

“A place where I can contribute:” Inclusion and participation in a multicultural gospel choir

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Abstract

Immigrants and particularly refugees are vulnerable in relation to health and social exclusion. This article asks how inclusion in a multicultural gospel choir in a Norwegian town can contribute to the well-being of immigrants. A case study including participatory observation and interviews with choir members forms the empirical basis for the analysis. The multicultural gospel choir gathers singers with very diverse backgrounds, who sing together in several languages in a welcoming social environment, where entry to participation is made easy both practically and socially. The narrative analysis focuses on four choir participants' renditions of what the choir has meant to them. Within the broad framework of Antonovsky's salutogenic theory, the relevance of health-promoting factors such as integration, social support, and inclusion is considered. In the analysis, social support and participation are identified as particularly important positive factors. A common theme in all four narratives is the importance of experiencing a sense of cultural participation in the choir. In other words, the choir members value the opportunity to contribute and be acknowledged as valuable participants in cultural interaction. The analysis presented here might serve as a reminder to see immigrants not only as representatives of their backgrounds, but as participants in the culture(s) continually being created here and now. The choir can function as an entry point to Norwegian society, and as a "family" in a vulnerable situation, but it is "not quite Norway." In times of transition and uncertainty, however, the choir can provide quite an important arena for cultural participation, which in turn can strengthen participants in ways that may transfer to other arenas as well. This has policy and practical implications for preventive interventions, and points to a significant health potential in choirs and other community work where immigrants are included as equal contributors.

Introduction

Refugees and other immigrants¹ may be considered vulnerable groups in Norwegian society, facing challenges such as discontinuity and loss, lack of social networks, language and communication barriers, intolerance, and discrimination. Since 2005, people from different cultures and backgrounds—refugees, asylum seekers, and other immigrants included—have come together in choirs in several Norwegian towns. These *multicultural gospel choirs*, as they are called, are intended to include people from different cultures and contribute to integration into “a warmer Norway” (KIA, 2013). Can this kind of choir practice contribute to the well-being of people in a vulnerable position—and if so, in what ways?

This article presents one of these choirs, and some of the choir participants’ narratives about their experiences. Based on observational and interview data, I will analyze experiences and meanings of inclusion and tolerance in this context, and the impact on the lives of the participants. The narrative analysis sets out to answer the question of *how inclusion in a multicultural choir can contribute to the well-being of immigrants*.

A further understanding of inclusive social practices and their impact will be relevant for those who work within integration, social work, and musical and cultural activities, to illustrate the potential in setting up cultural arenas for inclusion. The purpose is to contribute to our knowledge of how cultural participation in a tolerant environment can strengthen immigrant health, as an important part of public health.

Background

Immigrant health—vulnerability and exclusion

Immigrants in general and refugees in particular are vulnerable, statistically speaking, in terms of both physical and mental health. A review of studies of immigrant mental health in Norway between 1990 and 2009 concluded that “in the majority of the studies, the immigrant populations, specifically adult immigrants from low and middle income countries, have been found with a higher degree of mental health problems compared to Norwegians and the general population” (Abebe, Lien, & Hjelde, 2014, p. 60). In one such study, non-Western immigrants reported 2.5 times more mild psychological symptoms—such as panic attacks, insomnia, and feelings of hopelessness—than the rest of the population (Dalgard, Thapa, Hauff, McCubbin, & Syed, 2006).

Immigrants from low- and middle-income countries also report more powerlessness and negative life events, and less social support and paid work, as well as lower income. Economic and health difficulties, as well as lack of social support, appear as significant mediators between immigration and psychological distress (Dalgard et al., 2006). While traumatic experiences and multiple negative life events in the past present a burden to many refugees, their current life situation also often adds to the health challenges, especially factors such as acculturative stress, discrimination, poor social support, and poor socioeconomic conditions (Abebe et al., 2014). Teodorescu, Heir, Hauff, Wentzel-Larsen, and

¹*Immigrant* here refers to a person who has migrated from her country of birth and who lives in another country. This is a wider category than *refugee*, which is defined by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR, 1951). A person claiming such status, but not yet acknowledged as a refugee by the receiving state, is an *asylum seeker* (SSB, 2014).

Lien (2012, p. 316) suggest a "cumulative relationship between pre-resettlement traumas and post-resettlement stressors in the mental health of refugees."

While migration can be an opportunity to start over and improve one's living conditions, it is also a psychosocial challenge, especially in cases of forced migration (Sveaass, 2000). According to Lie (2003), refugees carry "a triple burden of trauma, uprooting and settlement." She found in her doctoral work that refugees in Norway to a large degree suffer from posttraumatic stress, and that experiences from war and migration have impacted their health and psychological functioning significantly. The psychosocial functioning and well-being of the refugees can be strengthened by the presence of family and involvement in meaningful activity (Lie, 2003). Recent developments within trauma psychology also emphasize the importance of viewing trauma in context, and of strengthening the protective systems that can provide refugees and other traumatized persons with belonging, meaning, and coping resources (Nordanger, 2007).

Two important dimensions in the psychological vulnerability of refugees are *loss* and *disempowerment* (Orford, 2008). The potential losses are numerous: Loss of family members and friends, home and local community, health and physical integrity, work and status, a familiar linguistic, cultural, and physical environment, and dreams and plans for the future. In sum these losses can facilitate a loss of identity (Simon, 2004). Pre-migration disempowerment experiences, such as violence, torture, deprivation, and persecution, can make refugees disempowerment sensitive. This entails a hypersensitivity to potentially disempowering situations in the host country. Refugees and asylum seekers often find themselves in a post-migration situation with limited influence over their own lives and few points of reference around which they can establish their new life. Asylum seekers especially, risk a long waiting period characterized by insecurity, unpredictability, and disempowerment, not knowing whether or when they will be granted asylum (Valenta & Berg, 2012).

