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## Singing Our Stories: Building Community and Developing Self-Empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Music

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## Abstract

Involuntary childlessness is a complex and identity-shaping experience molded by parameters of a pronatalist society. For the women who participated in this study, isolation, silence, and shame were experienced as a consequence of their childlessness. Motivated by the idea that singing, particularly in group contexts, might aid in unburdening women whose identities have been stigmatized by their childless circumstances, this ethnographic study examined whether, and in what ways, women experienced community and developed self-empowerment through participation in the Childless Voices Choir.

Framed by theories of community (Delanty, 2018) and empowerment (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016), this research explored how meaningful engagement with group singing and collaborative song writing afforded the opportunity for eleven involuntarily childless women to use their voices collectively to mitigate the isolating and silencing impact of a stigmatized identity (Goffman, 1963) through the recognition, critique, and resistance of pronatalist discourses. Within the ethnographic framework of this study, a participatory action research (PAR) project was also employed, wherein seven of the study participants—and myself as researcher-participant—collaborated on the writing and recording of a song titled, “Calm After the Storm.” This project facilitated an opportunity for profound and meaningful expression.

Emergent through analysis of the data were the umbrella themes of identity transformation and self-empowerment. These themes emerged through the experience of *communitas* (Turner (1969) and a sense of affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012), as experienced through collective singing and collaborative song writing. The women who participated in this study experienced feelings of connectedness and belonging in new friendships that led to a sense of community among and between the participants. The development of communal bonds, in

conjunction with their shared musical experiences, instigated a growth in musical and personal self-confidence and the development of self-empowerment.

Additionally, the research revealed the impact of the song writing and recording project on the group's sense of affective solidarity. For many of the women who participated in the PAR project, a sense of accomplishment aided in building self-confidence and developing self-empowerment, thus impacting their ability to speak about their childless experience both within and outside of the CNBC community. This research is significant to music education and community music practitioners, as it fills a gap in relation to musical engagements involving involuntarily childless women.

Keywords: Involuntary childlessness; group singing; community music; community; self-empowerment; affective solidarity; music education; identity; *communitas*

## Summary for Lay Audience

The purpose of this study was to explore whether, and in what ways, women who are involuntarily childless (also commonly known as being childless not by choice) experienced a sense of community and developed self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir. The eleven women who participated in this study experienced isolation, silence, and shame as a consequence of their childlessness. My research explored the ways in which these experiences were mitigated through the social and musical engagements that took place during the weekly online singing sessions.

In this ethnographic study I explored, as both a participant and a researcher, the musical and social experiences of the Childless Voices facilitator and ten singers. Additionally, I incorporated a song writing and recording participatory action research project into my fieldwork. The outcome of this project was the composition and recording of a song titled, “Calm After the Storm.” This song is a reflection of the women’s experiences with, and perceptions of, involuntary childlessness.

I analyzed data from singing session observations and interviews through the lens of community and empowerment theories. My findings showed that, through social and musical interactions, the Childless Voices facilitator and singers built communal bonds that led to a sense of solidarity. Additionally, through social and musical engagements during the singing sessions and the song writing and recording project, participants developed their literal (physical) and figurative voices, which aided in the development of self-empowerment.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated, with much love and gratitude, to the eleven incredible ‘Wonder Women’ who stepped into this research with eager and open hearts. The vulnerability and courage with which you shared your experiences is a humbling testament to your strength and resilience. Please know that your voices are beautiful, worthy of being heard, and yours to use in whatever capacity you choose.

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I am deeply grateful every day for the opportunities I have had, to learn from one of the most difficult challenges I have faced: involuntary childlessness. My childlessness is the reason this dissertation exists. It is the life ‘non-event’ that has shaped who I am, what I know, and how I came to know it. It has brought me much heartbreak and also, in recent years, great joy and fulfillment. Without childlessness, I would not have had the opportunity to experience the most challenging, rewarding, frustrating, and exciting journey that I have ever been on: Graduate studies.

Over the last seven years at Western, I have engaged with many intelligent, charismatic, kind, and generous professors and staff, to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. First, my supervisor, Dr. Patrick Schmidt. Eight years ago, I met with you to discuss the possibility of applying for an M.A. in Music Education at Western. After speaking with you about my research interests in relation to my journey with childlessness, you told me that I was exactly the kind of graduate student the Don Wright Faculty of Music was looking for. Since that moment, you have never once stopped believing in me, encouraging me, teaching me, supporting me, or keeping me grounded and focused when I was doubting myself. There are not enough words to describe the impact you have had on shaping my academic identity and career; and sometimes you were brutal, in the best way. Which is ultimately why I chose you as supervisor for my PhD, because I knew that you would know exactly what I needed to get through this in one piece (well, minus an organ). Thank you for all of this. Your impact on my life will not be forgotten or taken for granted.

A massive thank you also to Dr. Cathy Benedict. Because of you, I am a better educator, a more reflexive practitioner and researcher, and a better human. You have shaped my thinking

in ways that I am not even sure I can articulate. Ways that still make me stop mid-thought and smile and think to myself, “Was that Cathy’s voice?” You are one of the most gifted and humble educators I have ever met, and I am grateful to have had so many opportunities to learn from your example. I strive for authenticity, vulnerability, reciprocity, and meaning in my teaching and engagements with the other every day, in large part because of you. For that gift, I thank you.

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To Paul. Words cannot express how grateful I am to you for the love, emotional support, and encouragement that you've provided me with, particularly over the last ten years, since I began my undergraduate degree as a nervous thirty-one-year-old. Our losses were still so fresh then, and yet we managed to thrive, despite (or perhaps because of?) living like two ships passing in the night. It's been a difficult journey for both of us; possibly more so for you because you have been by my side as I discovered who I am and how I wish to be in this world, which looks a lot different than ten years ago. You have been my 'pillar of strength' many times over, and you have also stepped aside and cheered from the sidelines when I needed to go the road alone. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study explores whether, and in what ways, women who are involuntarily childless (also commonly known as being childless-not-by-choice, or CNBC) experience community and develop self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir. Research shows that many women who are CNBC feel alone, silenced, and stigmatized, by their childlessness (Gold, 2012; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995). This may be attributed to the perceived sensitive nature of the topic (Chrastil, 2020), the trauma and disenfranchised grief that many CNBC women experience (Chester, 2003; Darroux, 2022; Doka, 1989, 2002; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995) and/or a lack of public knowledge regarding the complex nature of the childless experience (Cook & Dickens, 2014). Childlessness is a complex, identity-shaping experience (Greil et al., 2011) molded by parameters of a pronatalist society (Gold, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017) and emergent through a multitude of possible life circumstances; including but not limited to the loss of an only child, a person's inability to conceive and/or retain a pregnancy, and/or a social position that does not support having children or access to essential reproductive health services (Day, 2013).

Still normative in many countries, pronatalist societies promote reproduction and parenthood through “direct policies, such as child subsidies, or indirect influence, such as cultural celebrations of motherhood and childbearing” (Lovett, 2018, p. 1028). Within these institutionalized practices, pronatalist discourse also often involves the reification of white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, and able-bodied parenting (Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017). The outcome is the effective stigmatization of those whose personal and social circumstances do not reflect socially constructed reproductive ideals (Gold, 2012; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman,

2017). Significant to this study, then, are the ways in which pronatalist discourses reinforce gendered social norms and the notion that women must have children in order to be considered “good citizens” (Gotlib, 2016). Within such framing, women who are involuntarily childless experience stigma (Goffman, 1963) and are often positioned as Other to those who have children (Bays, 2017; Day, 2013; Greil et al., 2011). The impact of these marginalized and stigmatizing discourses, in addition to the silence that perpetuates the disenfranchised grief of involuntary childlessness (Darroux, 2022; Doka, 1989, 2002), may leave CNBC women feeling lost, alone, and lacking supportive communities of empathetic and/or similarly circumstanced others (Whiteford & Gonzalez, 1995).

Community, in its broadest sense, denotes a relationship between people, places, and institutions (Chaskin, 2013; Delanty, 2018; Sartwell, 2002). Community may be perceived, at first blush, as an inclusive concept that suggests “images and feelings of identity, belonging, shared circumstance, and common cause” (Chaskin, 2013, p. 105). It is important to note, however, as Sartwell (2002) does, that communities are also formed through exclusion, that is, “by excluding others or by being excluded by others: usually both” (p. 48). Stigmatized individuals, therefore, may experience community with similarly circumstanced others, but they do so out of necessity: They have been excluded, in some way, from a society whose ideals are unaccepting of their perceived social deviations or failings. Through such exclusion, stigmatized individuals may feel what Delanty (2018) describes as a sense of “solidarity” with others whose social circumstances “challenge the status quo” (p. 53). Women who are CNBC, too, may experience solidarity with similarly circumstanced others as a consequence of their exclusion from motherhood. Solidarity, according to Delanty (2018), “concerns the strength of social bonds that makes possible a shared social world. It is a capacity for action” (p. 53). In this study I



argue that within communities comprised of stigmatized individuals—women who are CNBC, specifically—a capacity for action derived from solidarity provides opportunities for self-empowerment (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016; Stein, 1997; Weissberg, 1999).

My research builds on Jorgensen's (1995) notion of community as bounded, interconnected, feelingful, and empowering. Jorgensen (1995) asserts that,

Communities are dynamic, in the process of becoming, alive, responding to and changing the world of which they are a part. That they can undertake corporate actions in a unified way empowers individual participants to accomplish more than they might otherwise be capable of alone. Knowing one's surroundings intimately, possessing self-assurance and confidence in that knowledge, being rooted in and bounded by this place, having one's place in the community, being intimately interconnected with others empowers one to find one's own voice and, by so speaking, act to change not only the community, but the world beyond. (pp. 74-75)

Empowerment is a ubiquitous term whose definition has evolved parallel to the evolution of systems of power (McLaughlin, 2016). It is defined as both an activity and an outcome in sociological and healthcare literature (McLaughlin, 2016). It is also critiqued, however, as being haphazardly thrown around as “a magical phrase capable of exorcising demons” (Weissberg, 1999, p. 2). This critique builds on the notion of empowerment as the facilitation of the positive personal and social transformation of marginalized and/or oppressed groups and individuals by those in positions of power (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016). It must be observed that while positive transformation may be made manifest through empowerment, empowerment should not be understood as something to be given, wherein disempowered individuals or groups are “presented as the problem, as that which requires modification” (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 124).

Instead, individuals and groups may be understood as disempowered through social and political policies and discourses (Carr, 2003; Lovett, 2018). Thus, the challenge here is to develop self-empowerment through the recognition, critique, and resistance of disempowering discourses (Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 2018).

As Ellsworth (1989) discusses, empowerment and the notion of ‘giving voice’—within learning environments, specifically—must be critically examined. In her article, “Why doesn’t this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy,” Ellsworth (1989) states that

current understandings and uses of "critical," "empowerment," "student voice," and "dialogue" are only surface manifestations of deeper contradictions involving pedagogies, both traditional and critical. The kind of knowing I am referring to is that in which objects, nature, and "Others" are seen to be known or ultimately knowable, in the sense of being "defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained, and diagnosed" at a level of determination never accorded to the "knower" herself or himself. (pp. 320-321)

My study explores whether the isolating, silencing, and stigmatizing nature of involuntary childlessness might be mitigated through participation in the Childless Voices Choir. Throughout my research process, I acknowledge and critique the ways in which my own experience as an involuntarily childless singer, choral director, and voice pedagogue influences my perception of the ability of singing to ‘free’ one’s voice. Thus, I critique the ‘empowering’ nature of group singing, in part, through Ellsworth’s (1989) examination of critical pedagogy, as well as through the feminist approach I employ within my research. Feminist research has the potential to facilitate an empowering process of knowledge creation with and by women whose lives function within disempowering, marginalizing, and oppressive societal structures, policies, and

practices. Through the acknowledgement of the “partial, multiple, and contradictory” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 312) nature of individual voices, a feminist approach recognizes the purpose of exploring women’s experiences as “survival, expansion of women’s own understandings of their oppression and strength, sharing common experiences among women, building solidarity among women, and political strategizing” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 312). I understand this process, through Freire’s (2018) notion of conscientização (consciousness raising), as the development of self-empowerment.

Through Adams (2008), I understand self-empowerment as an act and outcome of the self, rooted in one’s capacity to equip herself “with the knowledge, skills and resources to identify, interpret and achieve control over aspects of [her] personal...development” (p. 91). For involuntarily childless women, this cannot be achieved without first recognizing, critiquing, and resisting the pronatalist discourses that govern women’s identities. Self-empowerment as a practice is a critical activity requiring self-awareness, self-critique, and reflexivity from the individual (Adams, 2008). For Stein (1997), this takes place in a cyclical manner:

Individuals, through their participation in group activities, gain skills and resources that lead to personal development. Their self-concept improves and they develop personal interaction skills. As individuals develop skills, the group functions more effectively. It gains strength as a group through broader membership, increasingly effective leaders, more resources, allies, opportunities, and strategies, and the development of skills for effectively using power. (p. 62)

I argue here that the ‘use of power’ cannot be implemented until dominant discourses of power are recognized, critiqued, interrogated, and resisted by those whose lives are governed by them. My study explores the ways in which participation in group singing may foster the development

of self-empowerment, through Delanty's (2018) notion of solidarity. For Delanty (2018), "[s]olidarity in modern societies will very often entail a political challenge to the status quo. It is not an affirmation of it or of a pre-existing political community, but the promise of a new political community often by those who are excluded" (p. 53). Solidarity, therefore, forms the basis for communities of marginalized individuals whose personal circumstances, once considered personal, are in fact political in nature (i.e., involuntary childlessness). Additionally, Ackelsberg (1988) discusses women's networks as "providing nurturance and context for activism" (p. 304), stating that "[i]t is in and through networks...that most women engage in collaborative activity and, through that activity, can begin to experience themselves as confident, competent beings, citizens of a democratic polity" (p. 206). Challenging pronatalist discourses that frame the experience of involuntary childlessness then, when theorized through the lens of self-empowerment, may be viewed as political action, particularly among a community of women who are childless not by choice. Thus, I explore the potential for developing self-empowerment through solidarity—and specifically the notion of affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012)—among the involuntarily childless women who participate in the musical and social world of the Childless Voices Choir.

Research in the fields of music education and community music shows group singing to not only foster community among singers (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2005; Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Rio, 2005; ) but also to serve as a catalyst for self-empowerment (Balén, 2017; Cohen & Palidofsky, 2013; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Latimer, 2008; MacIntosh, 2003; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Palidofsky, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012; Seligson, 2012). The studies cited here explore the ways in which stigmatized individuals experience community and/or empowerment through group singing.

Participants in these studies are considered stigmatized and/or marginalized to varying degrees, due to their personal and social circumstances. Often missing from these studies, however, is a critical view of empowerment that addresses the ways in which participants' identities are stigmatized through dominant and oppressive social discourses. Participants in these studies include bereaved parents (Gosine & Travasso, 2018), LGBTQ individuals (Balén, 2017; Latimer, 2008), sexual abuse survivors (MacIntosh, 2003), incarcerated youth and adults (Cohen & Palidofsky, 2013; Palidofsky, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012; Seligson, 2012), homeless adults (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Rio, 2005), and people whose cognitive and/or physical health is impaired (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2005; Clift, 2012; Merrick & Maguire, 2017).

As the extant literature suggests, music education and community music scholarship exploring the positive impacts of group singing on stigmatized and marginalized populations is extensive. There remains, however, a dearth of music education and community music literature involving involuntarily childless women, which my research addresses. Additionally, this research offers a critical examination of the ways in which the women who participated in my study recognized, critiqued, and resisted pronatalist discourses within the group-singing environment.

In the last two decades, the proliferation of online social media networks has made it possible for individuals and charitable and community organizations affiliated with the CNBC community to provide virtual spaces to build community and develop self-empowerment through the recognition, critique, and resistance of the pronatalist discourses that negatively impact their personal and social identities (Fertility Network, n.d.; Facebook, 2023; Gateway Women, 2023; Lighthouse Women, 2023; Resolve, 2023). Within these virtual spaces, women share their stories, ask—and respond to—questions about being CNBC, and discuss topics of interest

unrelated to involuntary childlessness. In addition, opportunities for coming together as a community are also offered in person at multiple events such as conferences (The Not Mom, 2023), workshops and retreats (World Childless Week, 2023), arts festivals (Fertility Fest, 2021), and smaller gatherings organized through websites such as Meetup.com (Meetup, 2023). Most recently, a choir was formed specifically for CNBC women in London, England, by CNBC advocate Helen Louise Jones (Our Healing Voice, 2023a).<sup>1</sup> It is with the Childless Voices Choir that my research interests most strongly resonate, due to the positive impact that group singing is found to have on one's personal and social identities (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2017; Garnett, 2017). This had implications for this study in that many involuntarily childless women's personal and social identities are negatively impacted by pronatalist discourses that govern their childless circumstances (Chester, 2003; Greil et al., 2011; Petropanagos, 2017; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995).

Singing is a creative, embodied, and vulnerable act that provides opportunities for personal growth (Busch & Gick, 2012; von Lob et al., 2010; Welch, 2005). Within the group singing environment, individuals come together with a common purpose, to engage in potentially meaningful musical, educative, and social interactions (Wolfe-Hill, 2017). It is through these interactions that community building and, consequently, self-empowerment may be experienced (Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Latimer, 2008; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Parry, 2005). Consequently, I make the case here that singing in the Childless Voices Choir offers an opportunity for involuntarily childless women to build community and develop self-empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that, due to the global outbreak of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020, the Childless Voices Choir was moved online via Zoom, after only one in-person rehearsal.

I had the privilege of working alongside eleven incredible women on this dissertation research project. In this next section, I introduce these women, and myself. While these introductions are brief, and not at all wholly reflective of our personalities or lives, a deeper and more meaningful representation will unfold throughout this dissertation.

### **Introducing the Women Who Took Part in this Study**

The women who participated in this study were given the option, during the recruitment phase, to use their real first names or to be identified using a pseudonym\*. Helen, Lu, Catherine\*, Nicola\*, Sam, Emma, Sue, Tracey, Sara\*, Anna\*, Stephanie\*, and I vary in age, with all but one (Nicola) between the ages of forty and sixty (I turned forty between the first and second phases of the study). While the age range of all who participated in the study was varied, the racial and cultural diversity of the group was limited. All of us were born in Britain, with all but two of us identifying as white. During our interviews, Lu identified herself as “mixed race” and Sara identified as “South Asian.” From a socio-economic standpoint, each of us identify as middle class, although we grew up in varied social backgrounds and in various geographical regions of England (I emigrated to Canada in 1991, when I was eight years old). All of us identify as heterosexual, and at the time of the study eight of us were married or living with a long-term partner (Sue had been divorced previously). Of the four women who are single, two have never been married and two were divorced (Helen roughly twenty years ago and Tracey within a year of this study taking place). Our career paths were varied, although six of us worked in the field of education. Lu (unable to work due to disability), Sue (retired), Tracey, Anna, and me are teachers, and Catherine works as an educational psychologist. Helen’s professional background has been heavily geared towards musical performance, although she did have some experience teaching singing. Sam and Emma both perform administrative work in different

capacities, and Nicola is a priest. Sara and Stephanie both work in the field of health and wellness, with Sara being a yoga and meditation instructor and Stephanie a doctor (general practitioner, or GP).

