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The Effects of Team Songs on Social Cohesion in Sports and Their Implications for Group Music Therapy

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Abstract. The relationships in sports teams offer a motivation to consider music as a social activity. Team songs are especially relevant because they can be sung together and can be meaningful to the athletes. This is a critical narrative review to explore the potential of developing and singing team songs to promote social cohesion and how this process might be used to inform group music therapy. The research identified via consensus and original publication records is assessed based on participant groups, musical activities, outcomes, and study design. Collective singing studies indicate that it is beneficial for early bonding and group identification, and therapeutic songwriting research emphasizes participation and shared experiences. Studies with athletes also support the exploration of collaborative music, but do not confirm the effects of team songs. Limited findings due to indirect evidence, small samples, and differences between interventions. The review suggests a holistic perspective of collaborative songwriting, group singing and reflection in professional music therapy.

Keywords: team songs, social cohesion, athletes, group music therapy, therapeutic songwriting

1. Introduction

In terms of athletes' long-term psychological stability and the prevention of conflicts within the team, social cohesion and competitive performance are equally important. Sport psychology differentiates between social cohesion (relationships and social unity) and task cohesion (commitment to collective goals) [1]. This distinction raises a specific question regarding music: can a team song improve the relationship between athletes, without any improvement in sporting outcomes? A team song is a song that is adopted or composed to represent a specific team. In professional sports, team songs are often used during pre-match preparations, team celebrations, and other collective activities. These songs may help reinforce a shared team identity and create a sense of belonging among athletes.

Pearce et al. discovered that singing groups became closer more quickly than comparison groups, but that this effect was reduced over time [2]. Building on this finding, Han et al. discovered that international students joining a choir reported a greater rise in their sense of university belonging relative to non-participants [3]. Whereas Pearce et al. centred their analysis on the formation of interpersonal closeness, Han et al. expanded the scope of discussion to encompass a broader sense of

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group belonging. Collectively, these studies indicate that collective singing can foster multiple dimensions of social connection.

The link to music therapy is dependent on the intent and delivery of the activity. Professional practice is defined by the American Music Therapy Association as the use of clinical and evidence-based musical interventions, individualized goals, therapeutic relationships, and credentialed professional [4]. When assessed interpersonal needs are addressed, team singing may be part of this practice. This is a critical narrative review that explores the social processes that team songs may entail, reviews pertinent evidence, and discusses implications for group music therapy. The research question is how far existing research supports creating and singing team songs to strengthen athletes' social cohesion. Clarifying this question could guide interventions that prioritize teammates' inclusion and relationships.

2. Concepts and review approach

Listening to a song, singing it together, and jointly composing it involve different activities. Listening offers a shared musical experience, singing involves a shared vocal action, and composition involves negotiation over musical and lyrical decisions. The focus of the present discussion is on collective singing and songwriting.

These activities may contribute to social cohesion by encouraging shared attention, coordinated participation, and interpersonal communication, which provide opportunities for athletes to develop a stronger sense of group identity. Social cohesion includes both an individual's attraction to the team's social life and perceptions of the group as socially united [1]. Shared identity is related but different: being a member of a team does not necessarily mean that one has close relationships with all other team members. To conduct this focused narrative review, targeted consensus searches were performed using the following keywords: team cohesion, athletes, group singing, music therapy, and therapeutic songwriting. Records retrieved were compared with original abstracts, publisher pages and available full texts. All included studies were systematically compared across four predefined dimensions: study population, implemented activity, measured outcome, and research design. Athlete evidence was considered separately from community and clinical research. When abstracts only were available, interpretation was restricted to the information reported. The review does not attempt to be exhaustive in mapping evidence and does not attempt to calculate a pooled effect.

3. Social processes involved in team songs

3.1. Singing together and social connection

Collective singing establishes an activity where members listen and react to each other. In Pearce et al.'s longitudinal study, newly formed singing classes initially gained closeness more quickly than craft and creative writing classes. Later, the comparison groups were found to be equal [2]. This indicates that singing can be a way for groups to make early connections, and that musical involvement is not the only way to make connections. The relevant possibility is not a permanent advantage, but easier initial interaction, for a team receiving new members.