After migration, refugees are forced to reestablish a sense of meaning and recreate a coherent narrative of their lives (Sveaass, 2000). In spite of the variations in complexity and conditions, this situation also applies to other immigrants. Identity processes and acculturation become central tasks, with an impact on psychosocial adjustment. This adjustment also depends on how the majority population of the host country receives immigrants (Chrysochoou, 2004). Frequent encounters with prejudice, intolerance, and discrimination, even smaller such incidents when they add up (Prieur, 2004), can challenge immigrants' health, identity, and experienced opportunity and participation.

There are also contradictory results, gaps, and methodological challenges in this research field, but still, the available knowledge points to a need for preventive interventions to strengthen immigrant mental health (Abebe et al., 2014). This renders the salutogenic potential of meaningful activities and immigrant-inclusive communities as a relevant theme for research.

Choirs as health-promoting communities

In potential juxtaposition to the exclusion and lack of social network refugees and immigrants can experience, recent studies indicate that choir participation can strengthen health and well-being, because, among other factors, of the inclusion of singers into a community (Balsnes, 2014). Positive health benefits have been documented in ordinary choirs in civil society (Balsnes, 2009) as well as in more intentionally therapeutic choirs for patients in rehabilitation, the homeless, seniors, inmates, and disabled (Dingle, Brander, Ballantyne, & Baker, 2013). These findings form part of the larger fields of music therapy

and music and health that in different ways underline the potential of music as a health resource (Ruud, 2010; Stige, Ansdell, Elefant, & Pavlicevic, 2010).

Singing has been claimed to have a unique health potential in comparison to other musical expressions, as it is closely connected to the singer's body, breathing, emotions, and identity (Bailey & Davidson, 2005). The voice is an instrument available to all, and singing can therefore be a particularly participatory form of music. Singing *together* can have a social as well as physical, cognitive, emotional, and existential impact, resulting in a holistic effect on well-being (Balsnes, 2014; Stige et al., 2010).

The social dimension of choir practice is analytically central in the current article. To our knowledge, there are no other studies that focus on multicultural choirs in this way, and we therefore hope the present study may supplement the research within migration psychology and the music and health fields.

About the multicultural choir

The first multicultural gospel choir in Norway was started in Kristiansand in 2005. The choir is an activity run by KIA (Kristent Interkulturelt Arbeid, or *Christian Intercultural Work*), a volunteer-based, government-supported organization that works for "more intercultural fellowship, for equal dignity, care and friendship among all people in Norway, regardless of cultural background, language or religion" (KIA, 2013, p. 1). In addition to the choirs, KIA organizes a range of other activities such as language classes and language training cafés, dinners and cultural evenings, seminars, soccer practice, women's groups, and summer camps.

KIA's work is based on what they term Christian values, such as hospitality and love for neighbors, but most activities have no verbalized, explicitly Christian content. The choir practice is an exception in this regard, seeing that the repertoire consists of Christian hymns, praise, and gospel songs. Still, the choir is, like other KIA activities, open for everyone regardless of religious background.

In musical terms, the choir has no requirements of prior musical experience or knowledge. It was formed to create a warm and welcoming environment for sharing musical and social experiences, rather than to fulfill musical ambitions. It is a choir for adults, with singers ranging from about 20–60 years of age.

The first choir started with a handful of singers, but was soon invited to visit and sing in many churches in the region. In the choir's second year, they appeared on national television and released a CD.² Following this, multicultural gospel choirs have been established by KIA in seven other Norwegian towns. The choirs joined together to record new CDs in 2009 and 2014.³ Choirs from different towns also take trips and give concerts together, as the choirs for a large part share the same repertoire.

² *Ingen er som du* (2006).

³ *Sing to the Lord* (2009) and *No one like Jesus* (2014).

Theoretical perspectives

The inclusion and well-being of immigrants

The overarching theoretical perspective for this research is the salutogenic approach, based on Antonovsky's concept of *salutogenesis* (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987)—that is, a focus on what strengthens and builds health, rather on what leads to sickness and lack of health. Social support and inclusion in salutogenic activities and communities, as well as a range of other factors such as ego identity, coping, and creativity, have been found to strengthen salutogenesis (Langeland, 2014; Tellnes, 2007). Antonovsky himself emphasized the importance of having a *sense of coherence*—experiencing comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness in life (Antonovsky, 1987).

The choir in question is an integration initiative, and as such forms part of the wider integration discourse in the Norwegian society. I will here use the term *integration* in line with Berry's (2001) psychological acculturation model. According to Berry, acculturation—the adaption process of a person entering a new culture—can assume different forms based on variation along two main dimensions: 1) The degree to which the culture of origin is maintained, and 2) the degree to which the host country culture is adopted. This gives four different types of acculturation: *Marginalization* (low on both dimensions), *assimilation* (low on culture of origin, high on host culture), *segregation* (high on culture of origin, low on host culture), and *integration* (high on both dimensions). Following this model, an immigrant is integrated to the extent that she or he both maintains the relationship with the culture of origin and participates in the culture and society of the host country. Berry (2001) accentuates integration as the most beneficial form of acculturation, as much for the individual immigrant as for society as a whole. Later studies have since showed empirical connections between integration and better psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006).

Berry's definition of integration is clarifying in relation to the public discourse on integration, at least in its loudest and most tabloid expressions, which often seems to be one-dimensionally focused on how to make immigrants as Norwegian as possible, as quickly as possible: that they will learn the language, get a job, learn to ski and go mountain hiking, support gender equality and democratic values, and generally participate in the majority's ways of living.⁴ Compared to Berry's approach, this one-sidedness is more similar to his definition of assimilation than to integration. Viewing integration as two-dimensional, as participation in both culture of origin and host culture, has the normative implication that the immigrants' cultures of origin should be valued and given room in Norwegian society.

