion of singing physically and emotionally demanding (Philip et al. 2019: 117), which can undermine self-confidence in social settings (Williams and Carel 2018: 152). For people whose breathlessness impedes stamina or confidence in speaking, writing may be a more accessibly cathartic means of self-expression (Bolger et al. 2015). From its inception, LoB recognized this (Macnaughton 2020: 40) through a writer-led series of poetry workshops (Stavropoulou and McLusky 2019) and therapeutic letter-writing (Malpass and Penny 2019). As part of LoB's exploration of art-based activities for PwB, we explored the potential of songwriting activities within an SfB group.

Once we were breathless (breathless)
Now we sing to expand our lungs
Breathless (breathless)
We’re here for everyone
Singing lifts your mood
It makes you smile
So we can walk and talk for another mile
We were breathless (breathless)
Now we’re having fun

We are singing beside the sea
Living with COPD
We’re a group of fearless winners
We are the breathless singers
Singing beside the coast
The songs we love the most
Forgetting that we’re ill
The breathless singers still

CHORUS

RAP Come along and see us, all you heavy breathers
Got a friend with asthma? Go ahead and ask her!
Missing half a lung? Please do come along!
Bronchiectasis or emphysema? We’d really love to see ya!

We are singing near the Tyne
Our hearts in every line
For wor [Geordie dialect: our] health it is we’re singing
And the friendship it is bringing
Rain or shine you’ll find us here
But there’s no need to fear
With a smile upon our faces
We sing all the right notes *(spoken)* but not necessarily *(sung)* in the right places

There’s no judgment here, voices of every kind
Join together so we can leave our worries behind

CHORUS

(‘The Breathless Song’. Also available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A2yNawFBps, The Breathless Singers 2020)

Figure 1: ‘The Breathless Song’, The Breathless Singers, 2020.

Participatory songwriting

Participatory songwriting (Bolger et al. 2015; Lenette et al. 2016) forms part of the global arts in health (AiH) movement, and aims primarily to create songs which communicate the world-view and lived experiences of marginalized groups (Lenette et al. 2016). As a collaborative, co-productive process, participatory songwriting draws from informal education and participatory forms of action research (Bolger 2015: 90–93).

Participatory songwriting is particularly effective in generating emotional engagement and social cohesion within groups (Lenette et al. 2016: 128; Fletcher 2019: 41). Within most qualitative studies of participatory songwriting, 'fun' features as a prominent theme and as a significant outcome (Lenette et al. 2016: 130).

At the time of this study,[1] the only previous collaborative songwriting project for PwB has been 'The Singing Hospital' partnership between singer-songwriter Victoria Hume, the Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust, and three London SfB groups (Hume 2019; rbh arts 2019), co-produced to showcase and to celebrate the tenth anniversary of SfB. The Breathless Singers sought to produce a similarly collaborative and participatory work which would convey in song what the group meant to its members.

METHODS

The Breathless Singers

The Breathless Singers is a Singing for Breathing group based in the coastal town of South Shields in North East England for people living with chronic breathlessness and their carers and friends. The group was created in 2018 by local singer-songwriter and singing teacher Sharon Durant,[2] who had recently trained in the SfB model (Philip et al. 2019: 118). The group was initially supported by the British Lung Foundation and then funded by the LoB. Following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Breathless Singers now meet online via the Zoom platform.

The Breathless Singers name was chosen by group members themselves. A typical session involves around fifteen to twenty minutes of tea and chat, a routine of physical warm-ups to songs such as 'Run Rabbit Run' (Gay and Butler 1939) then a range of breathing and vocal exercises developed both from Durant's own experience and her SfB training. Durant invites group members to select songs from her portfolio containing a range of familiar mid-twentieth century classics (e.g. Rodgers and Hammerstein 1945). Songs included within this portfolio must satisfy two criteria: firstly, they must be upbeat popular favourites from Durant's previous arts and health work or requested by Breathless Singers themselves; secondly, they must be structured to enables Durant to use SfB methods to challenge group members to extend their breathing. Durant accompanies each song on her ukulele, identifying the specific breathing-related and musical challenges within each, encouraging group members to draw breath less frequently and in a more controlled fashion.

