

# Singing Against Loneliness: The Social Function of Choirs

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## ABSTRACT

Choirs are widely recognized for their entertainment value. However, choirs also have immense social value and serve as vital spaces where people can connect. With loneliness an ever-increasing problem in the world today, the value of these spaces has grown; therefore, it is vital to study choirs and their impact. By analyzing extensive research on choirs and their impact, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the social benefits of choirs and, overall, answers the question: How do choirs function as cultural spaces that strengthen social networks, trust, and belonging in diverse communities?

This review investigates and discusses the value of choirs in three areas: social networks, trust, and belonging. Choirs create strong and lasting social networks through the community formed by collective gatherings and joint singing. Trust is a critical component in choirs, as collective singing requires individuals to trust those around them to achieve a better sound. Finally, choir attendance gives individuals a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging in the group, which enables them to produce wonderful music.

However, these benefits of choirs are not shared equally, and this nuance is a critical finding of this review. Different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds are among the many factors that can lead to power imbalances and feelings of exclusivity in choirs. Also, to fully assess the benefits of choirs for community well-being, it is imperative to study the long-term effects of participation, which has not been examined to a great extent in prior research. This review explains that, to achieve the most positive effects of a choir, it must be carefully and intentionally designed to ensure it does not support exclusion or harm to certain members. Overall, in a world where social isolation is elevated, choirs can be an effective and monumental space for people to foster social networks, trust, and a sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** Choirs; Social networks; Belonging; Trust; Loneliness; Community; Social isolation

## INTRODUCTION

While the artistic value of choir ensembles has long been recognized, recent research has begun to focus on the social effects of these music groups, including impacts on well-being and community building.

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Choirs serve as unique spaces where participants come together to create art, fostering a shared identity (1) and mutual social exchange (2). Currently, there has been a large increase in loneliness worldwide, and this leads to a plethora of issues, including cultural fragmentation and the erosion of trust (3). Diverse community-based choirs might be a powerful way to address these issues. Therefore, studying the social benefits of choirs is crucial to developing effective community-building strategies. This review aims to answer the key question: how do choirs function as cultural spaces that strengthen social networks, trust, and a sense of belonging in diverse communities?

To better understand how choirs foster human connection and community bonding, it is necessary to examine three aspects: social networks, trust, and belonging. These categories all examine choirs from a unique perspective. Social networks are primarily an external factor and involve examining the meaningful connections made through choral participation. Alternatively, trust and belonging are more internal factors, as they address participants' personal emotions and responses to their participation in the choir. Trust encompasses both the ability to be vulnerable in sharing their voice with other choristers and trusting others to sing along and support them. Belonging captures the sense of inclusion, in which a participant feels they are a valuable part of a meaningful collective. These three aspects fully encompass the choral experience, as they focus on both the external social networks formed and the participants' internal emotions toward the choir.

In addition to these components, this review considers the importance of choirs as cultural spaces that can help ease alienating tensions in diverse environments. In diverse societies, there is segregation and marginalization, and choirs can be a way to bridge societal divides and turn feelings of exclusion into mutual understanding and trust among different people. There is also opportunity for future research on choirs, as most of the current research has paid less attention to the long-term effects of choirs as well as the potential negative effects of poorly planned choirs.

## **METHODS**

To systematically investigate how choirs function as cultural spaces that promote community, a structured literature search was carried out using Google Scholar and targeted Google searches. The primary search strategy focused on the overarching research question and was refined by applying specific keywords, such as choir, diverse, music, and community. To ensure a rigorous and relevant dataset, publications were screened against strict criteria, such as preferring empirical papers. To capture a strong synthesis of the topic, the final selection incorporated a wide variety of empirical methodologies present in the field, including longitudinal case studies, ethnographic observations, and expert interviews.

Furthermore, eligible research had to explicitly involve a choir group or community singing program as the primary subject of observation, presenting clear data on social outcomes, specifically detailing how social connection, belonging, and trust were measured within participants. To ensure the review reflected both contemporary and enduring findings, the review included studies and institutional data published between 2010 and 2026. The selection also intentionally prioritized diverse contextual settings, capturing

environments ranging from post-colonial communities and refugee support centers to urban schools, formal care settings, and virtual platforms. Following this screening process, a sample of 14 targeted papers was used for final analysis. This deliberate approach guaranteed that the literature provided a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of the research question.

## **1.1 CHOIRS AS CULTURAL SPACES**

In the context of this review, a cultural space is defined as a physical or social environment where shared practices, identities, and meanings are actively constructed and arranged by its participants. Choirs act as vital cultural spaces where diverse groups can come together in a structured environment with a common goal and shared meaning.