This two-dimensional understanding of integration can be further nuanced by adding a two-dimensional conceptualization of *culture*, as something we have (cf. a descriptive culture concept) as well as something we do (cf. a dynamic culture concept) (Dahl, 2013; Eriksen, 2010). This implies seeing culture as both a *starting point*—the patterns of thought and behavior we have acquired as members of a group or society—and as a *process*—the continual creation of shared practices and shared meaning in interaction. Metaphorically speaking, culture is a substance with varying degrees of viscosity—it flows and will change,

4 Report no. 49 to the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) (2003–2004) gives an example: "Many children of immigrant parents say that they are tired of 'being integrated...'" The perceived pressure to live in a certain way has different expressions, as in articles about immigrants at the top of Galdhøpiggen (the highest mountain in Norway). Must 'Norwegianness' be proven by mountain hiking?" (St. Meld. Nr. 49 (2003-2004), 2004: Paragraph 7.4., my translation). Ten years later, comedian and immigrant Igor Dunderovic makes a similar point in his article, "Cross-country skiing builds character" ("Bortoverski bygger karakter"), in which he advises immigrants to learn cross-country skiing (Dunderovic, 2014).

but often slowly, and with resistance based on its origin and direction. To the increasingly mobile and culture-crossing people of the globalization age, understanding culture as simply determined by one's origin is no longer sufficient. At the same time, entirely ignoring differences in origin and background would easily bring about misunderstandings, as well as the marginalization and silencing of minorities. In terms of the choir studied here, this two-dimensional understanding of culture can shed light on both the role of the participants' cultures of origin in the choir practice, and on the choir practice as current creation of culture, contributing to contemporary cultural life in Norway.

Another implication of the two-dimensional understanding of integration is the necessity of *inclusion* and *tolerance* from the majority, or, across cultural boundaries in all directions, for integration to be achieved in a multicultural society. Broadly defined, tolerance can be understood as accepting difference (Afdal, 2010). That is, tolerance involves difference (as opposed to assimilation, or ignoring difference) and some form of acceptance of those who are different, ranging from bearing with (a minimal nonrejection), via acknowledging, to appreciating the Other. Tolerance in the sense of Habermas (2003) extends as far as "inclusion of The Other."

While tolerance is a philosophical and political concept, fairly abstract and paradoxical, there are practical expressions of it that can more easily be studied empirically, such as inclusion vs. exclusion, discrimination, participation, and sense of community. Arguably, applied tolerance will lead to experiences of inclusion and participation at the receiving end. Kjeldstadli (2008), in his book on "Integration and Inclusion" in multicultural Norway, links inclusion to participation in education and work, as well as to social and cultural participation. Inclusion—like tolerance—involves difference and coping with it and can be seen as both a process toward and the goal of community participation across differences (Olsen, 2012). This can apply to differences of any kind, and in the Norwegian context, inclusion is often used in reference to differences in health status or functioning—as in inclusive workplaces (cf. *Inkluderende Arbeidsliv*) and inclusive education. The process of inclusion involves maximizing the individual's participation and influence in a community or context (Olsen, 2012).

Similar factors have been studied as *sense of community*, a central concept of community psychology (Sarason, 1974), that captures the experience of one's relation to a group or community: belonging, having influence, and assuming responsibility for each other in a community. This can be analyzed qualitatively, as in the current study,⁵ or measured quantitatively by using, e.g., The Sense of Community Index. In both approaches, a strong sense of community has been linked to health and well-being (Orford, 2008).

From a different disciplinary perspective, music therapy has long suggested and applied participation in musical activities as a health-promoting practice. There is also a growing, interdisciplinary research field concerned with music and health, both in Norway⁶ and internationally. The music and health perspective widens from traditional music therapy to include the health effects of music also beyond therapy sessions, addressing a wide range of musical practices and contexts, in all areas where music can be significant for developing and maintaining health in people's lives (Ruud, 2010; Stige et al., 2010). The current study can be considered a part of the interdisciplinary music and health field,⁷ while my specific

5 Cf. our first publication from this study of the multicultural gospel choir (Balsnes & Schuff, 2013).

6 A significant amount of work within these fields is carried out at the Centre for Music and Health at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, and the Grieg Academy Music Therapy Research Centre in Bergen (GAMUT).

7 The current case study was conducted in cooperation with Anne Haugland Balsnes, PhD in music, Ansgar University College, whose field is music and health.

approach is based in cultural psychology and migration health. This implies viewing the musical activities involved in broader terms, as meaningful psychosocial interaction in the context of migration, rather than specifically as music per se—in other words, as one among many potentially salutogenic phenomena.

Health can be defined and studied in numerous ways, with possibly the broadest (and most commonly quoted) definition appearing in the founding documents of the World Health Organization (WHO): “a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1948, p. 1). In this study, the focus is on the subjectively experienced dimensions of health, sometimes referred to as *well-being* (Balsnes & Schuff, 2013). According to Prilleltensky (2005, p. 54), “well-being may be defined as a positive state of affairs in which the personal, relational, and collective needs and aspirations of individuals and communities are fulfilled.” In this study, the focus is on the subjective experience of such well-being, which captures some of the wide scope of health referred to by the WHO, including physical, mental, and social aspects. Understood within this interpretative and phenomenological approach, studying well-being does not necessitate biomedical measurements, but can arguably be captured through qualitative analyses of the participants’ experiences.