With Durant enabling group members to collaboratively develop their own musical aesthetic, the Breathless Singers' repertoire then evolved to include favourite artists, such as The Carpenters (1973). The group were increasingly drawn to classic and contemporary songs of the ballad genre, the lyrics of which tended to resonate with members in describing journeys from isolation

1. Since then, Caro Overy and the Leith Cheyne Gang SfB group in Scotland has produced 'Love and Friendship Always Find a Way' as a song about their experiences of being separated from one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, available at https://youtu.be/_lspy42cAeg. Because of this abrupt change of context, this song was not studied within this research.
2. Further examples of Sharon Durant's work can be found on her websites https://www.sharondurant.com/ and https://www.mouthfulway.co.uk, as well as on Newcastle City Council's YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXHIaqkkAcU&feature=youtu.be.

to self-acceptance (Jackson et al. 1967; Settle 2017). This is reflected in the juxtaposition of 'The Breathless Song's' opening lines '*Once we were breathless/ Now we sing to expand our lungs*'.

In her usual choral practice, Durant focuses heavily on harmonization. Through feedback to her and in interviews and focus groups with Heather Yoeli, participants concurred that they preferred 'singing the same thing together', an assertion which perhaps foreshadowed the emerging phenomena of 'sameness' and being 'all in the same boat'. This artistic flexibility highlights the social element of Durant's artistic practice as 'an individual artist whose specialty includes working with society in a professional capacity' (Helguera 2011: 2). In this context, the art created through this collaborative process lies as much in the relationships which are formed through the art-making as in the artefacts arising from that process. This highlights the complex ways in which meaning is formed in musical activities, where the aesthetic dimension and the relational dimension are significant not just in the formation of meaning, but in the strength of the resulting outcomes, including those improving wellbeing (Camlin et al. 2020).

Songwriting

Participatory songwriting took place over four workshop-style discussions during the weekly sessions of August and September 2019. Durant facilitated these discussions, using a range of pair, sub-group and whole group conversations to encourage the group to reflect on life with breathlessness and upon how singing together impacted upon this experience. These discussions were recorded by Yoeli, who used a mixture of audio-recordings and contemporaneous handwritten notes.

Between workshops, Durant collated themes and quotations from participants, using them to draft versions of the song. Some group members brought along handwritten notes of ideas, whereas others preferred to contribute spontaneously during the sessions themselves, improvising and extemporizing in response to Durant's new material. 'The Breathless Song' developed collaboratively and organically. The group sang the emerging song most weeks, singing its chorus progressively more slowly to practice the controlled expirations encouraged by the SfB model. The song attracted the attention of local anti-smoking group Fresh SFNE, who visited to produce a video featuring Durant, Yoeli and participants.[3]

Alongside the notes, audio files and transcripts generated from the songwriting, Yoeli also made detailed field notes of singing sessions, observing participants and their interactions within the group. During July and August 2019, Yoeli interviewed eight participants more broadly about their experiences of breathlessness, lung disease, and singing. Whereas these interviews preceded the songwriting, they were nevertheless used to interrogate themes emerging from the songwriting, in accordance with ethnographic principles of validity as established through triangulation (Harrison 2018: 63).

Beyond the Breathless Singers, Yoeli also visited two Scottish SfB groups, a process which led to the Breathless Singers and the Warblers[4] holding a joint session. Yoeli, Durant and group members used this experience to reflect upon and to contextualize the Breathless Singers within the wider SfB movement.

3. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A2yNawFBps.

4. The Warblers, led by Jane Lewis, are a network of SfB groups based in the Lothians region of Scotland. The Breathless Singers joined their sessions in November 2019 and January 2020 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Department of Anthropology at Durham University, UK. All participants were allocated initialled pseudonyms, and provided consent for the publication of their song.

Data analysis

All materials generated by this study – field notes, audio-recordings from songwriting workshops, transcripts of workshops and individual interviews, together with lyrics of the preliminary drafts and final version of 'The Breathless Song' – were loaded into Nvivo12. From here, these were subjected to a phenomenological analysis grounded in the existentially embodied standpoint of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945).