Joseph et al. (2024) studied this value of choirs in the context of post-colonial South Africa, a society that is quite diverse. They conducted a longitudinal study over five years and focused on two choirs in the Western Cape and Cape Town region. The researchers used both questionnaires and interviews, applying Identity Process Theory to investigate how choir membership affected group identity and encouraged community growth among individuals from a range of socioeconomic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. Their research indicates that community choirs can serve as important catalysts for community development, helping to reduce persistent social, racial, and economic divides. The choirs enabled participants to feel part of a common identity, and members described this feeling as “with my people”(2). Similarly, Shafazhinskaya et al. (2020) argued that uniting traditions through "crossover music" functions as an essential means of bridging intergenerational gaps and dissolving rigid cultural boundaries. Drawing on sociological and cultural studies literature, historical analysis of crossover music, and surveys of musical preferences across age groups, Shafazhinskaya et al. found that this hybridity broadens audiences and promotes cultural tolerance, thereby promoting a common identity across social groups and age ranges (12).

For marginalized groups such as refugees and asylum seekers, community music groups can serve as equalizing cultural spaces where improvisation and collaborative music-making foster intercultural connection without requiring a shared language (4). These spaces also support integration and well-being by enabling non-verbal communication and creating opportunities for participants to feel empowered within their new communities. In a qualitative case study of a music group at a refugee support center conducted over two years (2017–2019), Vougioukalou et al. (2019) examined this process through participant observation, questionnaires, informal interviews, and a duo-ethnographic approach that combined practitioner and researcher perspectives (4). By observing rehearsals, community time, and performances, the researchers found that improvisation shifted power dynamics, and refugee participants displayed leadership qualities and worked alongside other community members.

Cabedo Mas and Díaz Gómez (2012) conducted an experiment in a school setting and used a different methodological approach, collecting experts’ opinions rather than directly engaging with participants (5). They interviewed 25 nationally and internationally recognized music education scholars from 12

countries, gathering and thematically analyzing 19 in-depth responses. The experts regularly emphasized that inclusive music practices, defined in this study as approaches that incorporate diverse musical traditions, informal learning methods, and multiple forms of participation rather than privileging a single cultural or stylistic standard, were vital for supporting integration in culturally diverse classrooms. The adoption of these practices, alongside recognition of students' particular cultural and musical identities, was identified by the scholars as promoting what they termed "peaceful coexistence," a concept the researchers used to describe an instructional environment in which students from different cultural backgrounds actively engage, cooperate, and feel mutually recognized rather than simply tolerating one another. The experts emphasized that the music classroom can be transformed into a shared social and cultural space that fosters deep participation, mutual recognition, and a stronger sense of inclusion.

## **1.2 CHOIRS AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

Social infrastructure refers to the foundational organizations, programs, and spaces that facilitate regular interpersonal interaction and community building. The role of choirs as social infrastructure lies in their ability to foster social activities and encourage participants to avoid remaining isolated.

This function has been described across a range of official and community settings, from elder care centers and refugee support programs to university ensembles and urban outreach initiatives, suggesting that the social benefits of choral participation are not confined to any single context(1,4,7,8). Gomes et al. (2025) captured this pattern through ethnographic observation of choir rehearsals across 15 formal care settings in northern Portugal, conducting 65 observation sessions alongside semi-structured interviews with older adult participants, their family members, and institutional staff over a six-month period (1). Their ethnographic evidence revealed that these musical cultural spaces encouraged "gestures of care," such as spontaneous hugs, mutual support, and increased informal conversation, consequently strengthening interpersonal relationships between participants from different institutions who might otherwise never have interacted.

Though the immediate experience of music provides intrinsic enjoyment, Lamont et al. (2018) argued that sustained, extended engagement in a choir cultivates enduring social networks and lasting well-being (9). Conducting a longitudinal qualitative case study of a UK community choir at two time points, 2009 and 2013, the researchers gathered data through individual interviews, focus groups, rehearsal observations, and a World Café participatory discussion (10). This system allowed the researchers to define and measure social networking as the depth of shared meaning and collective accomplishment built over time. Members described relationships within the choir as sources of meaning and identity that extended far beyond short-term pleasure, with sustained participation producing what the researchers characterized as "long-lasting social bonds" and a durable sense of shared community that persisted well beyond individual rehearsals (9).

Choirs' capacity to sustain social networks is not limited by physical proximity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person rehearsals became impossible, Konewko (2025) examined whether a virtual

choir format could still generate meaningful social connections. Studying a 33-voice university chorus that moved entirely to online synchronous classes, online sectionals, and a virtual recording project, the researcher collected structured written reflections from participants that covered themes of class functioning, personal and social experiences, and feelings of connection or alienation. The researchers found that 21% of participants effectively collaborated on joint objectives and formed new friendships through the digital choir format, revealing the potential for important connections to form even without a physical space. However, it is also important to note that there were many shortcomings in the virtual arrangements: 76% of participants reported missing in-person proximity, and 24% experienced some degree of alienation attributed to the online setting. These results illustrate that in-person singing produces a level of connection that online approaches have difficulty fully replicating (6). Future research should directly compare in-person and online formats within the same study to better identify which aspects depend on physical presence and which can be upheld online.