Research design and methods

To explore how inclusion and participation in a multicultural choir can contribute to the well-being of immigrants, an interdisciplinary case study was conducted by a music scholar (Balsnes, cf. footnote 7) and a scholar of community and cultural psychology (Schuff). In a qualitative research design, we have conducted participant observation and interviews, and applied phenomenological and narrative analyses to the material from one multicultural choir in the KIA context.⁸

We have followed standard ethical procedures of informed consent, voluntary participation, and principles of *do no harm*, and the project has been approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). For anonymization purposes, the informants have been assigned fictitious names in this presentation, and the name of the town is not mentioned. The study can contribute to making an otherwise often marginalized group more visible in academic and public debates.

We conducted participant observation in the choir during the first half of 2012, joining them for rehearsals, concerts, and trips. As we started attending rehearsals, we were immediately invited to sing with them, and became fully participating observers (cf. Fangen, 2004). Since the choir has a high turnover of singers, and the singing is facilitated by multiple repetitions and lyrics displayed on the wall, it was not difficult to enter into interaction.

We also conducted several interviews:

- A number of short, informal field interviews with choir participants during rehearsals;
- A semi-structured interview with two choir leaders (the two initiators of the choir, who led it together for a number of years, and one of them still leads the choir);
- A semi-structured interview with a representative from the local health services for refugees (Flyktinghelsetjenesten), who has referred many refugees to the choir;

⁸ The analysis in Balsnes & Schuff (2013) is phenomenological, while this current article is based on a narrative analysis, as will be clarified in the following paragraphs.

- Four individual, semi-structured interviews with choir participants who have been involved in the choir over a number of years. This was a theoretical/intentional sample; the first two informants were chosen after asking the choir leaders for participants who they thought had benefited from participating in the choir. With the mainly very positive accounts of the choir these informants gave us, the next two informants were chosen among former choir participants, to look for other types of choir experiences, potentially negative ones, that might have caused them to quit. This procedure, known as disconfirming case analysis (Yardley, 2008), was applied to give a fuller picture and enhance validity.

Among the seven informants who participated in the longer, semi-structured interviews, two are women and five are men—and five of them are immigrants originally from Latin America and Africa. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, English, and Spanish (according to the interviewee's preference), and were translated during transcription. The core material for this current analysis came from the four choir participants who we interviewed in depth. Here, the interview transcripts have been analyzed as narratives. As part of the validation process, the four main interviewees read their own narratives as presented in the current text and approved our summary of their story and our anonymized publication of it.

According to narrative psychology, humans are meaning-making beings who interact and understand themselves and their lives through the creation and exchange of narratives. Narratives are, in short, stories; more specifically, narratives are organized interpretations of a sequence of actions (Murray, 2008, p. 113). Analyzed as narratives, the interview transcripts shed light on the processes the interviewees have participated in, especially how they themselves view these processes, and on how they present and position themselves in relation to these experiences. I will present the narrative structure of the stories in terms of common elements (Murray, 2008) such as:

- beginning, middle, and end;
- problem and resolution;
- agency and tone (progressive/regressive).

Narratives can also be categorized and compared in terms of different narrative patterns, with different psychological consequences (Jansen, 2013). For instance, Jansen (2013) interviewed youth in care of the Child Welfare Service (Barnevernet) and argues that different types of narratives—"in spite of" narratives as contrasted to "if only" narratives—give these young people different developmental opportunities. I will compare and contrast the narratives after presenting them separately. But first, I present some of the shared narratives and practices in the choir, findings based on observational data and field interviews, as a context for the individual narratives that follow.

Findings: Participating in a welcoming musical community

They are from Uganda, Peru, Germany, the Philippines, Chile, Bolivia, Norway. Now they are gathered in a missions hall in a medium-sized Norwegian town. According to the clock on the wall, rehearsal should have started by now—but conversation, hugs, and laughter still fill the room. Rehearsal begins when it does. When they start, the songs are in Norwegian, English, Kinyarwanda, Spanish. The choir director, himself an immigrant from Latin-America, leads the rehearsal in Norwegian, while playing the piano and managing a computer to project the song lyrics onto a wall. The choir is

clearly a mix of more and less experienced singers. While they are learning a new song through many repetitions, a man enters the room and sits down on a chair in the back of the room. One of the altos leaves the choir for a moment to walk over and welcome him to sing with them. He hesitates: "It's been so long since I have sung..."—and stays seated until the break. After the break, however, the choir director invites him to play along on a guitar, and the newcomer joins in on a song the choir apparently knows well:

*"There is none like you, Lord...
You are my strength when I am weak in a foreign place
You are my family when they are far away
There is none like you."⁹*

One of the salient characteristics of the choir is its low threshold for entry and the ease with which new participants can join and contribute, socially and musically. We experienced this first-hand when we, as participating observers, were invited in to sing at rehearsals right away, and performed with the choir at a church within the first week of our fieldwork. We also observed and were told that newcomers are invited to contribute, both musically and practically, i.e., making tea and coffee and serving snacks during breaks—which is something both singers and leaders take turns doing. "It is easier in KIA than in other choirs I have sung in. All are welcome. You can go there once and then join the choir in concert the following weekend," one of the choir members told us. The choir leader emphasized the aspect of welcoming contributions and seeing the participants as resources:

We need to learn here in Norway that people who come here have a lot to give. You usually only get "where are you from, how long have you been here?" But people don't ask, "what can you do, do you know how to play, can you dance?" People change after singing in the choir for a while. Life in Norway, which started out all grey, becomes a bit more colorful.

The two leaders who first established the choir decided from the beginning to establish a "warm, welcoming environment," they told us, greeting people with hugs and offering comments such as, "We hope to see you again next week!"