Each of the women who worked with me on this study, as well as myself, identify as involuntarily childless, or childless not by choice. While we share this common identity, the routes through which we came to be childless vary, reflecting the complex nature of the experience of childlessness. Lu was diagnosed with endometriosis causing infertility and, at the time of the study, was awaiting a hysterectomy. Helen, too, had been diagnosed with endometriosis at a young age and had experienced a pregnancy loss. She eventually had a hysterectomy. Catherine was childless by circumstance, having never met a partner with whom she wanted to have children. Nicola was diagnosed with infertility caused, at least in part, by her experience with anorexia nervosa as a teenager. The fertility treatments she and her husband tried were unsuccessful. Sam was diagnosed with infertility after she and her partner attempted to conceive naturally when she was in her late thirties. They then experienced failed adoption, which marked the end of their journey with growing their family. Emma was also diagnosed with infertility, on top of her diagnosis of ME, which has caused physical disability. The fertility treatments that she and her husband received were unsuccessful. Sue was diagnosed with infertility while married to her first husband. They attempted fertility treatments but the treatments were unsuccessful. After their divorce, Sue remarried later in life and did not attempt to conceive again. Tracey was also diagnosed with infertility while married to her now ex-husband but their fertility treatments were also unsuccessful. Sara was diagnosed with infertility due to adenomyosis, which led to having a hysterectomy. Additionally, she and her husband experienced failed adoption after the end of their journey with fertility treatments. Like



Catherine, Anna was childless by circumstance, having not met her husband until later in life. Stephanie was childless by circumstance until she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and had to have a radical hysterectomy, which ended her chances of ever conceiving. I was childless by circumstance, having married a man who was infertile. The fertility treatments we tried were unsuccessful and before we could try again, I was diagnosed with MS. I made a choice to not try to conceive so that I could remain on the medication that would keep my MS under control. Finally, I had a total hysterectomy at age thirty-nine, which ended any chance of my ever conceiving.

As evidenced by the varying ways in which the twelve of us came to be—and identify as—childless, this experience is complex. Building on this, and in order to better understand the aims of this research project and how the study is designed and situated, it is necessary to first contextualize the experience of involuntary childlessness.

### **Contextualizing Involuntary Childlessness**

Human reproduction as a scholarly field of study within the social sciences has only been granted attention over the last fifty years (Inhorn & van Balen, 2002). Within this literature, the term “involuntary childlessness” is often used interchangeably with “infertility,” particularly within medical discourse (Letherby, 2002). This is problematic in that it is difficult to historically trace the origins of involuntary childlessness as an encompassing experience considered beyond a medical diagnosis of infertility. Conflating involuntary childlessness with infertility alone forecloses opportunities to understand it as a social phenomenon shaped by disempowering pronatalist discourses (Greil et al., 2011).

Exploring and interrogating the ways in which pronatalist discourses impact those who are CNBC is significant (Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017) in that it provides an opportunity for

nuanced elements that characterize involuntary childlessness as a complex phenomenon to be unearthed (Greil et al., 2011). While people of all gender identities may be impacted by pronatalist discourses, the literature points to a disproportionate pressure on women (Bays, 2017; Gold, 2012; Parry, 2005). The consequence of this pressure for involuntarily childless women often takes the form of social exclusion, disempowerment, silencing, and a loss of agency (Bell, 2013; Ceballo et al., 2015; Chester, 2003; Letherby, 2002; Williams, 1997). Thus, my research focuses on women's experiences specifically, as they relate to involuntary childlessness as a stigmatized phenomenon.

Goffman (1963) explores stigma from the perspective of identity, whereby discrepancies between “virtual” (as perceived by others) and “actual” (as perceived by oneself) identities work to “spoil” one's social identity. Exploring involuntary childlessness through the lens of Goffman's (1963) stigma theory situates it as a social phenomenon through which loss of agency and disempowerment may occur. Additionally, stigma is presented by Goffman (1963) as having a socially exclusory effect on those whose personal and/or social circumstances do not conform to societal norms. Individuals who are socially excluded may, in turn, form social bonds with groups of others in similarly stigmatized social positions (Goffman, 1963; Sartwell, 2002). Significant to my study are the ways in which involuntarily childless women experience community and self-empowerment through participation in the Childless Voices Choir.

Balén (2017) describes the role of singing in the context of social justice movements in her book *A Queerly Joyful Noise*:

The use of song displays important elements from the physiological to the communal to the negotiation of space, identity, power, and meaning evident in every such use of song for social justice movements. Who gets to speak; when, where, why, and how they can

speaking; and who defines whose identities and how—all these matter to issues of social justice. (p. 29)

Here, I am drawn to the notion of identity definition, as it harkens back to Goffman's (1963) theory that differences between one's virtual and actual identities position individuals as socially stigmatized. In relation to marginalized groups, then, I argue that active participation in a collective and collaborative singing environment offers the potential for rethinking and reimagining stigmatized identities. Below, I will position involuntary childlessness within the context of pronatalist discourses which function to socially stigmatize women who are CNBC. I will also discuss involuntary childlessness as a stigmatized social phenomenon through Goffman's (1963) stigma theory and Doka's (1989, 2002) theory of disenfranchised grief.

In the following section, I discuss involuntary childlessness as a complex and stigmatized phenomenon (Greil et al., 2011), exploring the ways in which pronatalist discourses position involuntarily childless women as Other to those who have children (Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017). This positioning may negatively impact both their personal and social identities (Chester, 2003; Loftus & Namaste, 2011), with consequences that socially isolate, silence, and disempower involuntarily childless women. Involuntary childlessness has been explored in the literature as an isolating, a silencing, and a stigmatized experience (Ceballo et al., 2015; Gold, 2012; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995). There is a dearth of research, however, on the ways in which the arts may mitigate feelings of isolation, silence, and stigma in women who are CNBC. Throughout this section, I position my discussion of involuntary childlessness as a stigmatized phenomenon as it is presented in sociological and feminist literature.

### *Involuntary Childlessness and Pronatalism*

Involuntary childlessness is a complex, identity-shaping phenomenon (Greil et al., 2011) often stigmatized through pronatalist discourses (Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017). As discussed by Darroux (2022), “pronatalist ideology promotes the view that the value of a woman is linked to her ability to produce a child” (p. 17), thus linking women’s intrinsic value to motherhood. According to Lovett (2018), “historically, pronatalism has often been associated with nationalism, racism, and state control of reproduction. In terms of women's lives, however, pronatalism is often framed in terms of ideals of motherhood” (p. 1029). In pronatalist societies, motherhood ideals rooted in racist, ableist, classist, and heteronormative discourses work to stigmatize women whose social positions do not conform to normative gendered ways of being (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Green, 2012; Malacrida, 2009). As such, pronatalist discourses position women of colour, women who are differently abled, women of low socioeconomic status, trans women, and queer women as unfit for motherhood (Ceballo et al., 2015; Frederick, 2017; Linton et al., 2016; Shakespeare, 2000). For Lovett (2018), motherhood may be achieved through the biological conception, adoption, or fostering of children. With a more specific view, however, Petropanagos (2017) states that pronatalism “should be more narrowly defined as a ‘probirth’ ideology that emphasizes gestational motherhood, which can be achieved with or without the use of one’s own genetic material. Pronatalism demands pregnancy” (p. 123). This definition of pronatalism complicates an already problematic societal ideal, as it privileges only women who attain the status of Mother through biological means (Petropanagos, 2017). Women who are childless by circumstance, as opposed to through medically diagnosed infertility, are therefore effectively ignored within Petropanagos’ (2017) definition. This differentiation is significant to my study, as the women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir identify as being CNBC for a

variety of physical and/or social reasons. Additionally, the concept of pronatalism is relevant to my research in that the public sharing of collaboratively composed vocal music—a central element of the project—acts as a medium through which the women in the Childless Voices Choir share their experiences of involuntary childlessness within a pronatalist society. In this way, the co-creation and sharing of knowledge have the potential to prove central to the development of self-empowerment.

Childlessness is discussed by Gold (2012) as a failure when positioned against heteronormative reproductive ideals. The author describes the inability to conceive as a “life nonevent” and “developmental crisis” for heterosexual couples (p. 226). For Gold (2012), a nonevent,

refers to any normative life transition which does not occur within a specified timeframe.

While the event itself may later occur, the shift in timeframe results in the individual or family being out of step with peers both regarding the anticipated and realized time frames. (p. 226)

Thus, for Gold (2012), those who do not conform to these timeframes are at risk of being identified as a non-family unit, which may have negative impacts on a couple’s social identity. The author’s arguments are sound from a heteronormative reproductive perspective. It is problematic, however, to see all other intersectional aspects of involuntary childlessness, such as socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, class, race, and marital status excluded from the discussion. I argue that these social positions play an equally important role in the socially stigmatized constitution of involuntary childlessness because positioning involuntary childlessness as only a socially privileged heteronormative issue excludes women who do not identify as such. Ceballo et al. (2015), for example, discuss the impact of pronatalism on black

women struggling with infertility in the USA. My research is framed by theories of community and self-empowerment as experienced and developed through social and musical interaction within the Childless Voices Choir, which is open to membership by all women who identify as involuntarily childless. Thus, the exclusion of women of colour, economically disadvantaged women, queer women, and/or single women from discussions of the CNBC community is not congruent with the social and musical interactions that take place within the group singing environment at the centre of this study.

### ***The Disenfranchised Grief of Involuntary Childlessness***

Kenneth Doka (1989) developed the concept of disenfranchised grief in his first book titled, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*, published in 1989. His concept was explored and expanded upon by multiple authors in 2002 in his edited book, *Disenfranchised Grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*. According to Doka (2002), a person's grief is disenfranchised when "that grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly observed" (p. 5). Additionally, disenfranchisement occurs when a person is denied the "right to grieve" (Doka, 2002, p. 5) their loss, which Attig (2004) discusses as "denying a human right" (p. 198). Doka (2002) categorizes the disenfranchisement of loss in five ways: "lack of recognition of the relationship, lack of acknowledgement of the loss...exclusion of the griever...the circumstances of the death and the ways individuals grieve" (p. 10). While every woman's experience of involuntary childlessness may not include the death of a child, evidence suggests that the intangible loss of a Motherhood identity can be understood as disenfranchised through Doka's (2002) other four categories (Ceballo et al., 2015; Darroux, 2022; Galhardo et al., 2011; Hiefner, 2020; McBain & Reeves, 2019; Parry, 2005). Doka (2002) discusses infertility as a "significant unrecognized" loss, one which the author suggests "may inhibit casual

bonding” (p. 12), thus excluding the griever from a variety of social exchanges and/or engagements. For women who are involuntarily childless for social—versus medical—reasons, the intangible loss of a Motherhood identity may be experienced in the same way, through isolation, stigma, shame, a lack of acknowledgement, silence, a lack of support, and marginalization (Ceballo et al., 2015; Galhardo et al., 2011; Hiefner, 2020; McBain & Reeves, 2019; Parry, 2005). According to Darroux (2022),

[t]he intangible nature of involuntary childlessness can be an ambiguous loss, often not apparent to others. With these circumstances surrounding involuntary childlessness, women who experience this issue are often ignored and marginalized, leaving them to grieve in silence without support, thereby disenfranchising their grief. (p. 27)

Although I first came to hear of the concept of disenfranchised grief in relation to involuntary childlessness through Jody Day (2013), it was Darroux’s (2022) Doctoral dissertation, and subsequent further reading, that allowed me to gain a much deeper understanding of the concept. I am particularly drawn to Attig’s (2004) powerful statement regarding the “negative and destructive” nature of the act of disenfranchising grief:

[D]isenfranchising is not simply a matter of indifference to the experiences and efforts of the bereaved. It is more actively negative and destructive as it involves denial of entitlement, interference, and even imposition of sanction. Disenfranchising messages actively discount, dismiss, disapprove, discourage, invalidate, and delegitimize the experiences and efforts of grieving. And disenfranchising behaviors interfere with the exercise of the right to grieve by withholding permission, disallowing, constraining, hindering, and even prohibiting it. (p. 198)

These words stand out to me because I have witnessed firsthand, as well as through bearing witness to the experiences of other involuntarily childless women, the denial—be it intentional or subconscious—of the right to grieve our childlessness. The denial is affected by the words and actions of individuals outside of the childless-not-by-choice community, as well as institutional and societal pronatalist policies and practices.

### ***Involuntary Childlessness as Social Stigma***

Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) was developed to help us understand the impact of socially constructed normative ways of being on those with varied physical, cognitive, emotional, and social circumstances. For many—if not most—women living in Western societies, the dominant gendered stereotype for women is that of Mother: Women are expected to want, and be physically able to have, children (Gotlib, 2016). Women who are CNBC, then, are often negatively impacted by this socially constructed gender norm. When examining the experience of involuntary childlessness from a sociological perspective, I am drawn to the work of Irving Goffman (1963), as his stigma theory provides a theoretical lens through which to understand the social impact of involuntary childlessness on women. An understanding of stigma is central to my research, as I acknowledge, critique, and address my own assumptions around involuntary childlessness that are based on my own experiences as a white, heterosexual, married woman who is childless not by choice.

Goffman (1963) defines stigma as “possessing an attribute that makes him [*sic*] different from others...sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap. It constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity” (p. 3). For Goffman (1963), a “virtual identity” is one that is constructed through the assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma that are attached to a person by others. As such, virtual identity is tied to social norms and



expectations such that, for women, particularly those who are married, society's expectations are that they will perform their "wifely duties," which include being able to "bear children" (Goffman, 1963, p. 53). In contrast, a person's "actual identity" is one held and performed by an individual: a personal identity. Goffman (1963) describes actual identity as "positive marks or identity pegs, and the unique combination of life history that comes to be attached to the individual with the help of these pegs for his [*sic*] identity" (p. 57). Discrepancies between virtual and actual identities may, according to Goffman (1963), "spoil" an individual's social identity, thus discrediting and disempowering them. Involuntarily childless women living in pronatalist societies that construct women's dominant gendered role as Mother—particularly those who are cis-gendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied—may thus be perceived, through Goffman's (1963) theoretical thinking, as stigmatized.

In addition to the spoiling of one's virtual identity, Goffman (1963) argues that the actual identity—how one perceives oneself—may also be transformed by the stigma of a spoiled identity, particularly when the stigmatizing attribute is deemed a "secret stigma" (Greil et al., 2011, p. 736). When an individual is able to conceal her "failing," "the stigma and the effort to conceal it or remedy it become 'fixed' as part of personal identity" (Goffman, 1963, p. 65). The notion of involuntary childlessness as a secret stigma is one which I consider throughout my research process, as not all of the women with whom I work have publicly discussed their experience with involuntary childlessness with anyone outside of the CNBC community or, even more specifically, the Childless Voices Choir. Additionally, carrying the burden of a secret stigma often has a silencing effect on involuntarily childless women. Darroux (2022) states that involuntarily childless women may feel as though "their voices have been silenced due to the disenfranchisement of their grief, as evidenced by lack of acknowledgment of their loss and the

lack of space to grieve such losses” (p. 65). Thus, my research endeavours have been motivated by the idea that singing, particularly in a group context, may aid in unburdening women who have been silenced by the secret stigma of involuntary childlessness. As discussed earlier, singing is a creative, embodied, and vulnerable act that provides opportunities for personal growth (Busch & Gick, 2012; von Lob et al., 2010; Welch, 2005). Thus, I argue that singing, particularly for stigmatized individuals, may be viewed as a means to self-empowerment through the use of a vulnerable voice that has been silenced by stigma. Consequently, I make the case here that meaningful engagement with singing in a group context affords the opportunity for involuntarily childless women to use their voices collectively to mitigate the silencing effect of social stigma produced through pronatalist discourses.

An important issue I consider throughout my research, however, is the possibility that the women with whom I work may not currently name themselves as involuntarily childless, nor feel negatively impacted by their circumstances, due to the complex nature of the phenomenon. Greil et al. (2011) raise the point that not all women who experience infertility consider their childless status to be a problem. The authors explain that, based on the relationship between identity and health, the medicalization of infertility places a stigma on women affected both negatively and positively by their childless status. They also raise an interesting question: “How are we to classify a woman who would be considered infertile according to the medical definition but who does not see herself as having ‘tried’ to conceive and who does not consider herself to be infertile?” (Greil et al., 2011, p. 740). Thus, while for many involuntarily childless women their circumstance may hold a dominant position within their personal identity that they perceive as negative, it is important to note that others may not feel the same, regardless of normative societal ideologies.

Goffman (1963) discusses normative ideologies in relation to personal identity as breeding “deviations as well as conformance” (p. 129). Problematizing the notion of social deviance in relation to involuntary childlessness, I ask: If stigma is constructed through the desire to conform, when an individual does not identify with that desire, is it appropriate to label them as stigmatized? Those who perceive their involuntary childlessness as a negative attribute at one point in their lives may eventually come to terms with their circumstance in such a way that they are able to later perceive their childlessness in a positive light (Letherby, 2002); something Goffman (1963) terms “a blessing in disguise” (p. 11). The significance here is that, while some women may consider themselves stigmatized by their childlessness, others may not. Thus, when exploring the ways in which the women in the Childless Voices Choir experience community and develop self-empowerment, I take into consideration that the women with whom I work are at different stages in their CNBC journey and thus identify with involuntary childlessness in complex and unique ways that do not necessarily fit with a stigmatized identity. This has consequences during the data collection, analysis, and reporting phases of my research because Delanty’s (2018) notion of solidarity, which I include in my theoretical framework, requires “a consciousness of a shared social world” (p. 53). I therefore develop and maintain a sense of awareness to whether, and in what ways, the women I work with identify with the shared social world of the Childless Voices Choir. In the following section, I discuss my position as a researcher who has a close personal relationship to the topic being explored in this dissertation.

## **Researcher Positionality: Navigating Research from the ‘Inside’**

### ***‘Inside’ Childlessness***

My journey through infertility and childlessness has shaped how I perceive and identify with these complex experiences. My life choices led me first to marriage with an infertile man, and then to remaining in the marriage after unsuccessful attempts at conception through assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs); namely, *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) with intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI). My choice to walk away from ARTs in 2011, after two rounds of IVF/ICSI and a frozen embryo transfer, was due in part to the physical and emotional trauma of the unsuccessful procedures, as well as the struggle I faced with my changed identity as an involuntarily childless woman. In January of 2012, a month after walking away from fertility treatments, I sought out a psychotherapist to help me through what was one of the darkest times in my life. At that time, I was having suicidal thoughts every day and felt completely lost and isolated in my grief. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with the rest of my life because for my entire life up to that point, at age thirty, I had assumed that I would get married and have children. Working with my psychotherapist, I began exploring options for my future and made the decision to further my post-secondary education pursuits, which was something I had previously thought about but hadn't pursued because I had prioritised trying to have children. My choice to enroll in university, made in part to fill what I perceived as a void in my life, ultimately led me to undergraduate and graduate studies in music education. These post-secondary pursuits have since taken me on an incredibly meaningful and fulfilling ten-year journey.