Other studies suggest further research and demonstrate significant limitations. The Sing4Health randomized trial included 149 older adults and a program of 34 singing sessions. It reported benefits for social wellbeing, but the program also included social interaction and a final performance [5]. A pilot study of online singing found that connection was greater when participants could hear each other in synchronized audio, but the order of conditions was fixed, which made causal interpretation

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difficult [6]. These findings, taken together, suggest that participation and listening to each other should be studied. Neither of the results demonstrates that vocal coordination by itself improves team cohesion among athletes.

3.2. Shared identity and the meaning of lyrics

A group song may provide a common means for group members to communicate what their group is about. Lyrics that speak to collective experiences can help to make membership more tangible. For instance, a verse on welcoming new players could convey a team value that the athletes have talked about together. This is a proposed application, rather than an effect directly demonstrated by existing team-song research. It would be up to the members if they see themselves in the song or not.

This proposal is plausible given evidence of group identity. Tarrant et al. noticed growing unity among singing sessions of people with aphasia, by watching behaviors and considering shared identity [7]. Hendry et al.'s interviews with six community choir members identified social bonds and group identity as important aspects of participation [8]. Han et al. conducted a controlled study with 53 international students for 6-8 weeks and observed that choir participants had a higher level of identification with the university [3]. But the choir was not randomly assigned. The results might thus be affected by previous sociability or willingness to participate in activities. These studies provide evidence for an identity-based explanation but fail to distinguish the effect of team-specific lyrics.

It is also important to distinguish an observable ritual from its social implications. Athletes may sing the same lyrics in unison yet still feel excluded. A compelling account of cohesion would then seek to answer the question of whether or not participation alters members' experience of everyday team life. Some indicators might be feeling welcome in open discussions and opportunities to participate beyond the song. These are suggested ways of interpreting social belonging, rather than alternative measures of validated cohesion and are not evidence of singing necessarily changing behavior [1, 7].

3.3. Collaborative songwriting and shared ownership

When composing a song, teammates can share their experiences and make deals about how to tell the story of the group. The process may be as important as the product. Bourdaghs and Silverman conducted a qualitative music therapy study with 12 adults in treatment for substance use disorders (SUDs) and found that songwriting was a way for participants to identify common experiences and make peer connections [9]. These accounts describe the sense of social meaning through collaboration, but do not show a causal increase in cohesion. The mechanisms of peer bonding observed among individuals with substance use disorders (SUD) can, in theory, be extended to athletic teams, as both groups rely on repeated interpersonal interactions and the formation of a collective identity. Nevertheless, there are important distinctions between the two: interventions for substance use disorders primarily aim at recovery and social reintegration, whereas athletes typically participate in sports for competitive and performance-related reasons.

Pérez-Núñez et al. also found group songwriting with caregivers to be associated with greater social functioning and descriptions of supportive interpersonal experiences [10]. But with no control group, these changes cannot be attributed to songwriting. Another focus of Bent et al.'s therapist reflections was the need for accessible starting material and the impact of missed attendance on group processes [11]. If applied judiciously to athletes, this evidence indicates that repeated opportunities to contribute would be necessary for shared ownership. A song chosen by a coach

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alone would provide less opportunity for co-authorship than a song that has been discussed. Whether or not that difference leads to better cohesion is an empirical question.

4. Evidence involving athletes and its limitations

Kim and Moon carried out a controlled study involving 57 youth soccer players, whose findings are pertinent to the present discussion. Twenty-eight players participated in eight melodic percussion sessions, while the remaining 29 participants in the control group received no additional intervention and remained at rest. The intervention group demonstrated significantly higher post-intervention scores for team cohesion and team efficacy relative to the control group [12]. Although this work advances understanding of group music activities within sports teams, the activity employed was not singing. Furthermore, a resting control condition cannot disentangle musical effects from those stemming from extra attention and social interaction. Kim and Moon conducted a second study using song-based group music therapy with youth soccer players, which showed that this therapy can be applied in a sports context. Its outcomes included positive psychological capital, rather than team cohesion [13]. In a more direct but preliminary sense, Orzel's conference abstract indicates that one social cohesion subscale was enhanced following an activity using music selected by the group among 20 collegiate rowers [14]. The music condition was repeated after the condition without music, and order effects cannot be ruled out. Playback is also not about co-creating or singing a team song.