The choir is, then, a social as much as a musical community, as we observed during long breaks, on trips, and in the personal conversations between participants. When we talked to the representative from the local health services for refugees, he cited the community factor when explaining his frequent referral to the choir: because participating in such a choir would provide meaning, community, and fellowship far beyond what a weekly appointment with a health worker could give the refugees.

In this choir, the leaders often need to provide social and practical support for the participants to attend, such as sending text message reminders about rehearsals and concerts and arranging transportation. This has to do with the temporary and uncertain situation of many of the participants. The choir consists of a mix of exchange students, au pairs, refugees, asylum seekers, working immigrants, and Norwegians. The Norwegian participants typically have intercultural experiences, such as having lived in another country for a period of time, and feel at home in a multicultural setting. The Latin American choir

⁹ "Ingen er som du/There is none like you" is a bilingual song in Norwegian/English, written especially for the choir by Sigrun Saltbones. I have here included parts of a Norwegian verse, in my own translation, since it specifically addresses the immigrant experience and links it to the singers' faith. The middle two lines are thus translated from the Norwegian original: "Du er min styrke når jeg er svak på fremmed sted. Du er min familie når jeg ikke har dem med."

director suggests that this shared experience of being a newcomer to a country is significant, also when leading the choir, referring to both his own immigrant experience and to directors of similar multicultural choirs in other towns.

They call it a *gospel* choir (*gospelkor*), but with a very wide definition of the gospel genre—as an observer, I would say that the label “gospel” in this case refers more to content (the Christian message) than to musical form. While we have been told that Muslims have also participated at times, as the choir is open to all who want to join, choir participants are most likely to be Christians due to the explicitly Christian songs. Many of the participants have indeed told us that the religious dimension of singing in the choir is highly significant to them, and they express with both body language and verbally that they sing these songs not just as music but as prayer and worship. A few said that they consider the choir “their church.”

The choir sings in three-part harmony, with the singers divided into sopranos, altos, and tenors. As there is a high turnover of participants, with widely varying musical backgrounds and skills, each part needs at least one steady singer to support newcomers and others. The presence of such singers makes it easier for others to participate. Other supportive measures to make participation easy include the projection of lyrics onto the wall, both during rehearsals and concerts (also inviting the congregations they visit to sing along), audio files shared on the Internet so that people can practice at home, and a relaxed atmosphere when it comes to making mistakes. Choreographies and movements during songs are kept simple, and the choir leaders emphasize enthusiasm and the joy of singing more than striving for perfect phrasing and voice balance. Or as one choir founder expressed it: “We can’t do ‘pretty’, so we go for ‘power’.”

The rehearsals are conducted with Norwegian as the main language, while certain words and phrases are explained and translated into various languages. The songs fall into three categories: 1) songs written especially for the choir, often with lyrics about migration experiences and “refugee prayers,”¹⁰ 2) songs from the countries of origin of the choir members, which they themselves choose and teach to the others, and 3) well-known hymns and songs that are available—and sung—in several languages. Based on observations and the interview with the choir leaders, we understand this repertoire as intentionally chosen to, respectively, 1) express and create shared narratives about the migrant experience (in light of Christian narratives/perspectives), 2) allow singers from any country to participate and share from their background culture, and 3) sing melodies that are familiar to many both in the choir and in the congregations they visit, so that people with many different backgrounds can connect and feel at home in shared musical experiences.

Several of the choir’s songs can be understood as collective narratives, both the internationally well-known hymns that connect choir participants to the Christian narrative and to a global religious community, and, most explicitly, the songs written for the choir. For example, the song “Blessing” is formulated as a prayer that God will “bless our loved ones back where we come from” and “bless our brand new family,” addressing the immigrants’ concerns for both former and current significant others. “One Day” talks of the hope of heaven, where “families will meet” and refugees will finally “be home.” Singing these in the choir gives participants an opportunity to collectively reflect on their experiences, challenges, and hopes as immigrants, and build a shared narrative identity, a story of their life that points to where they can find strength and resources in a vulnerable situation (cf. also Balsnes & Schuff, 2013).

10 The choir leader who wrote most of these songs has also performed several of them in other contexts under the heading “Refugee prayers.”

With these shared practices and narratives of the choir as a backdrop, we now turn to four of the participants' individual stories, starting with the narratives from the two who quit.

Louis: "The choir is the entry point to Norwegian society"

Louis lost several family members in a civil war and genocide in an East-African country in the 1990s. Later, when many of the perpetrators were released from prison, he felt threatened and decided to leave the country. He came to Norway in 2006 as an asylum seeker, and the application process for asylum is still inconclusive.

Louis found it difficult to start a new life in Norway, in terms of the long process of seeking asylum, learning the language and culture, and coping with the cold climate. "I knew about KIA as a place where I could learn Norwegian," he says. "They had a choir, and as a Christian who likes to sing, I joined." Since he used to sing in a choir at the Catholic school he attended in his home country, this represented a continuity factor in his life. Louis describes the first rehearsal he went to as "very interesting, very welcoming... with so many different nationalities, I felt at home." He explains this feeling by mentioning the presence of many shared experiences and a shared faith, among the cultural differences: "There were different nationalities, but Christian songs. We all shared being in a new country, new hopes, fears; we were in the same shoes, but from different countries. Studying together, studying the same language, a new way of life. That's why I felt at home among so many people."

Louis sang in the choir for five years, and his peak experience was teaching the choir a song from his church:

I even taught them one song from home. I taught them in my language. They asked if anybody could bring a song from their country, and I happened to volunteer, and people loved it. Everywhere people would sing it, when we went to sing in different churches, they would start singing the song, on the bus, they started to sing the song, they loved it. It was released on one of the CDs. I even appeared in the magazine... I particularly remember the day when I saw my picture on the cover of the magazine; it was not expected, and also when it was announced that the song from my country was going to be among the ones selected on the CD.