As I began my Master's degree in 2016, my husband and I spoke about trying again to conceive after I graduated, as I had not yet decided to apply for a PhD. During the first year of

my degree, however, I was diagnosed with Relapsing-Remitting Multiple Sclerosis (RRMS), a neurological autoimmune disease that attacks the myelin in the brain and spinal cord, forming lesions that can impair cognitive and physical abilities. When I received my diagnosis of RRMS, I was told by my neurologist that I would not be able to take medication to help slow the progress of the disease if I was going to try to conceive, which could take years for my husband and me. Thus, I made the choice to shut the door on trying to conceive, due to the cognitive and physical health risks posed by not taking my prescribed medication. I was now having to wrap my head around the finality of this decision and the unknown impacts that RRMS could have on my future.

For the following few years, I identified as involuntarily childless, as I felt that the choice to have children had been taken from me. However, as I continued on my academic path and began engaging regularly online with the global childless-not-by-choice community, I discovered a passion for raising awareness of the experience of involuntary childlessness. The fulfillment and joy that I experience through my academic and advocacy work, as well as the freedom that I feel not having children has given me to pursue a number of meaningful interests, has brought me to a point in my life where I now identify as involuntarily *childfree*. I feel this identity has more positive connotations that encompass the complex choices I have made, despite those choices not feeling as though they were made freely. Most recently, in January of 2022, it was discovered that I had a very large pedunculated fibroid; a vascular mass growing on the outside of my uterus. I was scheduled to have the fibroid removed and when I spoke to my surgeon and asked her whether there was a risk of further fibroids, she told me that, indeed, there was. With this news, I made the decision to have a total hysterectomy in April 2022, whereby my uterus and cervix were removed, leaving my ovaries intact so that I would not immediately go

into menopause. I will speak about the impact this surgery had on my research process in chapter three. The decision to have a hysterectomy was an easy one for me to make, which speaks to where I am in my journey with childlessness: I am completely comfortable with the idea that I will never have children. This comfort is derived from the intense psychotherapeutic grief work I have done over the last eleven years, as well as the fulfillment, joy, and meaning I derive from my ongoing academic, social, and emotional work with—and for—the CNBC community.

### ***'Inside' Singing***

My experience as a singer began from a young age, when I would sing at home with my dad, who was a musician. My formal singing training began in high school during three semesters of vocal music classes and participation in the school women's choir. Upon graduating from high school at sixteen years of age, I taught myself to play guitar so that I could accompany myself while singing the folk, rock, and popular music that I enjoyed. I would perform at open mic jam nights at a local pub on a monthly basis, and I also engaged in music making with many of my friends. I enrolled in the music program at Cambrian College in Sudbury, Ontario, when I was nineteen. There, I had three years of private classical voice and piano lessons, as well as experiences participating in the college choir.

When I graduated from college in May 2004 with a Diploma of Applied Arts in Music Performance, I had been accepted into two university Bachelor of Arts programs but did not enroll, as I was not in a financial position to do so. Because of the feelings of disappointment this incurred, I decided to give up singing. This didn't last for long, however, as I felt a huge part of my identity was missing. So, in the fall of 2004, I joined a community choir in my hometown, which I continued to sing with, on and off, until 2015. Because of my late start to formal music training, I continued to take private voice and piano lessons and worked to attain my Level 9

voice and Level 6 piano RCM certificates while also establishing myself as a self-employed private voice and piano instructor. During this time, I met and married my husband and pursued the dream of having children. When I began my Honours Bachelor of Music degree at McMaster University in 2013, I continued to take private voice and piano lessons, subsequently earning my Level 10 voice and Level 8 piano RCM certificates. I also sang in the McMaster University Choir and the McMaster Chamber Choir. As I began my graduate studies at Western University in 2016, I joined a new community choir in my hometown, in which I thoroughly enjoyed singing. I then joined a chamber choir that was an offshoot of this community choir for advanced singers. I participated in both these choirs until the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to all choral activities. Further to my choral singing, I was hired as the Music Director for a women's choir in Cambridge, Ontario, in September 2019; a position I still currently hold and enjoy immensely.

### ***Finding My Voice***

As a singer, I have used my voice to convey emotion and communicate stories written by others countless times, and yet never my own story of involuntary childlessness. Difficulties in singing arose many times for me when confronted with sensitive repertoire or singing-related social situations in which I felt 'othered' from the women I was interacting/singing with (specifically, in choral contexts). Childlessness isolated me from friends and family members, making me feel both a disappointment to my parents, who revel in being grandparents to my brothers' children, and an awkward social burden to my close friends who began having children without medical intervention while my husband and I were struggling with infertility. The isolation I felt within these social circumstances was also reflected within my marriage. I chose to hide much of my grief, disappointment, anger, and sadness from my husband so as not to

upset him. I felt victimized by infertility and gave up my voice on the subject because I believed my feelings to be less important than the feelings of others.

Over the last ten years I have been compelled, with ever-increasing vigour, to take back my voice by publicly sharing my story of involuntary childlessness so that others may feel encouraged to do the same. I feel incredibly grateful that my academic pursuits have provided me with a platform from which to speak out about the experience of involuntary childlessness, both my own and that of others. My desire to facilitate a musical space for involuntarily childless women to share their stories and explore their experiences through song is rooted in my experiences with involuntary childlessness and singing. Performing this creative exercise within a supportive musical group context facilitates several therapeutic mediums of expression, including vocal performance, creative writing, and social interaction. While I feel there are many benefits to being an ‘insider’ in the research I conduct, there are also many tensions, which I will discuss further through my methodological choices.



## Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore whether, and in what ways, involuntarily childless women experience community and empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir.

Through this research process, I answer the following questions:

- 1) Does the choral environment in the Childless Voices Choir foster community building and solidarity among involuntarily childless women?
  - a) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women experience community and solidarity within the Childless Voices choral environment?
- 2) Does the experience of singing in the Childless Voices Choir foster the development of self-empowerment among involuntarily childless women?
  - a) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women develop self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir?
- 3) Does the public sharing of these women's experiences through the performance of collaboratively composed choral music foster community and the development of self-empowerment?
  - a) If so, in what ways do these women experience community and develop self-empowerment through the collaborative composition and performance of choral music?

## **Researcher Assumptions**

Because of my experiences with both involuntary childlessness and group singing, I had many assumptions about the answers I might find to my research questions, which I explore below:

### **1. Does the choral environment in the Childless Voices Choir foster community building and solidarity among involuntarily childless women?**

Because I had experienced community building through social interactions within a variety of traditional choral contexts over more than twenty years, I assumed that the women I sang with in the CVC might have a similar experience. I was unsure, however, whether the online format of the singing sessions would facilitate a sense of community through the act of singing together, given that we were unable to hear each other. Additionally, my engagements within the online childless-not-by-choice community, prior to beginning my fieldwork, had caused me to feel a sense of solidarity with a handful of childless women. This stemmed, in large part, from my desire to advocate for the community (and myself). However, because I have also witnessed animosity and affective dissonance surrounding and embedded within the experience of childlessness in the online context, I was not convinced that the women I worked with would develop a sense of solidarity.

#### **a) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women experience community and solidarity within the Childless Voices choral environment?**

I assumed that the online format of the weekly sessions might make it difficult to develop a sense of solidarity, in particular, due to my perception of online social interactions through Zoom as often feeling awkward. Additionally, I assumed that any meaningful social interactions we *were* able to have during the weekly sessions would aid in building a sense of community between the

women because of my own experiences of social interactions with members of the CNBC community and the ways in which those interactions had aided in mitigating the isolation I had often felt due to my childlessness.

**2. Does the experience of singing in the Childless Voices Choir foster the development of self-empowerment among involuntarily childless women?**

Due to my vast experience with singing and vocal pedagogy, and what I already knew of the learning that took place during the online singing sessions, I assumed that at least some of the women might feel a sense of empowerment through the development of their singing voices.

**a) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women develop self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir?**

Because I had been singing with the Childless Voices Choir for a year previous to beginning my study and, therefore, knew the kind of repertoire that Helen taught, I assumed that the ‘empowering’ nature of the songs we learned might aid in fostering a sense of self-empowerment.

**3) Does the public sharing of these women’s experiences through the performance of collaboratively composed choral music foster community and the development of self-empowerment?**

The process of collaborative song writing that I had explored through the literature on community music and music education pointed to a sense of empowerment being experienced by the marginalized individuals who took part. However, because I had grappled with the notion of empowerment and had not perceived that this process had been meaningfully critiqued in the literature, I could not assume that self-empowerment would be developed during the PAR phase of my study. This is not to say that I didn’t *hope* that it would, however.

**a) If so, in what ways do these women experience community and develop self-empowerment through the collaborative composition and performance of choral music?**

I assumed that writing about their experiences with involuntary childlessness might aid in developing the women's sense of self-empowerment, due to the way that being open about my own experiences had helped me to develop self-empowerment. However, I was keenly aware of the fact that many women do not like to speak about their experiences, which I assumed might hinder the development of self-empowerment for some of the women taking part in the song writing sessions.

## Methodology Overview

Given the nature of the phenomenon explored in this study, and the questions it addresses, the intersection between two methodological frameworks emerged as most appropriate and conducive to this dissertation research, namely, ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hammersley, 2006, 2018; Hine, 2017; Krueger, 2014; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Stauffer & Robbins, 2009) and participatory action research (PAR) (Bresler, 1995; Cohen et al., 2018; Dennis, 2009; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Stringer, 2007). Ethnography is discussed as a methodology that seeks “to produce detailed and situated accounts of specific cultures in a manner that reflects the perspective of those whose culture is under discussion” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 4). It is not enough to observe a context/environ from a distance and attempt to explain it from one’s own (etic) perspective as an outside observer. An ethnographic researcher must, instead, seek to gain an insider (emic) perspective of the context being studied (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). The exploration of the experiences of those engaging in music-making activities from an emic perspective allows for a richer, deeper understanding of the ways in which research participants and researchers derive meaning from their experiences (Jorgensen, 2009). Thus, my aim was to gain a more meaningful and in-depth understanding of the experiences of the involuntarily childless women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir through my active participation in, and observations of, the weekly online singing sessions.

While ethnography is my central methodological approach, elements of PAR are embedded within the larger framework. Here, my aim was to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge between participants and myself as researcher. According to Cohen et al. (2018), PAR’s purpose “is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. In

particular it seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society” (p. 51). While the purpose of this project was not for me to emancipate involuntarily childless women, it aimed to facilitate experiences in which these women could come to see the forces that have acted upon them (Freire, 2018), within and through this choral community. To this end, I co-facilitated a collaborative song writing project during which the Childless Voices singers co-created a song reflecting their experiences with involuntary childlessness. The PAR element of my study was important to my larger research design. Through the creative process, the women with whom I worked had an opportunity to reflect on, and critique, their experiences with involuntary childlessness and the ways in which these experiences are embedded within, and shaped by, pronatalist social discourses. Additionally, I posited that the performance of the collaboratively composed song may act as a form of resistance to oppressive power structures that position involuntarily childless women as stigmatized.

### **Summary**

As discussed at the beginning of this introduction, the experience of involuntary childlessness is complex, shaped by social interactions and institutionalized policies and practices that often marginalize, stigmatize, and silence women who are childless not by choice. My research explores the ways in which women who are involuntarily childless may experience community building and the development self-empowerment through group singing; specifically, through singing in the Childless Voices Choir. This study examines the personal, social, and musical identities of eleven involuntarily childless women who sing together weekly, in a virtual context. There is a dearth of literature in the fields of music education and community music

exploring the experiences of women who are childless not by choice, which my research plays an important role in addressing.

## CHAPTER II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

Involuntary childlessness is a complex and stigmatizing experience complicated by the silencing impact of pronatalist discourses that disenfranchise the grief of those who are childless not by choice (Darroux, 2022; Doka, 1989; 2002). The silence that pervades the topic of involuntary childlessness exacerbates feelings of isolation and shame for many individuals who are unable to have children (Gold, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017). Women who are CNBC are particularly impacted by the silencing and isolating stigma of their circumstances due to the gendered nature of pronatalist ideologies and discourses that can leave them feeling alone and lacking empathetic communities of support (Whiteford & Gonzalez, 1995). The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which community (Alperson, 2004; Chaskin, 2013; Delanty, 2018; Higgins, 2012) is experienced, and self-empowerment (Adams, 2008; Freire, 2018; McLaughlin, 2016) developed, among and between the women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir. What follows is a detailed exploration of theories of community and empowerment, examined in relation to involuntary childlessness, group singing, and collaborative song writing. I situate my theoretical discussion within music education and community music literature that explores the experiences of community and empowerment within group singing contexts involving stigmatized populations (Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Palidofsky, 2010; Rio, 2005).

Within my review of the literature relevant to my research, I consider theories of community within the contexts of both social (Alperson, 2002; Chaskin, 2013; Delanty, 2018; Turner, 1969) and musical life (Higgins, 2012; Turner, 2012), as I think through the ways in



which each perspective may complement (or create tensions with) the other. In relation to the act of group singing, I discuss Turner's (1969) theory of *communitas*, an anthropological concept defined as "a groups' pleasure in sharing common experiences with one's fellows" (Turner, 2012, p. 2). I view *communitas* as essential to my theoretical framework, given the opportunities for collective affect found within the group-singing environment (Balén, 2017).

Next, I situate empowerment theory by addressing the stigmatizing nature of involuntary childlessness (Greil et al., 2011), as well as issues of power imbalance within traditional choral environments (O'Toole, 2005). I am drawn to theories of empowerment based on my desire to explore the ways in which group singing may mitigate the impacts of a stigmatized identity. I examine theories of empowerment within the context of group formation and identity (Adams, 2008; Carr, 2003; Freire, 2018; Stein, 1997), with a focus on choral communities constituted by individuals who may experience stigmatization (Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Palidofsky, 2010; Rio, 2005). I also situate theories of empowerment historically, so that I may discuss the origins of empowerment theory as rooted in theories of power (Freire, 2018; McLaughlin, 2016). Given the ambiguous definition of empowerment and the—often problematic—application of the concept (McLaughlin, 2016; Weissberg, 1999), I also explore critiques of empowerment in my theoretical discussion, particularly as they relate to issues of power and the notion of "giving voice" discussed within music education and community music literature (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 2003; O'Toole, 2005).

Building upon my discussion of empowerment, I explore the concept of self-empowerment (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016) through Freire's (2018) notion of consciousness raising (*conscientização*), whereby the recognition, critique, and resistance of oppressive dominant power structures relate to the possibility for the development of self-

empowerment among involuntarily childless women. Within my discussion of self-empowerment, I turn to Freire's (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wherein the author states: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (p. 46). While involuntarily childless women are not necessarily oppressed by their circumstances, Freire (2018) helps us to consider the ways in which their experiences are shaped by oppressive pronatalist discourses.

Lastly, I explore Delanty's (2018) notion of solidarity as "a capacity for action" (p. 53) among and between communities of people whose social circumstances position them as Other against socially constructed normative ways of functioning within society. I also take into account Hemmings's (2012) discussion of affective solidarity, wherein individuals whose circumstances are similar (i.e., involuntary childlessness) may experience solidarity despite differing social positions and affective understandings of the pronatalist policies and practices that influence their way of being in the world. These are key guiding theories that will be fully present in the analysis of the work, through observations and interviews conducted during my time in the field. I begin my theoretical discussion with theories of community.

## **Community**

Community is a theoretical concept whose definition is debated among scholars (Alperson, 2002; Chaskin, 2013; Delanty, 2018; Higgins, 2012; Jorgensen, 1995; Sartwell, 2002). Broadly speaking, theories of community are viewed as "ambiguous" (Chaskin, 2013, p. 105) due to differing conceptualizations of what it means to experience community. An exact definition of community may be difficult to pinpoint. It denotes a relationship between people, places, and institutions (Alperson, 2002; Chaskin, 2013) which, according to Higgins (2012), is

“constantly changing, functioning differently depending on the context of its use” (p. 135). Community can be differentiated as a sense of “meaning and solidarity, recognition and collective identities” (Delanty, 2018, p. 4) felt by those within it (an idea), or as a “social phenomenon” (Delanty, 2018, p. 4), whereby the community is viewed as a tangible reality. These forms of community are defined by unspecified boundaries within which members of the community function and differentiate themselves from those outside of the community (Delanty, 2018; Jenkins, 2014). The boundaries that delimit a community may, according to Jorgensen (1995) and Sartwell (2002), be both inclusive and exclusive whereby, as Jorgensen (1995) states, “the boundedness of the community...serves not only to define its distinctiveness from others, but to enhance its cohesiveness and unity” (p. 74).

Boundaries are constructed by the community through an awareness of the symbolization “by which the community differentiates itself from others” (Delanty, 2018, p. 50). Here, symbolization refers to the ways in which a group functions through discourse and embodied performance: how they communicate and perform their identity as—and within—the community. In relation to my research, the choral community is one bound by embodied symbolic performances of gesture and the use of one’s voice, as well as practices framed by—often problematic—power dynamics; discussed later in this chapter. Boundaries of a community may also be constructed through the activities that take place within it, the social relationships that develop between members, and/or an institutional affiliation (Chaskin, 2013). I understand all members of a community as subjective beings whose experiences define—and are defined by—their social positions and the social environments and discourses within which they function.

While involuntarily childless women may experience a sense of community based on their shared experience of childlessness, they do so from varied social perspectives that are informed by their social positions (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality) and environments (i.e., family, geography, culture, religious affiliations). As previously discussed, however, women's social positions and environments are, in turn, bounded—and shaped—by pronatalist discourses, which often have deleterious effects on the population of this study.

### ***Diversity and Musical Communities***

In his book, *Community Music*, Lee Higgins (2012) explores the concept of “*community without unity*,” whereby “*without* designates an open sense of the word *community*, a community of possibilities rather than a limited horizon of visibility and gathering” (p. 136, emphasis in original). Here, Higgins (2012) offers an expansion on the definition of community by focusing on the importance of diversity within a communal space; a definition that provides “resistance to one unified and authoritative identity because the communality at the heart of community provides internal contradictions” (p. 136). I am drawn to Higgins's (2012) notion of community without unity because of the complexity of the experience of involuntary childlessness. It is important to acknowledge that women who are CNBC may be unified by childlessness but not by the circumstances leading to their childless positions. Additionally, as will be discussed later through Hemmings's (2012) notion of affective solidarity, involuntarily childless women may experience differences of affect towards their circumstances, as well as the pronatalist discourses that frame them. The diversity of the CNBC community is an important factor here as, even while women may share similar social circumstances, their perceptions, attitudes, and ways of being are also shaped by the social environments within which they engage (i.e., professional, familial, friendship, and broader communities).

In relation to community building through diversity, Merrick and Maguire's (2017) work with a choir for patients and staff at a high security mental health facility in the United Kingdom shows evidence that individuals with multiple complex social and personal differences can develop a sense of community through musical engagements. The authors discuss the beneficial outcomes of the formation and performance experiences of The Vocal Group through "the importance of encouraging patients to attempt to do things with a real risk of failure, to learn from and support one another; which is surely the key to social inclusion" (p. 79). Here, I view the notion of vulnerability as central to understanding the musical and social engagements that take place within musical spaces facilitated with and for stigmatized individuals and groups.