Merleau-Ponty's (1945: 247) emphasis upon embodiment, and upon the human body as a social entity inseparable from its lifeworld or surroundings, highlights the importance of communal as well as individual experience. This study sought to understand the phenomena it identified as those experienced not only by a collection of individuals but by the group as a collective entity. Yoeli and the group identified emerging phenomena by discussing her provisional findings together, as she sought feedback to ensure that her understandings and interpretations accorded with those of the group.

Participant characteristics

The Breathless Singers agreed to Yoeli's presence as a participant-observer researcher (Harrison 2018: 13) within their weekly sessions. Nine group members – five women and four men, eight PwB and one carer – specifically consented to participate in this study, either by being ethnographically observed as a group member and songwriter, or being interviewed by Yoeli, or both.

Of the eight PwB, six had diagnoses of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), two of bronchiectasis, and three of asthma. All lived with additional chronic health concerns (most commonly cardiovascular disease, autoimmune conditions, and anxiety) which pre-dated their lung disease. For two, breathlessness had significantly reduced mobility, yet all sought to remain active through dog-walking, gardening, and local dance classes they attended together. All described how music formed an integral part of their social lives.

Most of the women were in their early 70s, whereas the men ranged in age from early 50s to early 80s. All had married and raised families, though most were now widowed or divorced. Most men had served in the military, and most women had worked in local factories or shops, though one woman and two men had subsequently held professional jobs. All but AC, the carer, had lived most of their lives in the South Shields area with large extended families nearby, the women caring for grandchildren and great-grandchildren. All but AC identified themselves as Sanddancers, and as speakers of Geordie, expressing strong cultural and emotional attachments to their heritage and dialect.

People from South Shields describe themselves as Sanddancers, though the reason for this is unclear. Sanddancers employ the Geordie dialect of the broader Tyneside area, a dialect with a lexicon, idiom and accent distinct from other varieties of British English (Hollands 1997; Watt 2002). The term Geordie, however, is used to refer not only to the dialect of the region, but to its culture and its people. Most Sanddancers consider themselves to be

a sub-group of Geordies, and participants in this study were content to be described as Geordies.

Geordie culture has been influenced by the longstanding industrial heritage of the region, by the labourers who migrated to Tyneside from Scotland and Ireland to work in its mines, shipyards and factories, and by the economic decline and social and political marginalization which accompanied the de-industrialization of the region during the 1970s and 1980s. Geordies have traditionally perceived themselves as skilled manual workers and as members of the lower social classes (Hollands 1997: 174) and have been stereotyped by others as friendly and inclusive, though sometimes also as less educated or less cultured (Watt 2002: 55). Given South Shields' coastal location and prior status as a major port, Sanddancer culture has been more specifically associated with fishing, shipping and trade, industries which are also suffering from post-industrial decline.

Whereas Sanddancers and Geordies are amongst the UK's most deprived or excluded groups, the participants of this study might arguably have been regarded as coming mostly from relatively advantaged sections of their community in that they were generally socially able and culturally literate. Owing to its port and the eighteenth and nineteenth century immigration and intermarriage this attracted, Sanddancers have traditionally been more ethnically heterogenous than other Geordies, and a significant minority have continental European or Arab lineage. Participants of this study, however, identified as solely white.

Nevertheless, as LoB work has concluded, being a person living with breathlessness involves embodying an often hidden yet nevertheless intense form of marginalization and social disadvantage. Particularly in the United Kingdom, COPD is known to be an illness associated with poverty and stigma (Macnaughton 2020). All participants, then, were living with disadvantage.

Researcher positionality

Within research undertaken into similar music and health activities, and particularly when undertaken from an ethnographic perspective, researchers have typically been music therapists, academic musicologists, or skilled musicians (Fletcher 2019). Yoeli was none of these and therefore able to use her lack of musical experience to join the Breathless Singers as a participant-observer (Harrison 2018: 13) and beginner at singing, bringing to the group no particular musical aesthetic or preferences of her own. By becoming accepted as a fellow learner, Yoeli was able to transcend some of the social barriers and the perceptions of expertise caused by her non-Geordie accent to gain the trust of the group (Harrison 2018: 91). During workshops, interviews and discussions, Yoeli emphasized to the group that she had no lived experience of breathlessness, acknowledging that, although she was '*in the same boat*' as the less musically confident group members in learning to sing, she was not '*in the same boat*' in terms of her health or mobility, or by the way in which she was viewed by society on account of this.