In addition, the social benefits of choral participation extend across multiple cultures, as explored by Boer and Abubakar (2014), who collected survey data from four national samples: the Philippines, Kenya, Germany, and New Zealand (11). They used Confirmatory Factor Analysis and path modeling to discover the impact of music and musical rituals on the social landscape in the different countries. Overall, they found that music consistently strengthened social unity and had a very positive effect on community identity across all cultures. However, the different environments also experienced music differently and were split between individualistic and collective listening. In collectivist contexts where family bonds are central to society, such as Kenya, musical rituals fostered emotional well-being by first strengthening family cohesion and subsequently spreading to the broader community. However, in more individualistic societies such as Germany and New Zealand, peer listening had a greater emotional benefit, as these communities place greater emphasis on peer relations. Together, though, both types of societies experienced the positive effects of choirs, demonstrating their value for building and strengthening social networks within the specific cultural contexts of the Philippines, Kenya, Germany, and New Zealand (11).

### **1.3 CHOIRS AND TRUST**

Choirs cultivate trust through reliance on fellow choristers as well as the vulnerability of singing. In choral environments, participants transform from strangers to mutually reliant, and researchers have studied this phenomenon by examining synchronized movement and internal felt experiences. Stupacher et al. (2020) investigated this through three online experiments in which participants watched animated stick-figure walkers, one representing "self" and one representing "other," moving either synchronously or asynchronously to music (13). Participants then rated their felt closeness to the other figure using the Inclusion of Other in Self scale. The findings demonstrated a consistent "synchrony-closeness effect," showing that moving in time together directly increases feelings of interpersonal connection and interpersonal trust regardless of the music used. These trust-building mechanisms were further strengthened when the music had high beat clarity and was personally enjoyable to participants, suggesting that the quality and rhythmic accessibility of the musical repertoire meaningfully shape the extent to which synchronized movement builds connection (13).

Trust and social cohesion within choral settings are built through consistent interaction, shared responsibility, and smaller interpersonal connections that expand to the larger group. In an urban context, Krüger Bridge (2024) examined how these trust mechanisms operate in a real community setting through a qualitative case study of Liverpool Cathedral's inclusive choral outreach program (7). Using longitudinal program data, institutional documents, and interviews and focus groups with participants from varied socioeconomic, cultural, and age backgrounds, the study found that regular rehearsals promoted a sense of reliability and reciprocal encouragement among individuals from very different walks of life. This finding demonstrated that the program was an effective community-building initiative and that participants developed bonds rooted in consistent effort and mutual accountability. Using a similar qualitative, interview-based approach, Parker (2010) conducted action research within a single urban high school choral ensemble, gathering data through seven small-group interviews with 26 students, as well as descriptive notes and reflective memos (14). Parker found that trust within the ensemble developed first at the sectional level, in the smaller subgroups of singers who share the same vocal part, such as sopranos or tenors, who rehearse separately before rejoining the full ensemble. These tighter-knit sectional relationships served as a foundation for ensemble-wide trust to grow, as the close bonds developed within sections gradually extended outward, strengthening the cohesion of the entire group (14). This environment was further defined by what Parker described as mutual vulnerability, in which the collective emotional experience of singing together in front of others created a sense of emotional safety that strengthened interpersonal trust within the ensemble.

Employing a unique methodological lens, Vougioukalou et al. (2019) used duo-ethnography, combining the perspectives of both a researcher and a practitioner, alongside two years of participant observation, questionnaires, and informal interviews with members of a music group at a refugee support center (4). In this setting, the central musical practice was improvisation. The researchers found that this improvisation effectively built trust by requiring attentive listening and carefully following others. Every participant had to stay responsive to others in real time, thereby distributing creative leadership among them. This study displays that in settings where participants may feel uninvolved or disconnected, an improvisation approach may be beneficial. Improvisation is an extremely important cause of trust-building in choral environments, as it demands presence and reliance on others. This shift in power relations also created a more impartial and participatory community, one in which refugee participants could assume visible leadership roles alongside local community members, thus building trust that extended beyond music into the group's broader social fabric.