When strangers gather to participate in group musical interactions, they do so from a variety of diverse social positions but with a common purpose: to learn and to create music together. Through the facilitation of, and participation in, community music engagements, individuals are invited to interact with each other both socially and musically. Within this musical space, Higgins (2012) states that a sense of "voice" (p. 136) is enabled among the participants. In related yet distinct ways, Jorgensen (1995), too, discusses community as potentially rooted, interconnected, feelingful, and empowering. Here, the author refers to the ways in which community may foster a sense of belonging, personal affirmation, and emotional connection that "empowers one to find one's own voice and, by so speaking, act to change not only the community, but the world beyond" (p. 75). While undertaking it cautiously, Jorgensen's (1995) notion of community, as potentially empowering through finding one's voice, is important to my research, which is rooted in my desire to explore the ways in which involuntarily childless women—who are often silenced by the disenfranchisement of their grief—may develop self-empowerment through community building within a group singing

environment. While the notion of ‘finding one’s voice’ is a significant aspect of community-oriented work, it is also a notion deserving of critique (Ellsworth, 1989), which I will undertake later in my discussion on theories of empowerment. Building on my discussion of musical communities, I turn next to the notion of *Communitas*, as it expands my understanding of the experience of group-singing as an opportunity for community building.

### ***Communitas***

For Turner (2012), *communitas* happens when participants experience (or find themselves in) “a state of alignment” (p. 197). It is an anthropological concept related to moments in one’s life through which transformation of identity characteristics of an individual or group may occur (Turner, 1969). This transformation, according to Turner (1969) is comprised of three phases: “separation, margin...and aggregation” (p. 94). During these three phases, the individual or group detaches from a fixed social and/or cultural position, enters a liminal space of ambiguous identity characteristics and, finally, arrives in a state of stability once more. For involuntarily childless women whose identities are often challenged and/or stigmatized outside of the CNBC community, moments of *communitas* may be experienced as they navigate their engagements with similarly circumstanced others. As discussed in chapter one, these engagements may include both in-person and virtual social interactions. In his book, *The Ritual Process*, symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) explores *communitas* as it manifests through the process of symbolic ritual. Here, the author discusses *communitas* as emerging spontaneously during symbolic rituals through the absence of social structure in what he terms a “liminal moment.” He defines the liminal moment as “the state of being betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969, p. 107). It is the moment at which one’s personal and/or social identity may be transformed outside of normative social structures. I view the group-singing environment,

particularly, as a potential space within which *communitas* may be experienced, wherein singers put their everyday lives aside to immerse themselves in the co-creation of musical moments that disappear as quickly as they emerge. *Communitas* is described by Edith Turner (2012) as often appearing “unexpectedly” and relating to “the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning” (p. 1). The author considers these moments “a gift from liminality” (Turner, 2012, p. 4), whose benefits include “quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others” (Turner, 2012, p. 3).

***Communitas and the Liminal Space.*** Building on Turner’s (1969) notion of the liminal moment, Wirtz (2014) describes liminal space as “a boundary...a zone of transition, in which one has the experience of being outside of physical space and chronological time” (p. 62). Here, Wirtz (2014) applies the notion of liminal space to her discussion on the ways in which trauma survivors process and move through a traumatic event. This has implications for my study in that many women who are CNBC, particularly those who suffer from reproductive health issues, and/or those who undergo medical interventions for infertility (i.e., *in vitro* fertilization), often experience physical, psychological, and emotional trauma (Curtis, 2017; Curtis, 2018; Schwerdtfeger & Shreffler, 2009). In addition to the trauma experienced by many women who undergo fertility treatments, the disenfranchised grief of involuntary childlessness that is often experienced through the lack of social ritual in relation to the loss of a Motherhood identity (Darroux, 2022) may leave many women who are CNBC in a state of liminality: betwixt and between their virtual and actual identities: “Mother. Unmother” (Chester, 2003). Thus, engaging with others whose identities fall within this liminal space offers a potential social connection that facilitates understanding, empathy, and a sense of community. More specifically relating to my research, engaging musically with similarly circumstanced others facilitates moments of

*communitas* wherein, through the acts of singing together and collaborative song writing and recording, the Childless Voices singers experienced musical engagements that removed them from their perceived liminal reality, grounding them in the musical moments that emerged.

In relation to the song writing and recording phase of my research, specifically, I turn to Rio's (2005) work with a group of homeless men involved in a gospel choir. The author discusses the positive impact of musical improvising; a musical performance approach that relates closely to the notion of liminality:

The power of group improvisation also was important to these men. The change in consciousness to an alternate way of interpreting time and space seems greatest during improvisation. This energy transformed their mundane daily existence into a mysterious dynamic force with a dimension unlike any other, heightening connection among those who were involved. In addition, the impact of providing music therapy in a group is a key factor. People feed off each other's music and thoughts in a way that provokes a variety of unconscious material. Memories, realizations and emotions that may be painful or difficult can then be musically shared, lightening the burden, and bringing greater cohesion to the group. (Rio, 2005, p. 117)

Rio's (2005) work resonates with the song writing and recording phase of my research due to the liminal nature of the project and its ability to facilitate moments through which feelings and memories were evoked, shared, and expressed. Delanty (2018) discusses liminality as "often connected with those moments of symbolic renewal when a society or group asserts its collective identity" (p. 49). Here, I am drawn to the idea that involuntarily childless women may assert their collective identity through liminal moments, specifically as a sense of *communitas* may



emerge through experiences within the singing and song writing processes facilitated in this study.

***Communitas and Identity Transformation.*** Identity is described by Jenkins (2014) as “an emotional matter...capable of influencing actions...through the power of symbols and ritual experiences” (p. 7). In relation to my study, the liminal and ritualistic experience of collective musical engagement may be viewed as one in which identities are potentially transformed through the emergence of *communitas*. According to Trevarthen (2002),

Our identity is our place in a collaborative awareness of the world and what to do in it...We gain this identity and keep it alive by celebrating the actions, feelings and experiences that we can share—and among the most intimate and powerful of things to share are the ritualized patterns of art, and especially the temporal arts, of which music, song and dance can be the most spontaneous and sincere. (p. 34)

Through Trevarthen’s (2002) discussion of shared musical engagement as an act through which identity may be transformed, I understand the group singing environment of the Childless Voices Choir as a facilitative space for the transformation of the stigmatized identities of involuntarily childless women.

Gosine and Travasso’s (2018) work with the Treehouse Choir, facilitated at a children’s hospice in East Anglia, England, explores the experiences of singers who rehearse and perform together regularly, and the impact of group singing on their individual and collective identities. The singers are the parents and hospice caregivers of terminally ill children, as well as parents grieving their children who have already passed. The authors state that “singing in the choir brings confidence, strength, and an ability to overcome difficulties associated with feelings of isolation and loneliness with an increase in wellbeing that extends beyond the choir sessions

themselves” (Gosine & Travasso, 2018, p.24). The authors attribute the formation of these connections to the act of singing together:

Music can reflect and help direct emotions serving as a powerful tool that can bring structure, hope, and calm out of chaos and despair. Like the grief process, singing together is dynamic with the potential for multi-layered interpretations of meaning and emotional response. It is perhaps for this reason that music can ease some of the pain associated with the process, enabling a person to regain a sense of control over their emotions and their situation. (p. 24)

Relating to emotional response, Trevarthen (2002) states that, “Social alienation can diminish a sense of self-worth and undermine spontaneous expression of feelings” (pp. 32-34). I view Gosine and Travassos’s (2018) work as evidence that the act of singing together, through which the spontaneous expression of feelings is often made manifest, offers a profound opportunity for identity assertion and solidarity when individuals experience a sense of *communitas* with similarly stigmatized others.

During the second phase of my fieldwork—the collaborative song writing and recording PAR project—I explored the ways in which perceptions of individual social and musical identities were impacted by the online collaborative song writing sessions and the in-person recording session, as experienced by the Childless Voices singers. My desire to explore the impact of collaborative song writing and recording, specifically, is due to the creative, individual, and embodied nature of the voice as a communicative tool for emotional expression (Hargreaves et al., 2002; Welch, 2005). I sought to explore how opportunities for members of the group to assert both their uniqueness and individuality, as well as their collective identity as singers, may be especially salient for women whose identities and experiences are stigmatized by

their childless circumstances. Additionally, I examined the ways in which stigmatized identities, shaped by normative societal ideologies, might benefit from group formations that provide the opportunities to identify and counter stigmatizing discourses through the emergence of *communitas*.

***Communitas and Social Justice.*** Stigmatized populations performing choral music as social outreach aspire to raise awareness of the ideologies and structures that work to stigmatize their communities (Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Palidofsky, 2010). According to Delanty (2018), “*communitas* is sustained by ‘anti-structure,’ when ‘structures’ are resisted. It emerges when anti-structures come into play” (p. 49). Here, the author refers to *communitas* as “the expression of the social nature of society” (Delanty, 2018, p. 49), which he argues is in opposition to “the governed, institutionalized and abstract nature of social structure” (Delanty, 2018, p. 49). Building on this, I argue that group singing engagement is a liminal act through which *communitas* may emerge among and between performers and facilitators, particularly when musical engagements are aimed at raising consciousness of stigmatized experiences. More specifically, I argue that musical consciousness-raising may act as a creative expression of anti-structure, where structure, in relation to my research, is defined as the Motherhood ideal that dominates pronatalist discourses (Carroll, 2012; Gotlib, 2016).

In Bell’s (2008) examination of theories of performativity, the author argues that “Performativity opens up new possibilities for understanding identity as a claim to selfhood, with agency to work with and against dominant structures and ideologies” (p. 194). Performativity is discussed by Bell (2008) as a political practice enacted through everyday actions and ways of being, as well as performances enacted through the medium of the arts. Similarly, in her work on

choral singing for social justice, Balén (2017) explores the possibilities for social justice activism through the medium of group singing, stating that,

The use of song displays important elements from the physiological to the communal to the negotiation of space, identity, power, and meaning evident in every such use of song for social justice movements. Who gets to speak; when, where, why, and how they can speak; and who defines whose identities and how—all these matter to issues of social justice. (p. 29)

Thus, I understand the song writing and recording phase of my study as facilitating an opportunity through which involuntarily childless women can resist and work to change oppressive ideologies that function through practices of power to stigmatize their identities, through the musical performance of their experiences both individually and collectively. Equally important was an examination of the ways in which the development of community within and between the weekly Childless Voices singing sessions facilitated an environment that nurtured a sense of solidarity through which issues of power inherent in the pronatalist discourses that impact their everyday lives may be challenged by the development of self-empowerment.

Before exploring the theories of empowerment and self-empowerment through which I analyzed my research findings, I move to a discussion of discourses of power. I first give an overview of the notion of power, before exploring issues of social power that work to stigmatize involuntarily childless women. Finally, in relation to the group singing environment this study examines, I discuss issues of power that emerge through choral discourse.

## **Discourses of Power**

### ***The Experience of Power***

Empowerment is a ubiquitous term whose definition, as both an activity and an outcome, is parallel to the conceptualization and practice of power (McLaughlin, 2016). Adams (2008) discusses power as “a problematic concept at the heart of empowerment” (p. 61) that calls for careful attention by those seeking and facilitating the experience of empowerment. Historically, power has been conceptualized and practiced through both structural and relational means. Structural forms of power include institutionalized, top-down approaches to wielding power, such as those wielded from a distance by ruling bodies. Relational approaches to power include more “diffuse” (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 24), normalized social forms of discipline and control (e.g., governmentality), embedded inconspicuously in social structures, ideologies, and behaviours and “continually exercised by means of surveillance” (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 25). Power is explored in sociological literature as complex, whereby structural and relational forms of power coexist and are experienced in multiple ways and at differing times in our lives (Adams, 2008; Freire, 2018; McLaughlin, 2016; Weissberg, 1999). However, Adams (2008) critiques the conceptualization of power as too often focused on social, structural, and institutional aspects and, thus, failing to analyze the individual experience of power; how one becomes disempowered and/or empowered and how that experience is perceived by the individuals.

In music education and community music literature, too, I perceive a gap in relation to an analysis of participants’ individual experience of power relations. As discussed briefly in chapter one of this dissertation, the literature I have explored focuses on the ways in which community and/or empowerment is experienced through group singing (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2005; Bailey

& Davidson, 2005; Balén, 2017; Cohen & Palidofsky, 2013; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Latimer, 2008; MacIntosh, 2003; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Palidofsky, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012; Rio, 2005; Seligson, 2012). These studies infer that the participants involved are considered stigmatized and/or marginalized to varying degrees, due to their personal and social circumstances. These studies do not, however, critically examine the ways in which participants' identities are stigmatized through dominant and oppressive social discourses, or the ways in which the individual participants recognize, critique, and resist these discourses; a gap which my research addresses.

While power relations and inequalities impact individuals of all gender identities, they play an important role in the experiences of women in particular, as gendered social norms act as a form of social control of women's everyday functioning. In relation to the CNBC community with which I engage and work, I understand pronatalist discourses to operate as a form of relational power, whereby pronatalist ideologies are embedded, normalized, and enacted through social and medical discourses (Carroll, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017). These ideologies work to stigmatize, isolate, and silence involuntarily childless women through the disenfranchisement of their grief (Doka, 2002), effectively disempowering them (Gold, 2012; Gotlib, 2016). This is not to infer, however, that I view involuntarily childless women as *powerless*. On the contrary, I perceive these women, whose personal and social lives are embedded in, and framed by, marginalizing pronatalist discourses and structures of power, to be incredibly resilient in the face of such marginalization. Resilience, however, does not necessarily equate to transforming action, whereby oppressive discourses or structures of power are recognized, critiqued, and resisted (Freire, 2018).

Additionally, and related to my study, group singing has its own issues of power inequality and/or oppressive power relations within both ‘traditional’ in-person rehearsal and performance spaces (O’Toole, 2005) and ‘non-traditional’ online contexts (Daffern et al., 2021). What follows, then, is an exploration of the ways in which power functions within social and musical discourses relating to involuntary childlessness and choral singing.

### ***Social Power and the Stigmatized Identity of Involuntarily Childless Women***

As explored in chapter one, involuntary childlessness is a complex phenomenon shaped by pronatalist discourses that work to disempower and stigmatize the identities of childless individuals (Gold, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017). According to Schur (1983),

Women’s vulnerability to stigmatization rests on their general social subordination, their relatively poor power position. At the same time, when women are effectively stigmatized, that reinforces their overall subordination and makes it more difficult for them to achieve desired goals. (p. 8)

The struggle to gain an empowered identity, then, is made more challenging for involuntarily childless women by the gendered nature of pronatalist discourses which target women, specifically (Bays, 2017; Gold, 2012; Parry, 2005). Schur (1983) argues that a stigmatized identity emerges through the “devaluation of an overall identity more than of specific acts...Being treated as deviant often has less to do with specific offending acts than with the ‘kind of person’ one is taken to be” (p. 23). The author also states that, “Under the gender system as presently constituted women are subject to an enormous array of increasingly questioned, but still dominant norms” (Schur, 1983, p. 51). Involuntarily childless women, who arrive at their stigmatized status through no fault of their own, are devalued, through pronatalist discourses,

based purely on what they do not have (children) and an identity they have not achieved (that of Mother).

My doctoral research is rooted in my desire to explore the ways in which involuntarily childless women might challenge and resist oppressive dominant discourses of power that work to stigmatize their identities. Ackelsberg (1988) argues that, historically, women are known to have organized themselves to transcend oppressive ideologies through the formation of networks that enable the recognition and resistance of dominant social discourses that dichotomize women's issues as political/personal. The author states that, through the formation of communities of women, consciousness-change is made manifest,

by contextualizing issues, enabling people to recognize that what they may have perceived as their own particular problems are shared and may even be socially structured. Moreover, participation in resistance often engenders a broader consciousness of both the nature and the dimensions of social inequality and of the power of people united to confront and change it. (Ackelsberg, 1988, p. 307)

This study explores how community is built among and between involuntarily childless women who sing together, and the ways in which a capacity for action subsequently emerges through the development of self-empowerment made manifest through a sense of solidarity. Within this work, I critically examine issues of power imbalance that impact the experiences of the women who participated in the Childless Voices Choir. As such, I move now to a discussion on issues of power inherent within the choral environment.

### ***Power and Choral Discourse***

The choral environment is traditionally framed within, and by, problematic structures and practices “that reproduce oppressive hierarchical power relations” (O’Toole, 2005, p. 4).



O'Toole's (2005) feminist critique of the choral environment is a fascinating examination of issues of power imbalance between singers and choral directors. In her article, "I Sing in a Choir, But I Have No Voice!," the author discusses Foucault's (1979) notions of power through discipline and the docile body, as enacted through constant surveillance of the self and others, in relation to 'traditional' choral practices. Building upon Foucault's (1979) view of power as "not something *held*, but something *practiced*" (Nealon, 2008, p. 24, emphasis in original), O'Toole (2005) uses the analogy of the panopticon<sup>2</sup>, as described in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1979), to discuss what Foucault (1979) describes as "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 201). Upon entering the choral space, singers are led by conventions to do their best on an individual level to attain what O'Toole (2005) calls "a unity of vision" (p. 17). This concept is defined within choral practices through the process of working harder "for the good of the choir" (O'Toole, 2005, p. 18). A uniform vision is very often achieved through self-surveillance practiced by the choir members themselves through surveillance of each other. Nealon (2008) explains this as power becoming less centralized and, thus, more effective.

In O'Toole's (2005) personal choral experiences, the singers' main objective was "to bring the director's internalized sense of the music to life" (p. 12), which led the author to feel that she was merely an instrument of the conductor's vision. I find this to be an important issue, as the voice, being positioned within the body *is*, in fact, an instrument, and also instrumental to a successful musical performance. Choral singers' bodies are utilized as instruments of the choral director's creative output. Thus, choral singers become instruments of the director's power,

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<sup>2</sup> The panopticon is an institutional and structural method of self-surveillance, whereby prisons are designed and built in such a way that incarcerated individuals are positioned so as to be seen—and to see each other—at all times.

which in itself is made manifest through the choral director's own body (i.e., through gesture). According to O'Toole (2005), 'traditional' practices of power in choral pedagogy and performance have been normalized. The author argues that,

ideas about the role of the director and singers, about what kind of music should be sung, about how music is rehearsed, and what entails a good performance have become "normalized" or deemed "common sense" in our society. This "normalizing" process masks the fact that typical choir practices and discourses are fraught with power relations that serve specific interests and intentionally create silences and gaps. (O'Toole, 2005, p. 2)

Through engaging with the literature on choral singing, as well as unpacking my own experiences as both a choral singer and choral director, I find myself drawn to O'Toole's (2005) critique of choral practices, particularly as I think through the notion of choral singing as a potentially empowering experience. It is therefore imperative to my research, which takes place both with and within the Childless Voices Choir, that I critically examine the ways in which empowerment is theorized. In thinking through theories of power, I am confronted with the difficulty of defining empowerment as a collective action and self-empowerment as individual action, as I understand both as reliant on the other.

While empowerment may function as an individualized concept (as in self-empowerment—discussed below), it is closely linked with group functionality by Adams (2008), who states that "empowerment is about taking control, achieving self-direction, seeking inclusiveness rooted in connectedness with the experiences of other people. It concerns individual achievement and social action. One aspect feeds another" (p. 18). This argument is similarly expressed by Stein (1997), who states that "the strength and cohesiveness of the group

is a key component in the process of empowerment” (p. 62). I argue that choral singing, then, given its reliance on musical cohesion, as well as its demand for communal action, may prove a productive activity, whereby empowerment can be worked through and developed.