Louis otherwise emphasizes friendship as the "number one benefit" of singing in a choir: "The choir is a starting point. You learn Norwegian, and you learn Norwegian culture. From there you make friends. So many friends I have right now are the people I met through KIA. It is really the beginning... the entry point to the Norwegian society."

When asked why he no longer participates in the choir, Louis says there was "no reason" why he left, but goes on to explain how it became harder to attend after moving farther away from the town center. He also got "discouraged because of the papers," the negative response to his application for residency in Norway. "All this is affecting me," Louis says, presenting this as his main struggle.

Marcel: "In a choir, we all help each other"

Marcel was politically involved in his home country in East Africa, and had to flee after the outbreak of civil war. He came to Norway early in the 2000s, and has acquired refugee status.

At first, his focus was on learning Norwegian and finding a job. He got in touch with one of the KIA employees who started the choir, who helped him find contacts for work opportunities. "After that she asked if I was interested in singing, and it was just perfect for me. My mother led a choir at home," he says. "My family have always sung, except for me. So I went to the choir, and it was great. Lots of good experiences and friends for life. With the choir, I came to love singing."

Marcel was in the choir for about 7 years and says it "released something good" in him: "First and foremost, it was the fellowship... being together as Christians, with good people, who care and take time to listen and tell you about their lives. It was a great environment."

He appreciates how the choir participation helped him learn the Norwegian language faster. He also describes the interaction in the choir as very fruitful, comparing it to competitive activities such as sport: "You learn to adjust to others, pay close attention to what they are doing—the interaction is great and very interesting. When I play soccer, I play to win. But in a choir, we all help each other, and you want a good end result."

Marcel tried to invite some others to join the choir, but they said singing wasn't for them. When he found himself established in Norway, with a job and friends, he quit the choir due to a lack of time. In the choir "I got a network and good friends that I still hang out with when I have the chance."

Pedro: "The choir is a place where I can contribute"

Pedro comes from a Latin American country where he grew up "in the jungle," as he describes it, and moved to a larger city in his youth. There, he sold newspapers on the street to provide for himself and his family. Through an organization that offered schooling and health services to street children, he got in touch with foreigners for the first time, among them representatives from a Norwegian aid organization. He eventually came to Norway in 2006 through an exchange program run by these organizations.

During his exchange year, he got to know one of the choir leaders, whom he describes as very social and welcoming, and Pedro came to the choir with him. He appreciated the social environment and language learning opportunities he found there. If he wanted to extend his exchange period, he needed to learn more English or Norwegian, he explains, and his language skills weren't adequate:

So I wanted to continue at KIA. I like to sing, and really enjoyed the way they praised God based on the different cultures. And we got to use our own languages as well, not just Norwegian, not just English, not just Spanish, but other languages—that made an impression on me. It was just like: Come and sing with us. And if you can't sing, we'll teach you. I started in the choir in 2006 and loved it. There I learned more English and more Norwegian.

Pedro met a Norwegian girl during his exchange and later married her, so that he now has permanent residency in Norway based on family immigration. He still sings in the choir: "I will not quit KIA, because there I get a lot and can give something back," he says. "The choir a place where I can contribute."

The issue of contributing and volunteering for the choir (and for KIA in general) was mentioned repeatedly by Pedro. "It's not just a place with friends, but with people I can perhaps work together with," he explains. "When there are things one wants to do, to give, projects we want to start... You meet a lot of people at KIA that want to help." Ever since he first learned Norwegian at KIA, he has thought of how he could give something back: "When

they gave me free Norwegian classes, I thought, one day when I have learned Norwegian—not perfectly, but when I can speak and understand—then I can volunteer at KIA. And I came back... that's why I won't quit, and still attend the choir." He also mentions that he has a song he wants to teach to the choir, and he is excited about the opportunity.

Pedro's favorite moments with the choir are from when they sing in churches and get feedback from the congregations. "When we can contribute and share—it gives a lot of joy and satisfaction when they invite us to sing, participate and be part of the community, and then thank us for singing." After the concerts or services, they have coffee and cake with the congregation, and this is an important arena for relating, learning the language better, and making contacts, according to Pedro:

I used to always sit next to another Spanish speaker, because I didn't understand that much Norwegian, but now I sit by myself. And then somebody will come and say "hi, where are you from? Ah, I have been there..." And then they tell their story, about how they were missionaries or tourists or lived in Latin America... and we speak about the choir and my story. And that way there is a cultural integration into Norwegian society for us in KIA. And we keep learning, with our limitations. They'll switch to other languages... and we speak Norwegian too, so there's an exchange... and later we'll meet them and say hello. It's great to be recognized from the choir, "I think I saw you with KIA..."—I find that really satisfying.

Appreciating the social and learning opportunities the choir offers, as well as the religious fellowship, Pedro wants to "give something back to KIA." Importantly, he finds opportunities to show initiative and start projects; it is "a place where he can contribute."

Esperanza: "The choir is my family"

Esperanza came to Norway in the 1980s, a political refugee from a Latin American military dictatorship, and a single mother. She felt very alone after her arrival and tells us a story about a mother's struggles, in conflict with the Child Welfare Service: "It was a yearlong battle, years where I cried and was in pain. Many of those close to me turned their backs on us," she says. Later there were other family difficulties.

"Then I got a lot closer to KIA, especially the choir, because it became my way of praying," she explains. She mentions a song that became particularly significant to her during hard times. "I remember singing it with the choir, and I couldn't stop crying... I thought I was completely alone in this. But I noticed that the other people in the choir— even if they didn't know what I was going through—came and hugged me and put a hand on my shoulder."