## **1.4 CHOIRS AND BELONGING**

Choirs are meaningful cultural places that encourage a feeling of belonging by giving participants a common purpose and the experience of being part of a collective. This existential belonging lets individuals move beyond superficial social contact to find deeper meaning and an idea of community through shared musical activity. Heard et al. (2024) captured this through a qualitative, community-embedded case study of two music-for-social-connection programs in an urban Australian

setting, in which they worked collaboratively with social sector organizations to recruit participants aged 20–70 who were experiencing or at risk of loneliness (8). Using semi-structured interviews, brief interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation of music sessions, the researchers examined shifts across three separate dimensions of loneliness: social, emotional, and existential. Concretely, participants who had previously described feeling invisible or excluded reported that the music programs gave them a sense of being genuinely seen and valued, moving from a state of perceived isolation to one where they described a feeling of "we belong," characterizing the group as a meaningful collective they were actively part of rather than simply attending (8). In urban outreach settings, this sense of inclusion is often described in similarly expansive terms. Krüger Bridge (2024), whose methodology used longitudinal program data, institutional documents, and thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups with participants from varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, found that participants consistently characterized their experience as feeling "part of something bigger than myself (7)." By intentionally welcoming individuals of varying ethnicities, ages, and abilities through an open-door policy with low barriers to entry, the Liverpool Cathedral outreach program modeled how cultural spaces are able to bridge differences and provide a visible path toward social mobility and inclusion (7).

However, the distribution of belonging within choral spaces is not always equal. Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010) investigated this tension through a mixed-method ethnographic action research study of children participating in SingUp choirs, collecting participant observation data at weekly rehearsals and performances alongside questionnaire surveys at three time points, baseline, eight months, and sixteen months, and open-ended interviews and focus groups with 48 children, 8 parents, 6 staff members, and 2 teachers (15). A control group that did not participate in the choir (51 children from similar socioeconomic backgrounds) was also included for comparison. Their results showed that choir participation enhanced bonding social capital for those who were already socially and culturally advantaged. However, power imbalances in the choir persisted, resulting in social consequences for lower-status participants. Beyond social dynamics, external pressures persisted that undermined feelings of belonging. An example of this is the perception of choral singing as "uncool," which was a major deterrent for many boys, especially those from less privileged backgrounds. These data were especially significant because the use of a control group enabled the researchers to carefully isolate these patterns. To address these gaps, choral leaders must ensure that the musical repertoire is culturally relevant to the diverse communities they serve, as differences between the music offered and participants' lived cultural experiences were among the primary barriers to building a genuine and fair feeling of belonging (15).

## **CONCLUSION**

Choirs are crucial cultural spaces and essential social infrastructure. Choirs facilitate social integration across diverse communities through a structured environment for musical engagement. The results support the conclusion that choirs help individuals transition from isolation to community and develop an affiliation with the choir community. In addition, the specific demands of choral performance, such as reliance on others and shared vulnerability, develop deep trust. Finally, choirs promote a powerful sense of belonging because participants feel they are part of a significant collective with a shared goal.

These results suggest that social organizations can intentionally implement participatory music programs in their communities to combat loneliness and strengthen social integration. Also, if engagement is low or participants feel disconnected, improvisation-based approaches can be effective because they actively require the careful attention of all members. This type of intentional design is paramount to the success of these programs.

Choral leaders and educators also need to ensure that their repertoire is culturally relevant and that there are inclusive policies in place. However, as the research makes clear, these benefits are not always distributed equally. Belonging can remain out of reach for lower-status participants who face power imbalances within choral spaces, and external social pressures, such as the stigma attached to choral participation in certain peer communities, disproportionately exclude boys and children from less privileged backgrounds. Cultural differences between the repertoire and participants' lived experiences further exacerbate these disparities, meaning that a choir's potential as a space of inclusion can, without intentional design, reproduce the very inequalities it aims to dissolve. Although these conclusions are promising, the current body of research carries several important limitations. The studies included in this review were largely small-scale qualitative case studies.

The extensive use of qualitative studies in this field is highly beneficial. Rather than merely measuring whether choirs produce social outcomes in the aggregate, these methods capture exactly how trust and belonging are locally produced, and sometimes unevenly distributed, within a single ensemble. However, qualitative designs cannot easily demonstrate causality or generalize over broad populations. Furthermore, they call for careful attention to researcher bias, particularly because several studies in this field rely on authors who combine both practitioner and researcher roles, making self-awareness essential. Continued research should include more large-scale quantitative studies to carefully test the social outcomes of choirs. In addition, there is a large gap in research on the enduring sustainability of choir benefits. Of the studies examined in this review, only Lamont et al. (2018) investigated long-term outcomes by tracking the same choir across two time points four years apart (9). Most studies capture participants only during the intervention period, ignoring whether these connections endure afterward. Additionally, future studies should examine structural barriers, such as transportation costs and economic inequality. These factors currently limit participant diversity in choral initiatives because it may be difficult for some people to make time to participate. Fixing these limitations will help establish optimized standards for the use of choral music as a tool for cultural cohesion and community wellness.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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