In reference to community formation and its impact on the empowerment of women specifically, Ackelsberg (1988) states that “in addition to providing nurturance and contexts for activism, women’s networks can be crucial to the process of consciousness-change” (p. 304). I understand consciousness-change, in part, through Freire’s (2018) notion of “conscientização” (p. 66), whereby individuals and groups recognize and critique the oppressive forces of power embedded in the social and political worlds in which they function and take action against them. Additionally, Hemmings’s (2012) conceptualization of affective solidarity (explored below) as an “impetus to change” (p. 150) informs my understanding of consciousness-change and empowerment, wherein a sense of affective dissonance “might become a sense of injustice and then a desire to rectify that” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). Returning to the importance of women’s networks in the process of consciousness-change, Ackelsberg (1988) states that “it is in and through networks...that most women engage in collaborative activity and, through that activity, can begin to experience themselves as confident, competent beings” (p. 306). It is through such understandings of consciousness-change that I am drawn to the notion of self-empowerment, given the individual and complex nature of the experience of involuntary childlessness that cannot be universalized within communities of women. What comes next, then, is an exploration of theories of empowerment and self-empowerment, upon which I base my argument that, through the formation of community within the Childless Voices singing environment, involuntarily childless women develop a sense of solidarity that enables a transformation of musical and social identity and, subsequently, a capacity for social action.

## Empowerment

As an ideal and concept, empowerment has been critically explored at length in sociological, education, and health literature (Ackelsberg, 1988; Adams, 2008; Carr, 2003; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 2018; McLaughlin, 2016; Stein, 1997; Weissberg, 1999). Empowerment is critiqued as “a magical phrase capable of exorcising demons” (Weissberg, 1999, p. 2), a “benign term” (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 56), and “a narrow concept...that reinforces the centrality of power embedded in masculine-dominated knowledge of sociology” (Adams, 2008, p. 59). In music education and community music literature, empowerment is often discussed as an outcome of group musical participation, but too often lacks critical examination of what it means to *be* ‘empowered’ (Balén, 2017; Cohen & Palidofsky, 2013; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Latimer, 2008; MacIntosh, 2003; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Palidofsky, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012; Seligson, 2012).

The multifaceted nature of empowerment situates the concept within “academic, rhetorical, and radical associations...used academically to theorize about people’s relationship with power and powerlessness” (Adams, 2008, p. 4). In her article, *Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?*, Ellsworth (1989) argues that “key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, ‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 289). The use of the term ‘giving voice’ is closely aligned with theories of empowerment, particularly in music education and community music literature (Ellsworth, 1989; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Higgins, 2012). The notion of ‘giving voice’ is one that has created tensions in my thinking through empowerment, and I argue that ‘voice’ cannot be ‘given’ within music education and community music practices but may, instead, be developed through group

musical engagements that facilitate the recognition, critique, and resistance of oppressive power structures, and the subsequent development of self-empowerment. My discomfort with the notion of ‘giving voice’ is also tied to the possibility, within group singing contexts both in informal and formal music learning environments, of the capacity for one’s voice to be effectively silenced by structures and practices inherent within the choral environment (Forshaw, 2018; O’Toole, 2005).

As discussed above, the choral environment is fraught with issues of power imbalance (O’Toole, 2005). The act of collective singing, however, is discussed in music education and community music literature as facilitating identity transformation through communal acts of resistance in relation to dominant oppressive social discourses (Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Trevarthen, 2002). In what follows, I discuss empowerment theory as a lens through which to examine the potential for the development of a sense of voice within group singing environments. Building on empowerment, I move toward an exploration of self-empowerment as understood through Freire’s (2018) notion of consciousness raising, wherein the acknowledgement, critique, and resistance of oppressive social discourses is foundational to developing a sense of agency. Lastly, I discuss theories of solidarity (Delanty, 2018) and affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) as foundational to the development of self-empowerment. I begin with a discussion of empowerment.

### ***Empowering Voice***

According to McLaughlin (2016), “The goal of empowerment is often seen as one that expresses a positive vision of the human subject, a process that can help unlock the human potential and thereby enable people to take more control over their lives” (p. 124). The challenge of empowerment, then, lies in issues of power imbalance, whereby empowerment is easily

mistaken as something given by the “empowerers” (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 124), rather than something taken by those whose identities are disempowered through oppressive discourses. In viewing empowerment as something to be given, an assumption is made wherein one person is positioned as powerless, and the other as possessing a level of power that demands respect, thus exacerbating power imbalance. As discussed above, the choral space is traditionally one in which power imbalance abounds. In relation to my research, then, I was acutely aware of the impact of power imbalances between Helen, the facilitator of the Childless Voices online singing sessions, and the singers, which I discuss further in chapter five.

In education literature, pedagogical environments are contested as sites of considerable power imbalance (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 2003). Ellsworth (1989) and Gore (2003) explore these sites from the perspectives of both critical and feminist pedagogy and find within them a lack of meaningful engagement with the self as critical pedagogue. Herein, educators who seek to empower students are criticized by Gore (2003) as “overlooking the reflexivity which, rhetorically, is integral to critical practice” (p. 339). Similarly, Ellsworth (1989) states that, “while critical educators acknowledge the existence of unequal power relations in classrooms, they have made no systematic examination of the barriers that this imbalance throws up to the kind of student expression and dialogue they prescribe” (p. 309). For Gore (2003) and Ellsworth (1989), then, it is not enough to espouse critical and feminist pedagogies as a route to empowerment. Educators who seek, authentically, to enable student ‘voice’ in educative spaces must practice “humility, skepticism and self-criticism” (Gore, 2003, p. 345) so that their own positionalities—and the power embedded within those positionalities—are continuously acknowledged and critiqued.

In relation to informal educative spaces, and community music practice specifically, Higgins (2012) states that “the work of community musicians attempts to provoke discourse, stimulate active participation, and enable a sense of ‘voice,’ both for individuals and those complicit groups of communities of which they are a part” (p. 136). When viewed through the lens of empowerment, community music practice “needs to be purposeful and critical” (Adams, 2008, p. 16). Community music practitioners must work towards a critical and reflexive pedagogy if they are to facilitate a space wherein the voices of those they work with are ‘enabled.’ When working with involuntarily childless women in a musically educative capacity, then, it is imperative that the facilitator/educator continuously reflect upon her own positionality and the inherent biases that emerge through her experience with childlessness and singing, particularly when her intentions are rooted in the desire to ‘empower’ other childless women through the use of the voice.

Balén (2017) refers to choral music facilitation as “a compelling way for many to organize for social change” (p. 110). She states that,

Every group of people who are denied full social recognition and value must begin the journey of social change by developing safe places where they can counter the social narratives that deny them dignity and affirm their stories of themselves and thereby experience being held in their full human dignity. (Balén, 2017, p. 15)

The notion of ‘safe’ space is one that I grapple with in my own pedagogical and facilitative musical practice, as ‘safety’ is experienced differently by everyone and, thus, difficult—if not impossible—to facilitate. In relation to this study, I was conscious of the complex nature of involuntary childlessness as a potential barrier to feelings of ‘safety’ within the social and musical environment of the Childless Voices singing sessions, and the song writing and

recording project, as it was inevitable that sensitive and potentially triggering topics would emerge through social and musical interactions that took place. My efforts to gain a more nuanced understanding of ‘safe space’ led me to Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019), who discuss possibilities for reimagining the learning environment as a space in which courage is required, “rather than the illusion of safety” (p. 284). In this way, student voices are less likely to be silenced and an empowered voice may emerge through “genuine dialogue regarding...challenging and controversial issues” (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 284).

In relation to challenging and controversial issues, I turn to Palidofsky’s (2010) work with incarcerated female youth in the Fabulous Females program. This program, which is an offshoot of the Storycatchers Theatre program in Chicago, Illinois, is run by trauma-informed community music practitioner Meade Palidofsky. Palidofsky’s (2010) intention for the program was to provide “a safe environment for girls to reveal past traumatic experiences, often of extreme physical and sexual abuse, helping them connect their emotional reactions to subsequent negative choices and incarceration” (p. 121) through “the art of song and musical theatre” (p. 122). The notions of ‘safe space’ and an ‘empowered voice’ are carefully and meaningfully navigated and employed in Palidofsky’s (2010) work, as can be evidenced by the outcomes of the program that she describes:

At Storycatchers, the public acknowledgement of trauma in a staged reading and/or full musical production provides a safe means for fellow residents, family, institutional staff and community to understand the girls’ histories from the girls’ own viewpoints. Often, this creates a link to family communication and visits as well as a gateway to therapy.

The audience, moved by the emotional reality of the girls’ songs and performances, are



often motivated to offer assistance to girls individually and to advocate for change in or assistance to the system. (pp. 123-124)

Palidofsky's (2010) work resonates with me because of the trauma-informed practice that she employs in the facilitation of creative and collaborative musical engagements. Through these judiciously navigated engagements, the girls with whom she worked used their voices to effect positive transformation of their stigmatized identities through the acknowledgement, critique, and resistance of the traumatic experiences that shaped them.

### *Self-empowerment*

Adams (2008) describes self-empowerment as an act and outcome of the self, rooted in one's capacity to equip herself "with the knowledge, skills and resources to identify, interpret and achieve control over aspects of [her] personal...development" (p. 91). Self-empowerment is taken not given, although as Freire (2018) suggests, liberation from marginalizing forces is not achieved alone. Freire (2018) is central to my thinking about self-empowerment in relation to Delanty (2018) and Hemmings's (2012) notions of solidarity and affective solidarity. According to Freire (2018), consciousness raising is a praxis that requires gaining an in-depth understanding of the world, including social and political contradictions. It is the development of a critical consciousness that involves taking action against oppression (i.e., pronatalist social structures within which involuntarily childless women function). For Freire (2018), "It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves" (p. 64). It is the notion of "organized struggle" that I relate to Delanty (2018) and Hemmings's (2012) notions of solidarity and affective solidarity, which I discuss next in this chapter.

As described above, Palidofsky's (2010) work with a musical theatre group for incarcerated female sexual abuse and rape survivors speaks to both Adams (2008) and Freire's (2018) work in that, through transforming one's traumatic experiences into musical narrative, the girls involved in the group were able to express and advocate for themselves and, in some cases, transform their lived realities as youth offenders. Adams (2008) states that self-empowerment "is based on the assumption that people themselves can make a decisive contribution to the self-set goal of realizing their own potential and making the most of relationships with other people" (p. 90). In relation to my study, for involuntarily childless women, this cannot be achieved without first recognizing, critiquing, and resisting the pronatalist discourses that govern women's identities and experiences. At the same time, facilitated spaces where solidarity and community can be built are critical in the realization of such critiques and the potential empowerment that may ensue.

According to McLaughlin (2016) and Freire (2018), one must first recognize oppressive forces and their impact over us, in order to resist them. Women who are CNBC, then, develop self-empowerment not simply from naming pronatalist discourses (as many of them are already aware), but also from interrogating the ways in which these discourses work to shape their virtual and actual identities, their lived experience, and the behaviours of others towards them. As Balén (2017) states, however, "master narratives are very difficult to disrupt because they are everywhere assumed and generally not questioned. They are thought of as common sense" (p. 49). Assumptions emergent through pronatalist discourses are deeply embedded in social and political life, making them potentially difficult to recognize, let alone critique, interrogate, and resist. Building on Ackelsberg's (1988) position that "women's networks can be crucial to the process of consciousness-change" (p. 304), the data emergent from this study suggests that

through the formation of community and solidarity within the Childless Voices Choir, involuntarily childless women are afforded the space to recognize, critique, interrogate and resist oppressive pronatalist power structures, both individually and collectively, leading to the development of self-empowerment.

As a practice, self-empowerment can serve as a significant learning process requiring self-awareness, self-critique, and reflexivity from the individual (Adams, 2008). For Carr (2003), “empowerment is praxis, a cyclical process of collective dialogue and social action that is meant to effect positive change” (p. 18), wherein “stages of empowerment are seen not as linear but as mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses” (p. 13). Stein (1997) also views this process as taking place in a cyclical manner:

Individuals, through their participation in group activities, gain skills and resources that lead to personal development. Their self-concept improves and they develop personal interaction skills. As individuals develop skills, the group functions more effectively. It gains strength as a group through broader membership, increasingly effective leaders, more resources, allies, opportunities, and strategies, and the development of skills for effectively using power. (p. 62)

Consequently, I make a case here that the struggle for redemption, the resistance of oppressive power structures and discourses, may be strengthened through solidarity experienced within a community of similarly circumstanced others, particularly in relation to the CNBC community and the Childless Voices Choir.

Adams (2008) states that,

Empowerment may be defined as: the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and

the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. (p. 17)

The findings from my study indicate that the quality of the lives of many of the women I worked with was improved, though perhaps not maximized, through their participation in both the weekly online singing sessions and, for those who were able to take part, the song writing and recording project. While they may not have gained control of their childless circumstances (their status as involuntarily childless women did not change), they found spaces to exercise power through the use of their voices and the social and musical interactions that took place during the course of the study. As relating to the achievement of goals, many of the women I worked with felt a sense of accomplishment in their musical, social, and personal lives. This was made evident, during my analysis of interviews, through what the women perceived as a growth in self-confidence, the development of new friendships and, for many, their ability to speak about their childless experience both within and outside of the CNBC community. My analysis revealed that these elements of empowerment, as described by Adams (2008), were made manifest through the emergence of a sense of solidarity among and between the members of the Childless Voices Choir.

### ***Solidarity***

Central to my research is the idea that, through the shared social world of group singing, involuntarily childless women may develop self-empowerment through building community and solidarity with others who share similarly stigmatized social circumstances. The notion of solidarity (Delanty, 2018; Hemmings, 2012; Mason, 2000; Wilde, 2013) aligns with my research in that, according to Delanty (2018), it “concerns the strength of social bonds that make possible a shared social world. It is a capacity for action” (p. 53). Developing a capacity for action among

involuntarily childless women involves the recognition, critique, and resistance of oppressive pronatalist social structures that shape their virtual and actual identities and, thus, their social worlds. Delanty (2018) and Freire (2018) discuss the desire to be free from oppressive social structures as reliant on solidarity. Equality and aspirations of freedom from oppression are not sufficient, however, to warrant solidarity within a marginalized group of individuals. I understand solidarity, through Delanty (2018) and Freire's (2018) discussions, as a means to freedom from oppression through the collective desire to transform an oppressive reality.

Solidarity is significant to my study in that it implies that members of a group share what Mason (2000) terms a "mutual concern" (p. 27) for the wellbeing of other group members. For Wilde (2013), "this suggests an empathetic understanding of the common needs and interests of others and a standing with them in view of these" (p. 101). During the Childless Voices singing sessions, I observed multiple occasions on which Helen and the singers displayed a sense of mutual concern for each other's wellbeing. These included multiple conversations wherein emotionally charged responses to oppressive and/or identity damaging experiences faced by one or more women in the group resulted in collective calls to action against an oppressor or oppressive force. Additionally, analysis of interviews revealed a sense of solidarity made manifest through the formation of empathetic bonds between group members.

According to Delanty (2018), "Solidarity in modern societies will very often entail a political challenge to the status quo" (p. 53). I argue that a sense of solidarity developed among involuntarily childless women facilitates opportunities for self-empowerment through the resistance of oppressive pronatalist discourses. In relation to my argument, the resistance of stigmatizing and marginalizing discourses as an act of solidarity is explored by Balén (2017) through her social justice work with queer choirs. She states that, "[t]he enactment in song of

their solidarity with each other and their support for a shared cause...holds them in more socially empowered identities” (Balén, 2017, pp. 32-33). Building on Balén’s (2017) work, solidarity as an impetus for empowerment is discussed by Adams (2008) and Stein (1997) through the notion of strength. Adams (2008) states that, “[a]n important feature of successful empowerment has been the capacity of individuals to develop collective strength” (p. 193). Similarly, for Stein (1997), “[t]he strength and cohesiveness of the group is a key component in the process of empowerment” (p. 62). Analysis of my observations and interviews in both phases of this study revealed strength as a commonly expressed notion, in relation to individuals and the Childless Voices Choir as a whole.

While the notion of solidarity as defined by mutual concern and empathy is appealing, due to the positive undertones invoked, it is important to note here that solidarity is also theorized as an exclusionary concept, particularly when considering that communities formed through solidarity are necessarily recognized as defined against other communities (Delanty, 2018; Wilde, 2013). Delanty (2018) speaks to this recognition when he states that “the revival of community today is part of a more general tendency towards cultural struggles and conflicts over belonging. Minorities rebel against oppressive majorities and assert their individuality in declarations of identity, solidarity, belonging and roots” (p. 233). While solidarity may be theorized as exclusionary, I empathize with Delanty’s (2018) argument that solidarity offers “the promise of a new political community” (p. 53) for stigmatized individuals. I move now to Hemmings’s (2012) theory of *affective solidarity*, which problematizes the notion of solidarity as emergent through empathy.

### *Affective Solidarity*

In Clare Hemmings's (2012) article, *Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation*, the author develops the concept of affective solidarity. In contrast to Mason (2000) and Wilde's (2013) notions of solidarity as mutual concern and empathy, affective solidarity is rooted in affective dissonance between individuals in marginalized groups.

Hemmings (2012) problematizes solidarity as empathetic bonding in two ways: First, that empathy is embedded with "assumptions about reciprocity" and, second, that empathy emphasizes "the reflexive capacities of the empathetic subject as the primary way of resolving difficulties of misrecognition or hostility that attend intersubjectivity" (p. 152). In this way, Hemmings (2012) first recognizes that within a community of marginalized individuals, similarities in the oppressive power structures that shape their identities and experiences do not necessarily signify sameness of affect toward those structures, identities, and experiences. In relation to my study, it must not be assumed that involuntarily childless women, whose identities and experiences may be shaped by the same oppressive pronatalist discourses, share the same feelings toward these marginalizing forces, and their impact, or their subsequent social and personal circumstances.

Hemmings's (2012) second issue with the notion of solidarity as empathy is rooted in the possibility that the other may refuse the "terms of empathetic recognition" (p. 152). Here, the author is referring to the feminist notion of reciprocity, wherein "feminists acknowledge that the other, the object of empathy, may not wish to be empathized with when empathy is 'bad', but tend to assume that 'good' empathy will always be appreciated" (p. 152). Put simply, empathy may not always be accepted by those with whom others wish to empathize.

Hemmings (2012) develops affective solidarity as a transformative concept, where at the core of transformation is “the moment of affect” (p. 157) which I perceive as relating to Turner’s (1969) notion of the liminal moment. This “unstable” and “dissonant” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157) moment, a shift of affect, at which difference is recognized between one’s virtual and actual identities, and one’s social experience and social reality, defines the actions that follow. Thus, the author suggests that the shift of affect must occur if transformative action is to take place. Transformative action for Hemmings (2012), then, becomes,

a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds. (p. 158)

In her book *A Queerly Joyful Noise*, Balén (2017) examines negotiations within the queer choral environment. From this perspective, choral singing becomes an act of countering dominant social structures for singers in the LGBTQ community, as well as social justice activism for this marginalized population. Choral singing is discussed by Balén (2017) as “a compelling way for many to organize for social change” (p. 110). Here, a sense of community may be understood as formed through affective solidarity through and between bodies, as they recognize, critique, and resist power structures embedded within the choral environment and their personal lives, through the act of singing.