The overall evidence thus indicates feasibility and a rationale for continued testing but does not provide a reliable estimate of the effectiveness of team songs. Other social activities should also be considered. Lonsdale and Day's questionnaire study of six activity groups revealed no difference in psychological wellbeing between the groups, which questioned the generalization that choir participation has uniquely positive outcomes [15]. Wellbeing is not a cohesion measure, but this comparison further emphasizes the importance of an active control. Research into team songs needs to separate out the impact of musical involvement from having supportive leadership, friendship within the group, and the mere fact of regular group meetings.

5. Applications within group music therapy

5.1. Developing a song through a therapeutic process

A qualified music therapist would start a proposed programmed by assessing the interpersonal needs of the team and agreeing on goals with the participants [4]. This could be related to the inclusion of newer members or teammates expressing different perspectives. The therapist might ask each athlete to share an experience or word that reminds them of belonging and then assist the group to create a short, simple song from the words. The use of familiar music might be a starting point as suggested by the practical observations reported by Bent et al. [11].

Reflection would link the music activity to the therapeutic aims. Members could discuss

who got their ideas in, who had disagreements, and what they learned about teammates. A proposed outcome is that athletes experience being listened to during the creative process. This interpretation is based on songwriting accounts of shared experience and interpersonal support [9, 10]. It would still need to be tested on athletes. The program should be tailored to assessed needs and not be offered as a 'treatment' for all sports teams.

The therapist's function would not be limited to choosing a song. Facilitation would involve noticing unequal participation, inviting participation without making disclosure mandatory, and

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making adaptations when a lyric leaves someone unrepresented.

5.2. Inclusion and evaluation

Different contributions such as lyric writing, singing, selecting musical ideas, or playing simple rhythms should be allowed in participation. The contribution should not be based on musical ability. There is also a need to discuss cultural and language preferences, as research on children's groups has confirmed that repertoire selection influences the perception of a shared group identity, but this association has not yet been verified in terms of cohesion within athletic groups [16]. The choir accounts by Hendry et al. also reveal differences between old and new members [8]. These findings form the basis for inclusion as a substantive component of the proposal. If only influential teammates define the meaning of the shared song, it may be reinforcing existing divisions.

Evaluation should be done by comparing the program with a similar nonmusical group activity, which receives the same support. Whole team allocation to conditions may limit the sharing of the intervention across teams. Social cohesion should be assessed before, immediately after, and several weeks after participation with a validated measure that is appropriate to the ages of the participants; the Group Environment Questionnaire is one example of a measure for adult teams [1]. Interviews could explore if quieter members felt represented. A comparison of co-writing and singing an already written song would be necessary to determine the specific contribution of authorship.

Short-term enjoyment should not be conflated with long-term group unity. Assessments conducted immediately after singing may capture the experience of that single session, whereas delayed assessments can reveal whether feelings of belonging persist during routine team interactions. Recording attendance and concurrent team activities would also aid the interpretation of observed changes.

6. Conclusion

Previous studies suggest that team songs may enhance social cohesion between athletes by increasing their involvement, group identification, and collective ownership. Collective singing research provides evidence of social connection and therapeutic songwriting research reports how participants identify common experiences and participate in a common product. Studies of athletes provide some evidence to consider music in teams, but not the effectiveness of composing and singing a team song. The music therapy connection is in the purposeful facilitation. A qualified therapist might be able to assist members in creating a song based on agreed interpersonal goals, provide support for team member contributions and provide feedback on inclusion. The appropriate outcome would be an increased feeling of belonging and social unity, which is independent of sporting performance. The meaning and accessibility of the activity would then be significant in addition to the music.

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