FINDINGS

Living with breathlessness

Group members were drawn together as a group by their collective experience of, as they described it '*being in the same boat*'. As both their chosen name

(The Breathless Singers) and the opening refrain of their song's chorus ('*once we were breathless*') emphasize, their experience of breathlessness was central to this. Songwriting enabled the group to reflect together humorously, yet intensely, upon their shared experiences.

The social aspects

From the earliest sessions of the Breathless Singers, group members readily discussed how their breathlessness led to loneliness and isolation:

> Sometimes you would be on your own all day and wouldn't open your mouth to talk to anybody. I find that when I'm on my own and someone will come and visit us[5] and I'll be chatting away, 'cos I've been on my own all day and I'll start coughing; I have to go and get a drink of water because I haven't spoken to anybody.
>
> (TJ)

'The Breathless Song' line 'now we sing to expand our lungs' expresses participants' view that improving their fitness through the breathing exercises and singing helped them to go out and see more people. The songwriting sessions created a space for participants to talk about loneliness, returning repeatedly to the theme of how much they enjoyed being with others who could relate to their experiences. Discovering themselves to be '*all in the same boat*' enabled individuals to feel less self-conscious about and less socially inhibited by their breathlessness, and consequently more confident about going for walks and joining local exercise groups.

The emotional aspects

At the outset of the songwriting, the group expressed a consensus that they wanted to produce a piece that was 'upbeat' and 'positive' and 'fun' in a major rather than a minor key; they did not want to sing about their problems but to advertise the benefits of SfB. The lines '*Singing lifts your mood/ It makes you smile/ So we can walk and talk for another mile*' illustrate how, for participants, the physical benefits of the group derived largely from the emotional benefits.

As the months progressed, group members chatted increasingly openly with one another about the emotional aspects of breathlessness. Fieldwork notes describe one catalyst for this growing candour:

> PH has brought Ella: the softest, fluffiest new member yet, and she's wearing a service dog harness marked 'emotional support'. I'd been noticing these past weeks that PH has been increasingly open about his struggles. RG and Ella connect immediately – as a dog, she's so similar to his – but Ella soon wants to climb onto everyone's else lap too, one by one. As we're all admiring Ella, [two other group members] comment for the first time that *aye, like you* PH, *I can get bad with nerves, with anxiety too, of a morning, especially when, you know. […]* Neither of them were the people who'd quietly disclosed it to me alone in their interviews, either.
>
> (27 January 2020)

5. In Geordie dialect, individuals refer singularly to themselves as 'us' rather than to 'me' or 'I'. As the song line 'for wor health it is we're singing', 'wor' is used to refer to 'we' or 'us' of standard English.

Participants used the term 'anxiety' when seeking to relate to one another within the group. During interviews, however, members of the Breathless Singers spoke less about anxiety as much as 'worry', 'fear', 'panic', 'tizzy', or 'nerves', describing the emotional aspects of breathlessness in broadly two ways. Some described the prospect of an episode of breathlessness as causing them worry and the sensation of breathlessness as making them feel panicky. Others described themselves as having always been 'worriers' or 'nervous people', with some reporting longstanding mental health challenges which pre-dated their lung conditions and made their breathing problems harder to cope with. Within group settings, participants from both groups provided empathy and support to one another and found common ground in discussing their fears around their diagnoses and symptoms. 'The Breathless Song's' rap interlude (Figure 1), the composition of which was initiated and facilitated mainly by PH, illustrates how the songwriting process enabled the group to develop a collective sense of humour which enabled them to articulate these fears. Songwriting, more than the singing alone, enabled group members to recognize and explore the commonalities of their illness experience.

Being similar people

Through the songwriting process, the Breathless Singers were celebrating and developing a collective heritage and identity. This was based in part upon shared illness experiences but primarily upon shared cultural and musical passions.