In relation to my research, participating in the Childless Voices Choir offered me an opportunity to examine the affective differences between involuntarily childless women, regarding the social structures and discourses that shape their identities and experiences individually and as a group. I was cautious in my approach to my research practice, particularly in relation to my data collection processes. As Hemmings (2012) notes, universalizing the



experiences of women “ignores the historical and political reasons why others may not be able or not wish to reciprocate” (p. 153). Thus, regarding the approach I took when conducting interviews and focus groups, it was imperative that I not make assumptions around the researcher/participant relationship, especially as relating to building rapport, given probable differences in affect toward involuntary childlessness. Additionally, in my analysis of the collected data, a reflexive approach was key to unearthing the meanings derived from participants’ experiences as rooted in difference and affective dissonance, particularly in relation to my own experiences.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the theoretical ideas within which my research with the Childless Voices Choir is framed. Through this theoretical framework, the following research questions were developed:

- 1) Does the choral environment in the Childless Voices Choir foster community building and solidarity among involuntarily childless women?
  - b) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women experience community and solidarity within the Childless Voices choral environment?
- 2) Does the experience of singing in the Childless Voices Choir foster the development of self-empowerment among involuntarily childless women?
  - b) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women develop self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir?
- 3) Does the public sharing of these women’s experiences through the performance of collaboratively composed choral music foster community and the development of self-empowerment?

- b) If so, in what ways do these women experience community and develop self-empowerment through the collaborative composition and performance of choral music?

Based on Hemmings (2012), Freire (2018), and Delanty's (2018) discussions on the possibility for transformative action through solidarity, as well as Higgins's (2012) expanded definition of community within the field of community music, I have sought to understand whether, and in what ways, members of the Childless Voices Choir, whose social positions and experiences differ from each other in a variety of ways, experience community and develop self-empowerment through a sense of solidarity. Through my exploration of the literature on theories of community and empowerment, as well as music education and community music literature that discusses the 'empowering' nature of choral singing, I argue that the group singing environment, while often fraught with issues of oppressive power dynamics, has the potential to facilitate community building and the development of self-empowerment for marginalized populations. Through my fieldwork with the Childless Voices singers, specifically, I sought to understand the impact of the musical and social engagements experienced by the singers and the choral facilitator, Helen—both virtually and in person. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodological framework of my study and tensions that arose for myself and the women with whom I worked.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

#### **Introduction**

Extant music education and community music research has explored the ways in which choral singing can foster community among marginalized and/or stigmatized individuals and may serve as a catalyst for the development of self-empowerment of those who sing together (Balén, 2017; Gosine & Travasso, 2018; Merrick & Maguire, 2017; Palidofsky, 2010; Rio, 2005). Populations studied in the research cited here include bereaved parents (Gosine & Travasso, 2018), LGBTQ individuals (Balén, 2017), sexual abuse survivors (Palidofsky, 2010), incarcerated youth and adults (Palidofsky, 2010), homeless adults (Rio, 2005), and people whose cognitive and/or physical health is impaired (Merrick & Maguire, 2017). These qualitative research studies, in large part, employ methodological approaches based on ethnography and/or participatory action research (PAR). They examine the experience of choral singing among groups of varying sizes and across multiple and varied musical sites (e.g., a children's hospice, prison settings, a high security hospital, community halls). Absent within music education and community music literature focused on choral singing and marginalized and/or stigmatized populations, however, are involuntarily childless women; a gap which my research addresses.

Given the nature of the experiences explored in this study, and the questions it addresses, the intersection between two methodological frameworks emerged as most appropriate and conducive to this dissertation research, namely, ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hammersley, 2006, 2018; Hine, 2017; Krueger, 2014; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Stauffer & Robbins, 2009) and PAR (Bresler, 1995; Cohen et al., 2018; Dennis, 2009; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011;

Stringer, 2007). Boellstorff et al. (2012) discuss ethnography as a methodology that seeks “to produce detailed and situated accounts of specific cultures in a manner that reflects the perspective of those whose culture is under discussion” (p. 4). It is not enough, therefore, to observe a context/environ from a distance and attempt to explain it from one’s own (etic) perspective as an outside observer. An ethnographic researcher must, instead, seek to gain an insider (emic) perspective of the context being studied (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). The exploration of the experiences of those engaging in music-making activities from an emic perspective allows for a richer, deeper understanding of the ways in which research participants and researchers derive meaning from their experiences (Jorgensen, 2009). Following these understandings, my aim was to gain a more meaningful and in-depth understanding of the experiences of the involuntarily childless women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir.

While ethnography was my central methodological approach, elements of PAR were embedded within the larger framework. Here, my aim was to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge between participants and myself as researcher. According to Cohen et al. (2018), PAR’s purpose “is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. In particular it seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society” (p. 51). While the purpose of this project was not for me to emancipate the involuntarily childless women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir, it aimed to facilitate experiences in which these women could come to see the forces that have acted upon them (Freire, 2018), within and through this community. To this end, I co-facilitated a collaborative composition project during which the women with whom I worked co-created a musical composition reflecting their experiences with involuntary childlessness and the Childless Voices Choir. The PAR element of my study is important to my larger research design.

Through this creative process, the women with whom I worked had an opportunity to reflect on and critique their experiences with involuntary childlessness and the ways in which these experiences are embedded within, and shaped by, pronatalist social discourses. Additionally, I posited that the performance of the collaboratively composed song may act as a form of resistance to oppressive power structures that position involuntarily childless women as stigmatized.

In this section, I situate my proposed research within music education and community music literature that employs ethnographic and PAR methodologies (Balén, 2017; Campbell, 2010; Carpenter, 2015; Higgins, 2012). More specifically, I discuss the ways in which my research design reflected the aims of my study. Involuntary childlessness may be considered a sensitive research topic due to the stigma attached to this phenomenon. It was critical, therefore, that I employ a research design within which the principles of feminist research were embedded (Ackerley & True, 2010; Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Cairns, 2013; Carroll, 2012; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Foley, 2002; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Olesen, 2005). Taking a feminist stance in my research was integral to addressing tensions found within ethnographic research, in terms of what constitutes ‘real’ ethnography (Bagley, 2009). These tensions include how much time should be spent in the field (Hammersley, 2006; Parker-Jenkins, 2018), what constitutes valid knowledge (Tsolidis, 2008), the scope of the field (Hammersley, 2006), and issues of ethics (Hammersley, 2018) and power (Tsolidis, 2008). Additionally, taking a feminist stance demanded that a reflexive approach be applied to all phases of my research process. In this respect, the positionalities of both me and the women with whom I work, and the ways in which these positions shape the research and the co-creation of knowledge, were acknowledged and reflected upon (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006).

Following discussion of my methodological framework, I describe my research processes, including the methods I employed for collecting and analyzing data, the selection of research participants, and ethical considerations I took. Within this discussion, I also describe barriers I faced during my fieldwork. The description of these barriers is relevant to both the methodological framework and research procedures of this study, as they paint a picture of the realities of my position as researcher in relation to both the topic of involuntary childlessness and my relationship to the women I worked with during my time in the field. I begin my methodological discussion by situating my proposed research within feminist methodological literature.

### **Feminist Research**

Qualitative research studies that involve women and are framed by feminist methodologies advocate for conducting research *for* women, rather than *about* women. Taking this stance, according to Olesen (2005), ensures that “even the most revealing descriptions of unknown or recognized aspects of women’s situations do not remain merely descriptions” (p. 236). Feminist research aims to benefit its participants by seeking to gain a more thorough understanding of the complex meanings surrounding their experiences (Ackerley & True, 2010; Carroll, 2012) by attending to power imbalances that shape the research itself, as well as within broader societal structures and processes. In this way, feminist research is characterized by critical and reflexive practice, whereby “the nature of research, the definition of and relationship with those with whom the research is done, the characteristics and location of the researcher, and the creation and presentation of knowledges” (Olesen, 2005, p. 238) are critically and meaningfully acknowledged and addressed.

Historically, research conducted before the rise of feminist scholarship did not include the experiences or voices of women, nor social issues impacting the lives of women such as gender-based discrimination, domestic violence, and reproductive issues, to name a few (Ackerley & True, 2010; Harding, 1987). Over the last sixty years, however, feminist researchers have worked to politicize gendered social issues that were previously considered personal (Ackerley & True, 2010), including those mentioned above, through “critical engagement with conventional research methods and approaches” (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010, p. 39). Critical engagement with feminist research methodologies addresses issues in the co-creation of knowledge, including the universalization of women’s issues, situated knowledge, and reflexivity.

### *Particularizing Women’s Experiences*

In their article, “Rethinking Feminist Methodologies,” Anandhi and Velayudhan (2010) critique the idea that feminist research can represent—and speak for—the experiences of all women. They note the importance of recognizing that within groups of women, differences of identity impact social interactions and “power relations” (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010, p. 41). This was central to my research approach in that I did not aim to generalize the experiences of the women with whom I work, but, rather, that the particularities of their lives were attended to with sensitivity and depth (Ackerley & True, 2010; Cairns, 2013; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Olesen, 2005). I sought to understand the meaning that each woman derives from her experiences with involuntary childlessness, singing, and collaboratively composing within the Childless Voices Choir environment. Here, critical engagement with each participant’s social positionality (e.g., race, class, cultural background) was imperative to avoiding generating “truth claims” in my research by seeking “to map how truths are constituted” (Cairns, 2013, p. 327)

within the social circumstances and structures that frame the lives and experiences of each woman. Feminist research, then, aims to capture the experiences of women not from a distant, rational and objective standpoint but, as Haraway (1988) argues, “from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (p. 589). Haraway’s (1988) notion of “Situated Knowledge” is a key element of feminist research that merges the researcher and the researched as co-creators of knowledge not from a position of objectivity, but from a position of “multidimensional” (p. 582) subjectivity.

### ***Situated Knowledge***

In distinction from positivist approaches to ethnographic and other forms of research, knowledge creation through research is discussed in feminist literature as a subjective process that acknowledges and critiques the social positions of all involved, as well as the broader context within which the research takes place (Cairns, 2013; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Olesen, 2005). Objectivity, as it is traditionally known in scientific fields, is rejected by feminist research as, traditionally, objective knowledge is constructed from a neutral point of view (Code, 2013; Haraway, 1988). In feminist research, knowledge is constructed through “politically informed inquiry” (Code, 2013, p. 354), whereby the researcher and the “knower” acknowledge the sociopolitical environment within which their experiences are located and from within which their knowledge is derived.

Through Haraway’s (1988) description of feminist research practice, I understand knowledge creation through feminist research as dependent upon the exploration of individual experience within a situated context and not, as previously discussed, upon generalizable truth



claims that disregard the experience and social positions of the researcher and those with whom research is being conducted:

Feminism loves another science: the sciences and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood. Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision. Feminism is about a critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in unhomogenous gendered social space. Translation is always imperative, critical, and partial. (Haraway, 1988, p. 589)

An interrogation of my own situatedness, then, was imperative to my research (Cairns, 2013). Thus, I explored, throughout my research process, the assumptions upon which my methodological choices were built. Specifically, the assumption that, due to my own experiences with involuntarily childlessness and the field I chose to study (the group singing environment), I would be able to better understand the experiences of the women with whom I work.

Assumptions, if not acknowledged and critically contested, are problematic due to issues of representation in knowledge creation (Cairns, 2013; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Olesen, 2005). This is a critical issue, particularly when research involves participants' sharing of personal and intimate information with which the researcher may be personally familiar. During my time in the field, I was presented with personal and intimate information regarding experiences with which I often empathized. To this end, Doucet and Mauthner (2006) state that, even when researchers and respondents share structural and cultural similarities of, for example, gender, ethnicity, class, and age, this does not guarantee knowing or 'better' knowing. Being an 'insider'—whatever this actually means—is not a straightforward route to knowing. (p. 40)

Critiques of the researcher's role have led to a rethinking of the assumption that feminist researchers may be granted access to inside knowledge based on being an 'insider,' (Olesen, 2005). Haraway's (1988) understanding of the "knowing self" (p. 586) addresses this assumption, when she states that "the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original: it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586, emphasis in original). With this understanding, the researcher and respondent co-create knowledge not by analyzing or representing their words and experiences as one, but as individually situated knowers. It was important to consider here the implications for the analysis and reporting phases of my research, wherein the reflexive engagements and interpretations produced by the researcher and the participants themselves often differ.

### ***Reflexivity***

The reflexive gaze is one which turns both inward and outward, to regard not only one's "personal, political, intellectual, theoretical and autobiographical selves" (Carroll, 2012, p. 550) but, additionally, the social context within which these selves exist and function (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Foley, 2002). When co-creating knowledge, the feminist researcher must reflect on the ways in which researcher and participant positions and assumptions shape the research and the knowledge that is produced before, during, and after every phase of the research project (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006).

Critical to my research was reflecting upon, acknowledging, and addressing my assumptions regarding involuntary childlessness, which are derived from my personal experience with the phenomenon, as well as my scholarly endeavours. This was especially important in relation to my theoretical framework in that the isolation and stigma I have experienced through

my position as a woman who is CNBC, as well as my academic pursuits that stem from my experience with involuntary childlessness, inform the ways in which I interact with others who share similar circumstances. Additionally, my privileged social position as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, educated woman were critically reflected upon and addressed in this research. Through the recognition, critique, and resistance of the dominant power structures embedded within my social world, I have developed self-empowerment. Lastly, my extensive experience within the fields of choral singing and choral pedagogy had an impact on all of my research processes, as my assumptions regarding the field of choral music as an institution are deeply embedded in my pedagogical and scholarly praxis. Exley and Letherby (2001) discuss their experience working in a field with which they themselves identify closely. The authors explore the notion of emotion work in research in relation to their experiences working with individuals who have experienced infertility and terminal illness. Their work resonates with my role as researcher in terms of the emotional labour involved in engaging in research with women whose experiences with involuntary childlessness relate closely to my own:

Clearly listening to, and reading, so many emotive accounts had an effect on both of us; for Gayle this was further complicated by the fact she shared an identity with some of her respondents. In both studies interviews were often emotionally draining, yet in support of the fact the experiences of 'involuntary childlessness' and /or infertility and terminal illness are not one dimensional the emotions generated in fieldwork were varied with laughter being as common as tears. However, sometimes we each felt overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and managing these feelings during fieldwork, in the academy and in our relationships with others was not always easy. Research of this nature may involve

the researcher going beyond the expected researcher role. (Exley & Letherby, 2001, p. 128)

Given both the sensitive nature of my research topic and my personal connection to it, as well as my affiliation with the choral field, reflexivity played an important role in my research processes, as may be evidenced in my thinking through of my epistemological standpoint (in chapter one), and my methodological choices (below).

### **Auto/Biography**

Auto/biographical research is rooted in the idea that “all research and (scholarly) writing is in some ways auto/biographical, involving intersections of the lives of those who write and those who are written about” (Letherby, 2022, p. 14). It is, thus, a reflexive methodology, and one which is particularly important to acknowledge during any qualitative research project.

Cotterill and Letherby (1993) state that,

As feminist researchers studying women’s lives, we take their autobiographies and become their biographers, while recognising that the autobiographies we are given are influenced by the research relationship. In other words, respondents have their own view of what the researcher might like to hear. Moreover, we draw on our own experiences to help us to understand those of our respondents. Thus, their lives are filtered through us and the filtered stories of our lives are present (whether we admit it or not) in our written accounts. (p. 74)

Thus, auto/biography offers space for a critical examination of researcher/participant subjectivity (Brennan & Letherby, 2017).

Although it was not my central methodological approach, it is important to note that auto/biography emerged as a significant element in my research. I did not acknowledge the

auto/biographical nature of my work, however, until my original dissertation had been submitted and defended. It was during the defense of my dissertation that I was challenged (in the most wonderful way) on this by one of my committee members, Dr. Gayle Letherby. One of her concerns regarding my dissertation was that, although she felt that I had written myself into the document by acknowledging my position as an ‘insider,’ there was not enough acknowledgement of the role I played, and the impact of my personal connection to childlessness on every aspect of the research, particularly my relationship to the eleven women with whom I worked. Inversely, although I had recognized and critiqued my position of power as researcher, and the privileges this position affords me, I had failed to fully acknowledge the impact of the research on myself, particularly as relating to my position as an involuntarily childless woman. In fact, Dr. Letherby commented that there were not, as I state in the dissertation, eleven participants; there were twelve.

Even as I write about this I am overcome by emotion as I struggle with concern over the notion of what I consider to be ‘centering’ myself in this research. I struggle because, as I expressed during my dissertation defense (and as I hope comes through in how I wrote this dissertation), my intent for doing this work is—and always has been—to facilitate a space for the voices of *other* involuntarily childless women to be heard. What I have come to realize, however, with Dr. Letherby’s guidance and further reading on auto/biography, is that it does not matter how much I grapple with and, to some extent, resist acknowledging the reciprocal impact of this research; I was as much a fully embedded participant as the other eleven women I worked with.

The emotional impact of doing this research was profound for me, particularly in relation to the interview process, which is evidenced in the following excerpts from my fieldwork journal

entries during the first phase of my research, wherein I had just begun conducting my first interviews:

Sept. 1, 2021:

In terms of my own healing journey from infertility, I'm unsure of how this fieldwork is going to impact me. I've thought a lot lately about making an appointment with my therapist, and yet I've kept telling myself that it's unnecessary, that I won't need it. Funny that I'm still lying to myself about my feelings after all these years of working through the grief of not having children.

Oct. 11, 2021:

I've seen my psychotherapist twice now...It's been helpful to talk through the emotional boundaries I need to set for myself and for the women I'm interviewing. Unfortunately, it hasn't always worked...While I try to distance myself a little, emotionally, in the interviews, it's after the interviews that I find it most challenging to let go of what's come before. In large part because I feel so strongly that these amazing women have been treated terribly, and then also because of what the memories and emotions their testimonies bring up of my own experiences...One challenge I'm noticing in this, though, is that I'm torn about holding myself together emotionally during the interviews. I don't want to do these women a disservice by holding (almost) my emotions in check. But then I think about how important it is for these women to have the opportunity to speak about their experiences openly and without interruption. In these interviews, it's their space for emotional expression, not mine. Although I'm not sure I'm right in saying that either. Of course this is going to be difficult for me. It was *always* going to be difficult for me.

Oct. 13, 2021:

It's exhausting doing these interviews. I'm so drained afterwards. All I want to do is curl up in bed and cry.

In addition to the emotional impact of the interview process, I also found it difficult to transcribe the interviews. I made a conscious decision, with the help of my psychotherapist, to not start the transcription process until the completion of the first phase of my research. Despite the emotional distance I attempted to put between myself and those interviews by postponing the transcription process, it was a difficult and drawn-out task. It also brought me new insights, however, into the emotional labour that was invested by the women I interviewed, and myself, which led to an even deeper sense of gratitude toward these women than I had previously felt.