Esperanza says the social support of the choir has improved her life:

It has really changed my life. I feel much closer to God... and know that I am not alone. The choir has really lifted my burden. Every time I have problems, I can just think about that I am going to go out and sing... and then I tell myself, "This helps you be strong and continue forward." The choir and KIA are a big part of my life. They are my family. I don't know if I could've survived without the choir.

Esperanza also talks about her choir participation as a learning experience, not only in terms of languages, but also in getting to know other cultures and overcoming prejudice: "The best thing we have done with the choir was a trip to Oslo. I have always been shy and didn't think it would work out, but it turned out to be a beautiful experience. I shared with people from so many cultures, and we came to a point where the cultures were left aside

and we were just together," she says. This was her first experience with a multicultural community, and she claims it changed her:

You think your culture is the best there is... but when you get to know another culture, you see there is much more. All countries have something beautiful, in all countries there are good and bad things. This has given me a new perspective on life: Not being selfish, not judging by first impressions...

Esperanza only wishes people would participate more consistently in the choir, and that there were more singers. She has been singing in the choir for six years and will "always be there for KIA," she claims: "I was helped by a woman on my way to Norway, and thought that if I later meet someone who comes the way I did, I will help them without expecting anything in return... I cannot live without the choir, or KIA in general. Therefore, I am always ready to help when something is needed in KIA. For that I will drop anything. They were there for me when I needed it, and I will always be there for the choir."

Overview of findings

All four interviewees in some way describe the importance of being included—not just in the sense of being allowed into community but also in the sense of contributing and participating as active agents, being included in the giving and helping that takes place in the community. This agency dimension—their *cultural participation*, as I will refer to it here—will therefore be discussed below as a main finding.

Comparing the four individual narratives, I have identified patterns and repeated elements, such as inclusion and social support, agency, and participation. I developed a table to summarize the interviews during my analytical work, and here I present an abbreviated version of it in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of choir participants' narratives

	<i>Louis</i>	<i>Marcel</i>	<i>Pedro</i>	<i>Esperanza</i>
Beginning	Fled from home country, difficult to come to Norway	Fled from home country, difficult to find a job	Exchange/family immigration, language challenge	Fled from home country, felt alone in Norway
Middle 1. Problem 2. Resolution	1. Difficult to learn language, culture, climate; process of seeking asylum 2. Found friends and felt at home in the choir; still no asylum granted	1. Needed to learn Norwegian and build network 2. Got a job and a social network, found friends in the choir, learned language	1. Needed to learn Norwegian and English 2. Met choir leader and joined the choir, found friends, learned language, and could contribute	1. Lack of network, family difficulties 2. Found social, emotional and religious support in the choir, opportunities to help others
Ending	Quit the choir because of distance and rejected asylum application	Quit the choir because of time, still hangs out with friends from there	Has learned and made friends in the choir, will keep contributing	Sings in the choir, feels better, gets support, and will be there for KIA
Peak experiences	Teaching the choir a song from his home country; CD	Good experiences, making friends for life	Singing in churches, with good feedback	Trip with singers from different cultures
Tone	Unstable (up/down)	Progressive, thanks to narrative	Progressive, thanks to narrative	Progressive, thanks to narrative
Inclusion, social support	Very welcoming, made friends, met people in the same situation, as well as Norwegians	Made friends for life, warm environment, built network	Found friends, cooperation, recognized by Norwegian church goers, built network	The choir as family, support in hard times; thinking of the other singers brings joy
Agency, participation	Taught the choir a song in his own language, lead singer, appreciated in churches	Tried to invite others into the choir, interaction where everybody helps each other	Wants to give back after receiving from KIA, volunteers in the choir	Will always be there for KIA, help without expecting returns, supports others
Key quote	"The choir is the entry point to Norwegian society"	"In a choir, we all help each other"	"The choir is a place where I can contribute"	"The choir is my family... I cannot live without the choir"

Discussion: Inclusion into cultural participation

Based on the participant observation, relevant theory, and background knowledge about the choir, my understanding before the interviews was that the choir might be an important community and source of social support to many. This was confirmed by the interviewees, who told us about finding friends, making music together, and how "the choir is there for me." What was surprising in the interviews was to also hear the phrase "I am there for the choir" so strongly. They felt included into participation in the welcoming community to which they were allowed to contribute actively.

The tolerance and inclusion practiced in this choir was observed during rehearsals, in friendliness expressed in hugs, smiles, and conversations. Arguably, this was also expressed through what could be labeled *relational time*, a typically non-Western way of organizing time around relationships and the completion of actions, rather than according to clocks, as in Western/abstract time (Dahl, 2013). This explains why rehearsals will start late and have unpredictably long breaks at times. The practical support and measures that make participation easy (follow-up and reminders, lyrics on the wall, support singers) also add to the inclusion of members both new and old.

At the receiving end, the singers' narratives show that this inclusion is experienced as social support: They have been welcomed, made friends, and found both emotional and practical support, as well as informational support (culture/language learning), in the choir. The choir practice also provides a physical sense of community in the acts of moving and making music together (Balsnes & Schuff, 2013), as well as sharing collective narratives that can strengthen coping and psychological development (cf. Jansen, 2013).

And importantly, the singers are not only receivers of the inclusion, tolerance, and support. They all, in their different ways, tell stories of how much it has meant to be included as *active participants* in the choir community. Louis was happy to have shared his song, and Marcel felt that they all helped each other to be their best. Both Pedro and Esperanza clearly position themselves as active contributors and volunteers in the choir. This provides the opportunity to see oneself as active, giving, and empowered (cf. Jansen, 2013; Orford, 2008). The active, cultural participation theme also emerges in observations of how quickly newcomers are given responsibilities, and in leaders' statements on how they treat everyone as a resource.