Speaking Geordie together

As this conversation (Figure 2) illustrates, it was through the songwriting process that participants began – hesitantly at first – to explore their shared linguistic and cultural heritage. They introduced their Geordie dialect to The Breathless Song through the line '*for wor* [our] *health it is we're singing*' (contributed by KA) and through PH's line '*Got a friend with asthma? Go ahead and ask her!*', which rhymes only when the vowel of ask is pronounced using the Geordie /ă/. More specific than the use of Geordie, however, the recurring motifs of '*singing beside the sea/coast/Tyne*' reflect the Sanddancer connection to the coast and port town as well as the Tyne, an industrial river historically associated with mining exports and shipbuilding. This connection to both sea and river made the expression frequently deployed by participants 'we're all in the same boat' all the more metaphorically resonant. When describing themselves as '*all in the same boat*', participants pronounced '*boat*' with the Geordie /ʊə/ so-called GOAT-variant vowel (Watt 2002: 47), as in the traditional local song 'Dance Ti' Thi Daddy' (Anon. undated).

Being copers and helpers

The culture of the group developed not only out of commonalities of dialect and idiom, but out of ways of coping and of helping one another. During initial songwriting sessions, Durant encouraged participants to talk to one another about how they had found the group. Through sharing their stories with one another, group members discovered themselves to be similarly optimistic and proactive in their approach to illness (Figure 3).

The Breathless Singers developed a culture that was welcoming, resilient and encouraging. Whereas membership of some UK SfB groups requires

Durant	Right we'll have a little sing…. I'll write that out for the next session so that we can sing it, and so if there's any tweaks or any – if any inspiration should hit you *(to* NE*, who looks quietly thoughtful)* and I'm looking at you…
KA	*(to* NE*, pointedly)* Right
NE	I've – I've got nothing to add
Yoeli	You're sitting there with a notepad in your hand
NE	I can't do the – really, I was sitting there and thinking… and my mind went off a complete tangent, and I'm thinking about meself about why can't we do it in Geordie, why does nobody use our slang anymore?
Group laughs, NE*'s feeling seeming to resonate with others*	
KA	*(Geordie phrase, rendered inaudible by group laughter)*
NE	*(in exaggerated accent)* Aye, because naybody speaks Geordie like that any mair
More laughter, murmurs of agreement	
Durant	Yeah. Yeah – but feel free, you know, we could Geordify it *(to* NE*)*and if you want to as well
NE	Oh no, I – it *(laughs self-deprecatingly, glances nervously at* Yoeli *and* AC*)*
Yoeli	I think seriously though… I think we could
KA	The Why Aye song?
NE	Aye, yesssssssssss!

Figure 2: Speaking Geordie together, songwriting process, The Breathless Singers, 2020.

LB	Asthma didn’t [defeat me]; this won’t … I’m determined. I’m not going to get Alzheimer’s; I’m not going to get dementia and I’m not going to be breathless.
Yoeli	You’ve got a fantastic attitude.
LB	You have to. I won’t be browbeaten by anybody… [They say] ‘Be careful when you go out…’ and I’ll go ‘If I fall, I fall. I’ll get up’.
Yoeli	And it seems like that’s very much the attitude you carry through into your singing, too.
LB	It is. I’m not the greatest. I can hold a tune but I enjoy it. And you get no other people in the same position you’re in. You know? You don’t sit there thinking: Oh, I’ve got COPD, I’ve got asthma and I’ve got this, I’ve got that… I mean KA who comes… she’s far worse than me…

Figure 3: Being copers and helpers, songwriting process, The Breathless Singers, 2020.

referral from respiratory practitioners, the Breathless Singers was open to all. As the song lines ‘*we’re here for everyone*’ and ‘*there’s no judgment here, voices of every kind*’ (contributed by MG and JD) and rap interlude emphasize, this issomething about which the whole group felt passionately.

Living with music

Through the songwriting process, the Breathless Singers also found themselves to be ‘*all in the same boat*’ in their approach to music. The members shared a musical heritage and love of music which both united the group and energized the songwriting process as they explored their musical heritage and developed a collective musical identity.

A shared passion

All of the Breathless Singers were passionate and knowledgeable music lovers. The creativity and innovation involved in the songwriting process tended to facilitate a more active level of participation and engagement within the group than the singing alone. The fun of this is exemplified by the transcript (Figure 4) illustrating how their climactic line ‘and now we’re having fun’ emerged.