### **Ethnography**

The definition of ethnographic research has evolved from its nineteenth-century anthropological roots to include, in more recent years, sociological and educational research (Hammersley, 2006). While some elements of ethnography may be shared between disciplines, Hammersley (2006) discusses ethnography as a methodology whose definition should not be constrained by "tight boundaries" (p. 3), as it "does not form part of a clear and systematic taxonomy" (p. 3). According to Hammersley (2018), ethnography *may* include:

- relatively long-term data collection process,
- taking place in naturally occurring settings,
- relying on participant observation, or personal engagement more generally,
- employing a range of types of data,
- aimed at documenting what actually goes on,

- emphasises the significance of the meanings people give to objects, including themselves,
- in the course of their activities, in other words culture, and
- holistic in focus. (p. 4)

The features included on this list leave room for interpretation by the researcher, and yet the overall picture is that of a methodology that aims at attempting to understand, in a meaningful way, an environment and the ways in which individuals and groups function within the environment. Central to ethnographic research is the value of meaning (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Bagley, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Brockmann, 2011; Cairns, 2013; Carroll, 2012; Geertz, 1973; Haraway, 1988; Hine, 2017; Jorgensen, 2009; Krueger, 2014; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Stauffer & Robbins, 2009; Tsolidis, 2008). Boellstorff et al. (2012) explain that ethnographic methodology should account for the importance of interpretation from both etic and emic perspectives, whereby ethnographers “conduct research not just to mine data from informants, but to learn about their theoretical and pragmatic insights” (p. 16). My research sought to gain a thorough understanding of the ways in which involuntarily childless women derive meaning from their experiences as singers in the Childless Voices Choir. In this way, I observed and analyzed musical, educative, and social elements that may be common to all choral engagements (e.g., repertoire selection, learning processes, social interactions), as well as those specific to the Childless Voices Choir.

Krueger (2014) describes three assumptions embedded in ethnographic research. The first is that researchers should avoid predetermined hypotheses and should instead “attempt to remain sensitive and open to the ways in which the subjects, rather than the researchers, make sense of and give meaning to experiences” (Krueger, 2014, p. 137). In this way, reflexive practice was



crucial to my research processes, particularly in challenging pre-supposed notions of what I found. Consequently, I approached my research with the knowledge that my epistemological stance was based upon my own experiences, and not those of the women I observed and interacted with. The second assumption proposed by Krueger (2014) is that research participants are themselves essential sources of data in that “both their actions and statements about their beliefs and actions are considered important” (pp. 137-138). To this end, in addition to observations, I conducted multiple interviews and focus groups during my time in the field. These activities offered participants the opportunity to reflect and discuss their experiences and the meanings they derived from those experiences. Lastly, ethnographic researchers should pay close and critical attention to the ways in which participants are influenced by any “social and institutional conditions...[that may] enhance, shape, or limit actions and events taking place” (Krueger, 2014, p. 138) during the research process. As discussed in chapter two, the choral environment itself often has particular—and unspoken—institutionalized policies and practices embedded within it, of which participants may not be aware. Additionally, participants’ experiences with involuntary childlessness are embedded in pronatalist discourses and must be acknowledged and critiqued as such.

Each of Krueger’s (2014) three assumptions supports the central focus on the contextual and cultural character of meaning-making in ethnographic research, so that the ethnographic researcher may avoid interpreting meaning of participants’ actions and interpretations with little consideration of the contexts within which they occur, and thus avoid merely describing observed events at the surface level. It was important, however, to also understand and reflect upon the ways in which my role as researcher/participant impacted every aspect of my research. According to Foley (2002), “an ethnographer evokes rather than explains the lived reality of

others” and must therefore “refrain...from all monologic, rational attempts to map, explain, classify, and describe social facts/reality” (p. 479). My intention, through my immersion in the Childless Voices Choir, was to unearth and reflect upon the creation of meaning within the social and musical world of the group.

Stemming from anthropological and ethnomusicological research practices, where enquiry is focused on the cultural Other (Marsh, 2009), music education research often explores the experience of music making, teaching, and learning from within “more familiar and accessible territory” (Marsh, 2009, p. 97) such as local music studios, schools, community centres, and people’s homes. The ethnographic gaze thus turns from the cultural other to territories more familiar, and perhaps more accessible, to music educators and community musicians. While insider accessibility provides opportunities for meaning making in ways that observing as an outsider to a community may not (Bresler, 1996; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014), it may also prove problematic. As previously mentioned, my own positionality as an involuntarily childless woman, singer, vocal pedagogue, and choral director, place me at an advantage for accessing and immersing myself within my chosen field site. While accessing the field site was not logistically difficult, my shared social location with the women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir raised potential issues of researcher blind spots and assumptions. I addressed these issues, as discussed earlier in this proposal, through reflexive practice, and by developing a sense of verisimilitude by engaging in close accounts of the events transpired through what Geertz (1973) first called “thick descriptions.”

Geertz’s (1973) notion of thick description has been applied to ethnographic research in music education and community music to investigate the “richness and diversity of musical communities” (Stauffer & Robbins, 2009, p. 85), as well as “to try to interpret and represent

behaviour in particular situations” (Marsh, 2009, p. 96). Through thick description, the researcher is reminded of “the importance not only of describing things richly, but of understanding the difference between researchers’ description of events and what those who are being observed actually think about what they do” (Jorgensen, 2009, p. 77).

Contemporary, immersive approaches to ethnography enrich music education and community music research (Balén, 2017; Campbell, 2010; Carpenter, 2015; Higgins, 2012). This approach, however, has brought with it tensions and critiques from both anthropologists and sociologists. I explore these contested elements of ethnography below.

### ***Tensions in Ethnography***

The development of ethnographic methodology over the last hundred years, across the fields of anthropology and sociology, has given rise to debate among scholars regarding some key elements of ethnography and the ways in which those elements are applied to ethnographic research in a contemporary context (Hammersley, 2006). It was imperative to my research design that I explore these tensions and discuss the ways in which I addressed them in my research processes.

**Time Spent in the Field.** In recent years in particular, the importance of spending extended periods of time in the field (months or years) has become much more relaxed (Brockmann, 2011). In addition, ethnographic researchers may no longer be required to physically live with those whose lives and experiences they study but, alternately, may choose to immerse themselves within a particular location (e.g., a school) only during operational hours (Hammersley, 2006). However, Hammersley (2006) reminds us that shortened ethnographic immersion can be problematic particularly in relation to “sampling and generalization,” as well as “failing to recognize both cyclical variability and fundamental patterns of change” (p. 6)

within the field site. In contrast, Brockmann (2011) argues that her own short-term ethnographic exploration of young people's learner identities benefitted her study. She states that "in the absence of full immersion, short-term observations enabled situated conversations between the informant and the researcher, as well as situated actions, allowing the researcher to observe actions or interactions as they arose in the context of the learning environment" (Brockmann, 2011, p. 241). The author concludes that her short-term observations as an active participant in the research were beneficial to her study, as they exposed her to the same "pressures of the learning environment" (p. 241) as her participants.

The challenge, then, is to conduct the most rigorous ethnographic research possible within the given timeframe, attending carefully and meaningfully to the "levels of complexities and nuances" (Parker-Jenkins, 2018, p. 22) that the study demands. This connects to my study in that I observed and participated in the Childless Voices Choir sessions, which took place online, twice a week, over a four-month period (September to December, 2021). I also engaged in the PAR project over a three-month period (November 2022 to January 2023). Thus, my time in the field was bounded. While this may be considered a short period of time for ethnographic research, I argue that the periods of time in between rehearsals allowed me to analyze my collected data more thoroughly.

**'Valid' Knowledge.** Another tension in ethnographic research is the notion of what constitutes valid knowledge. Historically, ethnographic research has been conducted from a positivist standpoint, whereby the researcher observes a culture from an etic perspective and analyzes and reports on their observations in such a way that claims to knowledge are made from an impersonal and objective standpoint (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Foley, 2002; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Hammersley, 2018). Recent ethnographic research, specifically in the field of

sociology, “aims to acknowledge the validity of the personal, including the emotional side of lived experience” (Tsolidis, 2008, p. 272). Tsolidis (2008) acknowledges this as a limitation regarding a researcher’s “situationality and...authorial power” (p. 272). She seeks to address these complex issues through reflexive practice, with the understanding that “lived experience is situated within wider social processes and structures that need to be scrutinised” (Tsolidis, 2008, p. 275). I addressed the issue of validity similarly, in that I worked continually to acknowledge and critically reflect upon my assumptions regarding involuntary childlessness and group singing, and the social processes and structures that have shaped them.

In addition to the critique of power dynamics, other researchers approach issues of validity through varied means such as multi-method data collection, critical observation and interviewing, and comparison and cross checking of data (Hammersley, 2006; Jorgensen, 2009; Krueger, 2014). Jorgensen (2009) appeals to music education researchers to enact critical reflexive practice throughout the research process, including within the research design itself. She states that “particular theories, hypotheses and lenses inform and make sense of” (p. 75) participant narratives and should therefore be thoroughly critiqued and “assessed for their validity as justifiable ways of seeing the world” (p. 75). Taking a feminist approach to research, as I explored earlier in this paper, sought to address issues of validity.

**Ethics.** Ethical issues exist during every step of the ethnographic research process and should be attended to critically and reflexively from the formation of the study design to the dissemination of study results (Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014). Ethical considerations span from gaining access to the site, informed consent, the sharing of personal—and possibly highly sensitive—information, and the researcher-participant relationship (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Dennis, 2009; Hammersley, 2018; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Olesen, 2005; Parker-

Jenkins, 2018). In ethnographic research, wherein the researcher has close contact with participants, often for long periods of time, it is important to consider the researcher-participant relationship, especially in circumstances that include the sharing of sensitive personal information. Trust must be established throughout the research process, which may be achieved (though is not guaranteed) through the immersion of the ethnographic researcher in the field (Higgins, 2012). Parker-Jenkins (2018) discusses the issue of trust between the researcher and participants as it applies to the interview process, stating that the participants' level of comfort may rely on "the personal skills of the researcher" (p. 27). Here, it is important for the researcher to establish a rapport with the participants, which may be made possible through not only an extended time spent in the field, but through a critical reflexive process that seeks to "democratise the research process" (Dennis, 2009, p. 134). A democratised research project is one in which participant voices are carefully represented through ethical conduct (Olesen, 2005), including facilitation of "autonomy and opportunities for dialogue" (Dennis, 2009, p. 134) among participants and the researcher (Higgins, 2012). Meaning making, in this way, may be unearthed interactively and collectively (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010), thus aiding in minimizing "oppressive power relations" (Dennis, 2009, p. 134) inherent in the research process.

**Power.** Finally, in ethnographic education research, the context within which research participants are observed is often complicated by power structures that frame the learning environment that constitutes the research field site (Bagley, 2009; Brockmann, 2011; Cairns, 2013; Dennis, 2009; O'Toole, 2005; Tsolidis, 2008). My research examined dominant power structures that shape the experiences of involuntarily childless women within the choral environment. It was thus central that I critique dominant discourses embedded within music

education and community music environments and practices, as well as the pronatalist discourses that frame the experiences of involuntarily childless women.

In Higgins's (2012) ethnographic exploration of community music practice, he unpacks the notions of trust, respect, and responsibility that flow between facilitator and participant. I see a direct correlation between community music facilitation and democratic ethnographic research processes in that all who are involved in the community music-making process work together to create musical knowledge and experience, similar to the knowledge and experience that is co-created by researchers and participants in ethnographic research projects. It must be stated, however, that power imbalances are inevitable in all human interactions, musical or otherwise, and especially within institutionalized learning environments such as schools and community music spaces (Cairns, 2013; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Olesen, 2005; Tsolidis, 2008). Doucet and Mauthner (2006) address this inevitability in their discussion of feminist research practice, stating that researchers should consider not "*whether* there are power inequalities between researchers and respondents" but "*how* power influences knowledge production and construction processes" (p. 40, emphasis in original). For my research, reflexivity involved an examination of the ways in which my position and assumptions, as well as those of the participants, shaped the research and the knowledge that was produced before, during, and after every phase of the research project.

Having discussed ethnographic methodology, I move now to a discussion of participatory action research (PAR), which framed a portion of my ethnographic research study from within the Childless Voices Choir. My decision to incorporate a PAR project into my methodological framework relates to the critical elements of power and self-empowerment that are central to my overall research goals. In this way, I examined the ways in which my participants derived

meaning from their experiences as involuntarily childless women and as singers, which I argue, in chapters one and two, are embedded within, and shaped by, relational power structures.

### **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

As discussed previously, ethnographic researchers must acknowledge and attend to issues of power imbalance within the field so that knowledge may be co-created by researchers and participants in a democratic way (Cairns, 2013; Dennis, 2009; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Tsolidis, 2008). Attending to issues of power imbalance was central to my research in that I sought to provide an opportunity for involuntarily childless women to recognize, critically reflect on, interrogate, and resist the oppressive power structures that shape their experiences (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Green, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Malacrida, 2009; Petropanagos, 2017). I chose to incorporate a PAR project into my ethnographic research based, in part, on Freire's (2018) notion of "transforming action" (p. 46), through which oppressed populations of all kinds may pursue "a fuller humanity" (p. 46).

According to Stringer (2007), action research is always enacted in accordance with an explicit set of social values. In modern democratic social contexts, action research is framed as a process of inquiry characterized by the author as democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing. When action research incorporates a participatory element, the opportunity arises for full group participation, "acknowledging people's equality of worth...providing freedom from oppressive...conditions...[and] enabling the expression of people's full human potential" (Stringer, 2007, p. 11). Thus, participatory research processes that support the co-creation of knowledge may "positively affect the lives of disempowered members of the community" (Dennis, 2009, p. 134). This is accomplished through the building of trust between the researcher and the participants, which I also endeavored to strive toward in my research.



The role of the researcher in PAR is that of “democratic facilitator and consciousness-raiser” (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 220). To this end, within my ethnographic research study, I co-facilitated a PAR project during which members of the Childless Voices Choir, including myself, worked with Helen, the facilitator, who is an involuntarily childless female singer-song writer, in a song writing and recording project. The song we collaboratively composed incorporated choir members’ narratives reflecting their experiences with involuntary childlessness and their participation in the Childless Voices Choir. I view the PAR project as a social action process aimed at fostering the development of self-empowerment. It was, therefore, central to facilitate spaces and musical practices that offered participants opportunities to recognize, critique, interrogate and resist the oppressive pronatalist discourses that shape their social worlds (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Green, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Malacrida, 2009; Petropanagos, 2017).

Cohen et al. (2018) help us understand how PAR’s purpose “is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them” (p. 51). It is significant to remember, then, that PAR-framed projects require “an awareness and understanding of the ways in which social practices are located in, and are the product of, particular material, social, and historical circumstances that *produced* them and by which they are *reproduced* in everyday social interaction” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 565, emphasis in original). Thus, inviting singers in the Childless Voices Choir to explore and narrate their experiences in a participatory way afforded participants, and myself as researcher/participant, the opportunity to interrogate and address issues of power imbalance within the research process.

The recording session that I co-facilitated during the PAR project aimed to offer the listening audience an opportunity to learn from the singers’ experiences and to acknowledge the

oppressive social structures within which involuntarily childless women function (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Green, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Malacrida, 2009; Petropanagos, 2017; Wilkerson & DiMaio, 2013). This underscores the research of Denzin (2009), who states that “performance is a way of knowing, a way of showing, a way of interpreting and a method for building shared understanding” (p. 260). In my project's context, the finished product is a recorded song that incorporates singing, piano accompaniment, percussion, and bird sounds. The public sharing of the collaboratively composed song thus seeks to raise consciousness of the experience of involuntary childlessness through the words and music of the Childless Voices singers and facilitator. The performance of women's narratives within this PAR project, then, is an opportunity for creative meaning making between the performers, the audience, and the researcher/facilitator (Denzin, 2009; Palidofsky, 2010).

For researchers in the field of education, PAR offers a “liberating form of professional enquiry” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 8), in that one's own educational practices are investigated with the aim of reflexivity and improvement. Educational action research that is participatory in nature (as in PAR) allows for critical reflexivity not only on the part of the researcher/teacher, but also of the participants/students, leading to what Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) describe as “shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action” (p. 560). PAR projects not only create knowledge but mobilize that knowledge such that support may be given to social movements, issues of social justice may be addressed, and “silenced voices and perspectives” (Fine & Torre, 2019, p. 3) may be uplifted. In this way, participants engaged in PAR may experience autonomy and develop self-empowerment both within the project and within their everyday lives (Dennis,

2009). In the next section, I will fully articulate the methods through which my research data was collected and analyzed.

### **Study Methods**

My methods of data collection, analysis, and reporting are reflective of my research purpose and methodological choices, whereby I sought to conduct an in-depth exploration of eleven women's experiences with involuntary childlessness and group singing. I used a multi-method design in my ethnographic and PAR framework (Brockman, 2011; Hammersley, 2006; Jorgensen, 2009; Krueger, 2014) so as to yield "data on the multiple perspectives, identities and layers" representative of the context I investigated (Brockman, 2011, pp. 241-242). I argue that the complexity of the experience of involuntary childlessness warranted a multi-method design spanning two phases. Phase one of my study entailed a fourteen-week ethnographic immersion in the Childless Voices Choir—a singing group facilitated virtually<sup>3</sup> from London, England—from September to December 2021. During this time, I observed social and musical interactions that took place within the virtual setting while participating as a singer in twenty-eight weekly rehearsals (two per week, on Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings). Phase two of my study, which was originally intended to take place in May and June of 2022, as an eight-week PAR project, involved the collaborative composition of a song based on participants' experiences with involuntary childlessness and singing in the Childless Voices Choir, as well as a final recording session of the composed material.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although this choir was originally intended to be facilitated in person, the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with the original intent, whereby Helen transitioned to facilitating the weekly sessions on the online platform of Zoom

<sup>4</sup> See below for an explanation of the necessary changes made to the timeline and research process of Phase Two

During the two phases of my proposed research project, my role as participant observer facilitated the exploration of the Childless Voices Choir environment from an ‘insider’ perspective. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews allowed for covering the personal, musical, and social histories of participants in a way that was respectful of the sensitive nature of involuntary childlessness. These semi-structured interviews were conducted as a means to explore participants’ experiences as involuntarily childless women both within and outside of the singing environment. Additionally, focus group interviews allowed me to observe interactions between participants in their dynamic occurrence. Lastly, the PAR project acted as an observable creative outlet through which participants could derive meaning while interrogating their own—and each other’s—experiences with involuntary childlessness and group singing. In the following section, I frame my data collection, analysis, and reporting processes to illustrate their applicability to my research project. A discussion on my fieldwork experience, including issues and tensions that arose during this time, will take place at the end of the following Data Collection section.

## Data Collection

**Table 1**

*Data Collection Timeline*

<b>Phase One</b>	
Weeks 1 - 14 September - December 2021	Singing session observations
Week 5 - October 2021	First semi-structured interview
Week 9 - November 2021	Second semi-structured interview
Week 12 – November 2021	Focus group interview
Week 14 – December 2021	Third semi-structured interview
<b>Phase Two</b>	
November 2022 – January 2023 (Nov. 26, 29; Dec. 17; Jan. 16, 17, 19, 25, 26)	Composition project
January 28 2023	Recording Day
February - April 2023 (Feb. 14; March 3, 9, 16, 21; April 11, 26)	Semi-structured interview

### *Observation*

Observation, for Angrosino (2005), should be emphasized “as a context for interaction among those involved in the research collaboration” (p. 732), whereby the researcher is able to provide an in-depth account of the relationships between participants. Within methodological literature, scholars have divided views on ethnographic observation, regarding the relationship between researcher and participant (Reinharz, 1992). According to Reinharz (1992), some scholars advocate for keeping a “respectful distance” between researcher and participants, while others (namely, feminist scholars) believe that “closeness is supposed to enhance understanding” (p. 67). I argue that closeness was beneficial to my research process, given my desire to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the women with whom I worked. Thus, I immersed myself fully in the virtual singing environment of the Childless Voices Choir. Reinharz (1992) validates closeness as beneficial, stating that,

in general, feminist participant observation values openness to intimacy and striving for empathy, which should not be confused with superficial friendliness. Rather it means openness to complete transformation. This transformation—or consciousness-raising—lays the groundwork for friendship, shared struggle, and identity change. (p. 68)

The author's understanding of participant observation resonates with my research in that I explored community formation between participants, as well as the notion of consciousness-raising through affective solidarity.