Following the lead of this double inclusion (as receiver/giver) into the choir, inclusion can strengthen well-being in at least two ways: through *social support* and through *empowerment*, and both have been found to increase well-being (Langeland, 2014; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Orford, 2008). Social support and a sense of community can strengthen identity processes, a sense of belonging, and the construction of meaning; provide emotional, informational, and practical benefits; and also have physiological effects on the cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune functions (Heinrichs, Baumgartner, Kirschbaum, & Ehlert, 2003). Empowerment can be understood as a process through which people attain more agency and influence over their lives and communities, through, e.g., participation, resource mobilization, and heightened awareness (Laverack, 2006). Empowerment is believed to affect health positively through strengthening meaning and coping and lowering unmanageable and unhealthy stress.

To sum up, all four interviewees emphasized the importance of experiencing a *sense of cultural participation* in the choir. While all human beings are cultural beings (Rogoff, 2003), and therefore all participate culturally, there are significant differences in the degree to which people's contributions are acknowledged or marginalized in all societies and communities (Chrysochoou, 2004). By cultural participation I mean the opportunity to

contribute and be acknowledged as a valuable participant in cultural interaction. In the context of minorities and immigration, and in light of the two-dimensional understanding of culture delineated above, it becomes clear that cultural participation can likewise be framed in a twofold manner: As participating with *culture as something we have* as well as in *culture as something we do*.

This can add to a further development of Berry's (2001) two-dimensional model of integration, as participation in both culture of origin and host culture. Revisiting this model, we find that it reflects a *descriptive* concept of culture. The understanding of cultural participation as twofold adds the *dynamic* concept of culture to the mix. While Berry's model can help those involved in integration to acknowledge the importance of maintaining cultures of origin, the analysis presented here might serve as a reminder to see immigrants not only as representatives of their backgrounds but as participants in the culture(s) being continually created here and now.

The stories about the choir studied here are generally very positive, and three out of four told progressive narratives about how they were better off today than earlier, thanks to the choir (and other factors). Louis's narrative does not have such a happy ending as of yet, related to his difficulties in obtaining asylum or residency in Norway. The parts of his story that relate to the choir, however, are progressive in the sense that they have a tone of gratitude, where the choir appears as a positive influence in his life. At the same time, this did not solve his other struggles. In the words of another choir participant, the multicultural gospel choir is "not quite Norway." This was said in a different context in a positive sense, painting the choir as a warmer, more relaxed and welcoming place than Norway in general. However, it also sheds light on some of the limitations of the choir in terms of integration, networking, and well-being, as it expresses that the choir is a small arena within a larger context that lacks the same level of inclusion. In other words, what does it help to have fun singing with someone one night a week, if you can't get a job or an apartment in "real life"—or if you can't even stay in Norway in the long term?

For interviewees such as Marcel and Esperanza, on the other hand, it seems that the social support and empowerment experienced in the choir has strengthened them for life outside the choir and helped them find jobs and deal with other challenges. In other words, the "good experiences" and "friends for life" found in the choir do not fix everything; but they *can* strengthen the participants in ways that transfer beyond the choir setting.

The two interviewees that quit the choir also illustrate different possible outcomes: Louis' unresolved residency status caused him to quit and left him in a troubled situation that seems to challenge his well-being and integration. Marcel's story ends in quite the opposite way, as he quit because he no longer "needs" the choir, being as integrated and content with his life in Norway as he is. To many, the choir is of greatest importance during an early phase of immigration—a fact that both makes the choir vulnerable in terms of high turnover and lack of musical progression and underlines the choir as an entry point, but "not quite Norway." In times of transition and uncertainty, however, the choir can provide quite a significant arena for cultural participation, where participants can contribute simultaneously from their backgrounds and in the present becoming of culture.

The choir practice has here been discussed as a meaningful, social, and participatory activity, but not specifically as a *religious* activity/community. According to the participants themselves, this is also a central dimension. There is extensive literature regarding the health benefits of religious practice, via, e.g., social support and meaning-making (Danbolt, Engedal, Stifoss-Hanssen, Hestad, & Lien, 2014; Koenig, 2013). Similarly, the present analysis cannot give full justice to the impact of the choir's specific *musical* activities—synchronized singing and movement, etc. Within the scope of this article, it will have to

suffice to imply that these dimensions are likely to have contributed to the participants' well-being in ways that deserve further elaboration elsewhere.

Concluding reflections

I set out to answer the question of *how inclusion in a multicultural choir can contribute to the well-being of immigrants*. The narratives presented and analyzed here are mainly stories about a choir that has meant a lot to its singers—both as a caring, welcoming community that provides social support through good times and bad, and as an arena for cultural participation, initiative, and empowerment. What they receive in the choir, and perhaps particularly what they are able to give, appear to bring fulfillment and well-being.

While participation opportunities in society at large can still be limited, the choir as caring community and safe arena can constitute a tolerant space, a counterculture of sorts. And might that not be exactly what is needed in a context of looming exclusion and discrimination?

A case study with a limited scope only tells a few stories and sheds light on the factors that appear in them. As we have seen, many life factors outside of the choir context naturally also affect the participants' well-being. The current study is qualitative and explorative in its design and obviously cannot provide conclusive answers to causal relations or the magnitude of general effects of singing in a multicultural choir. However, the analysis points to the potentially salutogenic impacts of a *sense of cultural participation* as an interesting question for future research. This has policy and practical implications for preventive interventions, integration, and social work, due to the significant health potential in choirs and other communities where immigrants are included as equal contributors.

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