Music transcended everything

Previous ethnographic studies of the collective experience generated within broader art-based health groups (Raw 2013) and SfB groups specifically (Yoeli and Macnaughton 2020) identified phenomena of *communitas* and *liminality* (Turner 1969) in the intensity with which singing drew members into the group. Within this study, group members reported this process helped with their anxiety or worries. Both the breathing exercises and the exhilaration of

Durant	and then it goes *(sings)* Singing lifts our mood *(speaking)* Singing lifts our mood. Ready? *(starts playing)*
Whole group *(sings)*	Singing lifts our mood
Durant *(singing)*	It makes you smile
Whole group *(sings)*	It makes you smile
Durant *(singing)*	So we can walk and talk for another mile
Whole group *(sings)*	So we can walk and talk for another mile *(stops playing)*
Durant	*(singing, unaccompanied)* for another mile *(speaking)* so we could do that again, I think, if *(inaudible)* And now I need another line *(starts playing, and sings)* We were breathless
KA	How about ‘and now we’ve having fun’
Lots of murmurs of approval, laughter	
Durant	‘Now we’re having fun’ – that’s good. I’ll write that down.
Durant picks up ukulele and begins quiet to improvise with KA’s suggested line. Group spontaneously breaks into several groups of more informal chatter. Lots of laughter.	
Durant	*(speaking loudly to bring group together)* Yes, cool. I’m just trying to think if I *(strums several chords, adjusting key)* *(singing – someone else is humming)* Once we were breathless Now we sing to expand our moods Breathleeeee… *(stops, realising her Freudian slip from JD’s amused expression)*
Lots of laughter from group	
Durant	Lungs? Moods? Anyway

Figure 4: A shared passion, songwriting process, The Breathless Singers, 2020.

singing and writing together enabled them to both manage and transcend the isolation of their illness together, as reflected in the 'The Breathless Song' lyrics *'join together so we can leave our worries behind'*.

DISCUSSION

'All in the same boat'

The determination of participants to identify, to emphasize, and to celebrate their commonalities of experience emerged as the single most significant theme within study findings. In studies applying Victor Turner's (1969) work on *communitas* to religious groups and to the music they generate, I. M. Lewis (1971) found that the most musically and emotionally intense connections develop within the most marginalized or stigmatized communities. The warmth, connectedness and creativity with which the Breathless Singers described being *'all in the same boat'* could therefore be taken as a reflection of the disadvantage and isolation characterizing their lived experience, both as PwB and as Sanddancers.

'All in the same boat' as worriers: Same-ness and identity through breathlessness

The emotional and psychosocial challenges of life with breathlessness and lung disease emerged as a major theme within this study. Loneliness and isolation were the most readily discussed source of distress for participants. The *Catch Your Breath* writer-in-residence evaluation also found that the emotional consequences of breathlessness emerged largely from social isolation, and from the feeling amongst participants that their symptoms were – or rendered them – invisible (Stavropoulou and McLusky 2019: 32; Macnaughton 2020: 37).

Anxiety has long been recognized as a significant component and confounder of chronic lung disease, though researchers have struggled to describe how and why psychological symptoms relate to patient experiences of breathlessness (Williams and Carel 2018). This study identified that, for some, anxiety also preceded breathlessness. Traditionally, the increased prevalence of COPD amongst people with mental ill-health has been explained in terms of the socio-economic disadvantage which predisposes people to both lung disease and anxiety, and in terms of the way that many individuals use smoking as a means of managing distress (Williams and Carel 2018: 146–7). Given that all Sanddancers of their generation smoked, and that the Breathless Singers appeared, if anything, to be less deprived than many, these explanations may not suffice.

Oh the love we conjure
Is a thing of wonder
With our hearts to the sky
We all defy you
To determine us

('The Singing Hospital', Hume 2019: 1)

Figure 5: 'The Singing Hospital', 2019.

The clinical diagnosis of an anxiety disorder requires that the patient's worry be irrational or unfounded (Williams and Carel 2018: 150). For PwB, worries become valid and legitimate in the distress they cause. This study found that participants without previous mental health concerns did not necessarily regard their emotional responses to breathlessness as anxiety, but described instead a more rational worry, fear, panic, tizzy or nerves. By exploring in greater depth how individuals relate to their breathing, the *Letter to my Breath* study (Malpass and Penny 2019: 51–53) found that people living with newfound breathlessness experience emotions which extend beyond the diagnostic constructs of anxiety disorders, also encompassing antagonism, mistrust and uncertainty. 'The Singing Hospital' (Hume 2019: 1; Figure 5), in affirming this study's findings of how music transcended all illness experience, cautions against the pathologization or labelling of the lived experiences of PwB:

'All in the same boat' as a group of fearless winners: Same-ness and identity as songwriters

The Breathless Singers possessed a common language grounded in a cohesive heritage; Geordie is stigmatized as uncultured, lower class and unintelligible to outsiders (Watt 2002: 54). For those whose working lives spanned the

Don't come to us with your sad sack recipes
We come here for fun
You tell the world that we're here to rattle its cage
We come here for fun

We're bold as brass
We shine like suns
We feel the joy
We sing as one

Don't bring us down with your ragbag therapies
We come here for fun
You tell them all that we're here to live our best lives
We come here for fun

('The Singing Hospital', Hume 2019: 1)

Singing lifts your mood
It makes you smile
So we can walk and talk for another mile
We were breathless (breathless)
Now we're having fun

('The Breathless Song')

Figure 6: Parallels between 'The Breathless Song' and 'The Singing Hospital'.

industrial and manufacturing decline of the 1970s and 1980s (the generation within which all participants fell) asserting one's Geordie or Sanddancer identity can feel particularly problematic (Hollands 1997: 174). The emotive status of the dialect may explain NE's seeming hesitancy about proposing the use of Geordie within 'The Breathless Song' (Figure 2) and his apparent seeking of assent from AC and Yoeli as well as Durant. By overcoming the group's initial inhibitions about using Geordie within the song, the Breathless Singers used their song to celebrate their distinctive culture and heritage.

Beyond these cultural nuances, 'The Breathless Song' contains some parallels with the longest Singing Hospital piece (Hume 2019: 1). Both are up-tempo, written in a major key and their lyrics (Figure 6) emphasize the fun the groups were having, as noted throughout the participatory songwriting literature (Lenette et al. 2016: 130). Just as the Breathless Singers were unanimous that 'The Breathless Song' be 'upbeat' and 'positive', the SfB groups collaborating on 'The Singing Hospital' fed back to Hume that her initial drafts sounded too sombre and needed to convey more fun (Personal correspondence). Hume responded to this by transposing the piece (Figure 4) into a major key, humour by arranging 'The Singing Hospital's' opening line '*I thought I couldn't sing*' (Hume 2019: 1) in an ironically musically demanding multi-part harmony. In comparing these, it is important to note that neither Durant nor any other of the Breathless Singers had listened to any of 'The Singing Hospital' before completing 'The Breathless Song'.

Although similarly intent on emphasizing the fun of singing, however, 'The Breathless Song' and 'The Singing Hospital' express their enjoyment in distinctive tones. The fun of 'The Singing Hospital' piece (Figure 6) appears grounded in anger and defiance that 'The Breathless Song' is not. This study found little of the sense of injustice or marginalization that is often understood to underpin the cohesion and collective identity of condition-specific patient support groups, nor of the marginalization or injustice often described as affecting people living with chronic lung disease (Carel et al. 2014; Macnaughton 2020: 37). This difference in tone might partly be explained in terms of cultural identity or traditional British class-based deference: Geordies have historically regarded themselves as socially outside the 'professional classes' (Watt 2002: 54; Hollands 1997: 175), and members of the Breathless Singers may therefore have felt ineligible to criticize the healthcare professionals who managed their care. Beyond such possible explanations, the Breathless Singers did not regard themselves primarily as a patient group but instead as a '*group of fearless winners*' (Figure 1), singers and songwriters whose music was shaped not just by their breathlessness, but by their love for music. The songwriting process furthered the collective identity that the Breathless Singers were developing not only through the commonalities of illness, but also in the heritage they were celebrating.

The clarity and resolve with which the Breathless Singers distanced themselves from the feelings of resentment or oppression which might be expected from such an ostensibly marginalized group, as evidenced by 'The Breathless Song's' difference in tone from 'The Singing Hospital' was perhaps when viewed within a framework of *communitas* (Turner 1969) and in light of the historical marginalization of Geordie culture, an act of resistance in itself. The Breathless Singers were drawing upon the intensity and cohesion of their collective musical experience to assert their resilience as '*fearless winners*' to an extent that implicitly challenged any social expectations that they should embody their victimhood. Instead, the Breathless Singers conveyed the more

empowering assertion that people living with chronic ill-health often find creative, collaborative ways to make meaning and find enjoyment from their lives (Carel 2014: 253).

The strengths and limitations of this study

The strength of this study lies in its exploration of how songwriting helped develop collective identity and celebrate shared heritage for PwB from a frequently marginalized and rarely studied cultural group. Previous UK songwriting within SfB groups (Hume 2019) and research into SfB (Philip et al. 2019) has generally been located in more socioeconomically advantaged areas of the South East of England. By highlighting how the Breathless Singers introduced their Sanddancer values of resilience, inclusivity and encouragement to the songwriting process, this study supports the potential flexibility of the SfB model and its concepts, and the potential cultural transferability of the participatory songwriting method. As the study of Catherine Downes et al. (2019), which seeks to transpose the SfB model to a Ugandan context, also concludes, the SfB model makes significant cultural assumptions about how breathlessness affects social experience that are based largely upon Anglo-Saxon understandings of the body, illness and music. While Anglo-Saxon, Sanddancer culture is different from that of the South East of England. Future studies might further explore the cultural transferability of our findings.

Ethnography has long debated the validity of abstracting theoretical generalizations from a single case study (Lloyd-Jones 2005: 75–76). By emphasizing the local dialect /ʊə/ GOAT-variant (Watt 2002: 47) within the idiom of being '*all in the same boat*', the over-arching phenomenological conceptualization of 'sameness' in 'The Breathless Song' is linguistically context-specific to Geordie dialect. Nevertheless, the depth of focus and plurality of methods enabled by our sustained engagement with a single SfB group may nevertheless have highlighted phenomena that might not have been uncovered in a more broadly based study. Its conclusions invite further research.

The discipline of participatory songwriting is grounded in many of the same principles of co-production and action research which informed the participatory orientation of this study's ethnography (Bolger 2015: 90–93). This collective focus added rigour to the emerging phenomena in that it enabled Yoeli to verify them through discussion with the group. However, this group-based emphasis may also have inhibited contributions from the less outgoing group members (MG and TJ) and from those who sometimes felt reticent about sharing their writing (NE and PH). By providing group members with notebooks to be shared only with researchers, Nelli Stavropoulou and Sarah McLusky (2019) found many individuals disclosed in writing experiences, thoughts and feelings which they did not discuss within either the group or during interview sessions. This study might have been improved by offering participants a similar option.

The study was designed and led by a qualitative researcher who did not identify as a musician (Yoeli) in partnership with a musician (Durant). The article primarily uses conventional qualitative methodologies and may have benefited from an approach that reflected the art form it explored. By engaging in songwriting, however, the group explored through words and music their own experience of breathlessness in words and in the form of the music. Those words and musical phrases do more than the quotes reported here to express their lived experience of breathlessness.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified how introducing a collaborative songwriting process within an SfB group intensified the collective sense of same-ness, identity and being '*all in the same boat*'. When considered within the context of similar singing-based and writing-based research initiatives undertaken amongst people living with breathlessness, lung disease and other chronic illnesses, this study suggests that collaborative songwriting projects might confer effective psychosocial benefits to a group and to its members. The songwriting process encourages and enables participants to share their experiences of coping with worrying or isolating symptoms, and of managing life within the practical and social limitations imposed by chronic illness, while at the same time enjoying their favourite songs and creative talents. In so doing, the songwriting process can enable participants to connect with one another through both illness and music; to feel less isolated; to discover, explore and celebrate a common musical heritage; and to enjoy life together.

As a result, we would propose that SfB practitioners and facilitators of similar arts in health groups consider including collaborative songwriting within their repertoire of activities. Further research is needed, we would suggest, into how songwriting might most effectively be assimilated within the SfB model.

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