During ethnographic fieldwork that entails immersive observation, negotiations of the field should be recorded so that the experiences of both the researcher and the participants may be recorded, analyzed, and re-visited, in a continual cycle throughout the research process (Barz, 2008). In both phases of my research, I took fieldnotes immediately after every singing and composition session. My choice was founded, in part, on Barz's (2008) notion of field research—harkening back to Turner's (1969) anthropological research—as a “liminal act” (p. 213). Here, the author explains that, in taking fieldnotes during the act of observation, a change of focus is facilitated, whereby the researcher becomes “further separated from the field” (Barz, 2008, p. 213). By manually recording my observations in real time and taking fieldnotes immediately after each singing session ended, I avoided separating myself from the field site during rehearsals. Fieldnotes are, for Barz (2008), epistemologically crucial:

[T]hey are not only critical in determining what we know, but also illustrative of the process of how we come to know what we know...[F]ieldnotes are part of the process that informs both interpretation and representation, understanding and analysis of experience—in and out of the field. (p. 206, emphasis in original)

Fieldnotes can communicate, to both the researcher and the reader, not only what transpires in the field, but also the ways in which the interactions take place, and the reactions provoked by what takes place (Barz, 2008). Lastly, and just as significantly, the real-time observational notes in conjunction with fieldnotes provided me with the means to continually re-evaluate the experience of the field site and of the overall research process.

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Carroll (2012) describes interviews as “sites of interaction and coproduced meaning” (p. 550). The interview process was a method through which I sought to make connections and examine contrasts between what I observed participants *doing* and what they actually *said* during the research study (Hammersley, 2006). This was important to my research aim of unearthing meanings derived from participant experiences, particularly as my observations were made from a situated position shaped by assumptions. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because their use of loosely guided pre-conceived questions allows participants more control over the interview process. This process engages participants’ narrative histories unbounded by structured interview formats (Letherby, 2003). This narrative technique, for Letherby (2003), “is a method that enables the discovering of the social experiences of ‘silenced women’ (or other silenced groups)” (p. 89). Throughout an interview process involving sensitive topics of discussion, the researcher may embody multiple roles which must be “mediated and enacted” (Carroll, 2012, p. 552). These roles may include that of interviewer, friend, and/or counsellor, and must be thoughtfully, and critically, navigated by the researcher so as to attend to the needs of both the participant and the researcher herself.

During phase one of my study, I conducted three one-hour, semi-structured interviews with each singer and the facilitator: The first, in early October (Week 5), the second in

November (Week 9), and the third in December (Week 14). Conducting interviews beginning after the first four weeks of my fieldwork gave the participants and myself time to become comfortable with my presence as a researcher, while continuing to build the rapport that had already been developing over the past twelve months of my involvement with the Childless Voices Choir as a singer. Building rapport with participants was crucial to the interview process, as it was likely that personal and possibly sensitive issues would arise. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews in phase one of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with involuntary childlessness. In addition, I sought to understand participants' singing experience, both past and present. The interviews, which took place both online via Zoom (28), and in person (5), were audio recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of analysis. At the end of the second phase of my study, the PAR project, I also conducted one one-on-one, semi-structured interview with each participant, wherein we discussed their experience with the song writing and recording project. These interviews were conducted exclusively on Zoom.

Semi-structured interviews allow for the breaking down of hierarchical relationships between researcher and participants. In turn, participants "have more control over the whole process of research...[T]he respondent is not 'objectified' nor placed in a passive role but plays an active part in the research process" (Letherby, 2003, p. 83). It was important that my participants felt in control through the breaking down of researcher/participant hierarchies, particularly given their CNBC circumstances, over which they may have felt a lack of control. Seidman (2006) discusses the ideal participant/researcher relationship as "an 'I-Thou' relationship that verges on a 'We' relationship" (p. 96). Herein, the researcher (I) does not strive for equal participation, as in a conversation (We), but instead "keeps enough distance to allow



the participant [Thou] to fashion his or her responses as independently as possible” (Seidman, p. 96). Similarly, Letherby (2003) discusses the interview process as “interactive” (p. 84), whereby “the researcher should be responsive to the language and concepts used by the respondent; and should give of herself as well as ‘obtaining information’ from the respondent” (p. 84). While Letherby (2003) advocates here for participation from both sides, she is not suggesting a “We” relationship. Instead, she argues for trust and reciprocity in the interview process. In relation to my study, I worked to establish trust and reciprocity through my immersion in the Childless Voices Choir and by maintaining openness, empathy, and transparency in my relationships with participants throughout the research process.

For Parker-Jenkins (2018), “the ability to be accepted as a trustworthy interviewer to whom respondents may feel comfortable in divulging personal views is...contingent...on the personal skills of the researcher” (p. 27). Building rapport with participants, then, is an important element of the interview process. Commonly, researchers disclose their own personal narratives (in part or in whole), as a means to build rapport (Carroll, 2012). When conducting interviews involving sensitive information, however, (such as discussions surrounding involuntary childlessness) it is important for the researcher “to be emotionally attuned and sensitive to her own emotions and the needs of the participants” (Carroll, 2012, p. 548). For Carroll (2012), during her research about infertility and IVF, keeping a diary of the emotions involved in the interview process was imperative to engaging in “researcher reflexivity,” as well as yielding “the hitherto scant systematically recorded empirical data of the emotions involved in what it is like for the researcher to do sensitive qualitative research.” (p. 551). In relation to my study, it was crucial that the women with whom I worked were offered the opportunity to participate in the interview process reflexively. In this way, by discussing their experiences with me, they engaged

critically in the process of acknowledging, interrogating, and resisting the discourses that shape their experiences. Additionally, it was imperative that I also adopt a reflexive practice that incorporated emotional selfcare during my time in the field. Thus, I sought counsel through weekly online sessions with my psychotherapist so that I could work through issues brought up by my investment of emotional labour during my time in the field. This process was crucial to my entire research process, particularly as pertaining to the feminist approach I took in my research.

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus groups are discussed by Cairns (2013) as granting participants “greater control in the research process by fostering opportunities for dialogue and contestation” (p. 330). Through focus group interactions, the researcher relinquishes some of her authority to the participants and, in so doing, acknowledges the possibility of shifting power dynamics between the participants themselves (Cairns, 2013). Further, by fostering opportunities for dialogue and contestation, participant agency is acknowledged, creating a space for individual voices to be heard in such a way that “related meanings” (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010, p. 39) may emerge through participant interactions. Focus groups played an integral role in my research, as I wished to observe and interrogate the ways in which the women participating in my study experienced and derived meaning from community building and solidarity within the Childless Voices environment.

I conducted two ninety-minute focus group interviews with the singers (divided into groups as Tuesday and Saturday singers) during the twelfth week of the first phase of my fieldwork. These focus groups were loosely guided by pre-conceived questions relating to the women’s experience of singing together in the Childless Voices Choir, such that I was able to

observe the ways in which they interacted with each other and derive meaning from their individual and collective experiences. Building on Cohen et al.'s (2018) understanding of the focus group as providing an environment that promotes “thinking and reflection” (p. 533), I encouraged participants to engage critically in the process, as a means to interrogate their experiences and resist the oppressive discourses that shape them. The focus groups were audio recorded to aid in the transcription process, and I took observational notes so that I could observe participants’ interactions and reactions as they engaged in conversation. Focus groups took place virtually, via Zoom, outside of singing session hours.

## **The PAR Project**

### ***Original Intentions***

According to Lather (2017), “for researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations” (p. 17). During the second phase of my study, I was to bring my findings from the observations, interviews, and focus group discussions from phase one to the participants. In this way, participants could critically reflect on and interrogate the data I collected over my four-month immersion in the choir, as well as my analysis and interpretation of the data. My aim here was to relinquish some of my control over the data (Letherby, 2003) by offering participants the opportunity to cross check the interview and focus group transcriptions, to think through their experiences, and to critique my interpretations of those experiences more fully. A ninety-minute focus group interview in week one of phase two was to be dedicated to discussing my findings, allowing participants to interrogate, critique, and comment on them. Participants would share control of the ways in which my findings from phase one were to be

publicly presented, including incorporating their own narratives into the songs they composed in phase two, if they chose to. The compositional process was to then take place through six weekly, in-person sessions outside of regular singing session times. These sessions were to take place within the rehearsal space, with observations notated manually by me, to be reviewed during the analysis phase which was to commence in July 2022.

In week eight, the public presentation of the composed songs was to take the form of a live performance that would be planned and organized collaboratively with the Childless Voices Choir singers and facilitator. The performance would be video recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis. Weeks seven and eight were originally scheduled to be dedicated to preparing and rehearsing for the final performance. A ninety-minute focus group interview was then scheduled to take place in week seven of the PAR project, within the choral rehearsal space but outside of session hours. The purpose of these focus group interviews was for participants to discuss their experiences within the PAR phase of the proposed research project. Observations of the focus groups would be manually recorded to aid in the transcription process.

Following the final performance (week eight), I was to conduct a one-hour, semi-structured interview with each singer and the facilitator, Helen, for the purpose of exploring their perceptions of the PAR project. The interviews, which would take place within the rehearsal space but outside of rehearsal hours, were to be audio recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of analysis. In addition to the analysis of interviews and focus groups, I was also planning to analyze the songs composed during the PAR project, for the purpose of interpreting the text, specifically. Phase two of my study would be central to the aims of my research in that, more than simply observing, engaging with, and commenting on the experiences of the women with whom I worked, I sought to frame a creative space through which participants might come

to acknowledge, interrogate, and perhaps find pathways for resisting the pronatalist social structures within which they function. While my plan for phase two of my fieldwork was sound, approved by the Western Research Ethics Board, and consented to by all participants, it was not able to proceed as planned. In the following sections I discuss, in detail, the events that prevented me from conducting the second phase of my study in the way that I had originally intended.

### *Interruptions*

**The COVID-19 Pandemic.** The original intention of the Childless Voices Choir's facilitator, Helen, was to implement an in-person singing group, with rehearsals to take place once a month in London, England, where she resides. She facilitated the inaugural in-person rehearsal at the beginning of March of 2020, in Waterloo, London, which was well attended, with fifteen singers. However, within roughly two weeks, the British government implemented its first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the initial lockdown, which was supposed to last only two weeks, continued, Helen decided to switch the singing sessions to an online format. She stated in our third interview that despite not wanting to switch to an online format, she realized that the lockdown was causing people to feel isolated and alone, particularly those in the childless-not-by-choice community. Some of the women who had attended the first and only in-person rehearsal expressed a desire to continue in an online format, and so she began facilitating weekly sessions through Zoom. This switch in format proved beneficial, as it allowed women from the CNBC community, who lived too far from London to travel to in-person rehearsals (including myself), the opportunity to join the Childless Voices Choir virtually.

In relation to my study, then, I was able to build rapport with Helen and the singers for twelve months prior to beginning my fieldwork, which I feel aided in developing rich and varied relationships with the women I sang with every Tuesday. I had contacted Helen in December of

2019 when I saw a post she had written on the CNBC social media platform, Gateway Women. Initially, I had planned to start my own choir for involuntarily childless women in the Greater Toronto Area, close to where I live. However, when I reached out to Helen about her intention to start a choir, and we met online for the first time in January of 2020, we agreed that working with her group would make for an interesting and important research project. At this point, I was in my second year of the PhD program at Western and working towards planning my dissertation: the timing was perfect...and then, the pandemic struck.

While it feels strange for me to admit this, the pandemic proved highly beneficial to my Doctoral work. By this I mean that, although my original intentions were to conduct my fieldwork in person, the accessibility of virtual engagements meant that I was able to execute a dissertation research project that worked around pandemic restrictions put in place by both the British and Canadian governments. This is not to say that there were not challenges in the planning process; namely, the unknowns that I feel most researchers faced during the pandemic. Thankfully, by the time my fieldwork began in September 2021, I was able to implement a hybrid approach wherein I moved to the UK and continued engaging in the online singing sessions, but was able to meet and speak with many (though not all) of the women I worked with in person at least once. I feel that this hybrid approach was highly beneficial to my research, in terms of the meaning making that took place through the building of relationships both virtually and in person.

While the COVID-19 pandemic proved beneficial in many ways to both phases of my doctoral research study, due to the hybrid nature of my fieldwork, the second phase of fieldwork, the PAR project, was impacted in such a way that drastic changes had to be made to my original plan. The first change I made was to end the PAR project with a recording session, rather than a

public performance, as the fluctuating nature of the government-sanctioned pandemic restrictions caused uncertainty as to whether a public singing performance would be possible. I decided, through ongoing discussions with Helen, that planning a recording session at the end of the song writing process would be more realistic than planning a concert. In hindsight, this decision proved to be highly beneficial to the overall study in many ways, not least of which was the resulting recording that has now been made publicly available. The second change that had to be made was the decision for Helen to facilitate the song writing sessions. This decision was made based on the fact that the woman who was initially supposed to facilitate the sessions was unable to do so because she developed Long COVID.

In addition to the impact of the pandemic on this phase of the study, it was also complicated by medical issues related to my childlessness that I faced in the first half of 2022. Helen also dealt with medical issues in the summer of 2022, and so both of our circumstances necessitated a change in timeline and, thus, procedure, of the PAR project. What follows is a description of these circumstances that I share not only as an explanation of research procedural alterations, but also as relevant to my researcher positionality. I feel that the sharing of my experiences here, while deeply personal, is imperative to the feminist approach I have taken in my research, in terms of researcher transparency and reflexivity. Additionally, one of my aims of conducting this research was to raise consciousness of the experience of involuntary childlessness in all of its messy and unique complexities. Thus, as an involuntarily childless researcher who conducts research on the experience of involuntary childlessness, I feel that to silence this part of my experience in relation to the research process would be counter productive to the aims of my research.

**The End of My Journey Through Childlessness.** In October of 2021, while I was living in York, England, conducting the first phase of my fieldwork for this study, I discovered a lump in the lower left quadrant of my abdomen. Additionally, I began to notice changes in my menstrual cycle that became concerning. I continued to monitor the lump but, admittedly, brushed it off as something that could wait until I finished my fieldwork and returned to Canada. As the months—and my fieldwork—progressed, the lump began to feel larger and the changes to my menstrual cycle more pronounced. By the end of January, I was sufficiently concerned as to make an appointment with my doctor back home in Canada. I should mention here that, since going through fertility treatments and the subsequent physical and emotional trauma I endured, my relationship to my body, particularly anything related to my reproductive and sexual health, had been difficult. Therefore, it took a lot of courage for me to see a doctor about the issues I was having.

During my initial doctor's appointment, she confirmed that there was in fact a lump in my abdomen and sent me for a blood test for ovarian cancer. Waiting for the results of this test was incredibly stressful, and while I waited the three days (I had the test performed on a Friday), I attended a Childless Voices Saturday morning singing session. During our social time in the session, I explained to the women in attendance what I had been going through and they were all incredibly supportive and kind, particularly as I became visibly upset while discussing my situation and my fears about the possibility of ovarian cancer. These women, some of whom had participated in phase one of my study, and some of whom had not, were my friends. I felt—and still feel—a kinship with them that is rooted not only in our experiences with involuntary childlessness but also, for many of them, in a mutual understanding of the emotional impact of female reproductive and sexual health issues. My blood test results came back negative,



thankfully, and my doctor then scheduled me in for a transvaginal ultrasound and a CT scan of my abdomen. The ultrasound experience was one which brought on feelings of anxiety for me, as I had endured multiple ultrasounds during my fertility treatments, among other invasive procedures that left me feeling violated and traumatised.

Through the scans, it was obvious that there was a large mass (roughly 9cm by 6cm) that was impeding the view of my ovaries. My doctor subsequently referred me to an obstetrician-gynecologist at the beginning of March 2022, who informed me that the mass was most likely a pedunculated subserosal fibroid<sup>5</sup> and that surgical removal of the mass was the best solution to this issue. While speaking with the surgeon, I asked whether there would be a risk of more fibroids and she told me that there was a definite risk. Given this news, I elected to have a total abdominal hysterectomy whereby, in addition to removing the fibroid, the surgeon would also remove my uterus and cervix but leave my ovaries in place so that I wouldn't go into early menopause. The surgeon was hesitant to agree to perform the hysterectomy at first, given my age (I was thirty-nine at the time) and the fact that I hadn't had children. I explained my situation to her—my MS diagnosis and mine and my husband's inability to conceive without medical intervention—and she agreed to perform the surgery. I was surprised at my reaction to having to explain my situation, as I felt more relief than upset at closing the book, once and for all, on the possibility of having children.

My hysterectomy was scheduled for April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. I was also scheduled for an MRI, in the hopes that the surgeon would gain a clearer view of the fibroid before she performed the surgery. By this time, early March, I was experiencing extreme discomfort and some pain,

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<sup>5</sup> A pedunculated subserosal fibroid is a non-cancerous vascular mass that grows on a stem outside of the uterus (Responsum Health, 2023)

particularly when I was running and x-country skiing. I was advised not to continue these activities as there was a high risk of torsion of the fibroid which, given that it was a large vascular mass, could pose significant risks to my health. Additionally, ten days before my surgery, I received a phone call from my doctor to say that I needed to begin taking blood thinners because the fibroid was now so large that it was putting pressure on one of my main arteries, increasing the risk of a stroke. The blood thinners were to be self-administered by subcutaneous injection in my stomach which, again, harkens back to my experience with fertility treatments, as doing IVF required me to inject myself daily with hormones for each cycle. Needless to say, the month leading up to my surgery was fraught with concern for my health, and I became increasingly excited and impatient to get the surgery over with.

As part of my preparation for my surgery, I decided to celebrate the end of my fertile days with an 'I'm Not Having a Baby' shower, which I asked my closest girlfriends to organize for me. The decision to commemorate my hysterectomy and the removal of the fibroid in this way stemmed from a desire to view this next chapter of my life, and some of the freedoms it would bring, in a positive light, rather than mourning the end of my fertility journey. My experience as an involuntarily childless woman who, prior to my hysterectomy, was not actually infertile has been complex. Specifically, there have been two particular aspects of it that have remained difficult for me throughout the past two decades. Firstly, although I have known for certain that my husband and I could not conceive naturally, getting my period every month remained a constant reminder of this fact, causing me, at times, disappointment and emotional upset. Secondly, since experiencing the invasiveness of fertility treatments, I have struggled to go for regular cervical screenings, finding them both physically and emotionally traumatic. The removal of my uterus and cervix means that I will never have to experience either of these things

again, which has brought me a great sense of relief and peace at the end of a long and complex journey through infertility.

### ***Revising the PAR Plan***

With the health complications I faced at the beginning of 2022, as well as the transition of the Childless Voices sessions to an online platform (Zoom), my original timeline and plan for the PAR project needed to be revised. While I had hoped to go back to the UK from May 1<sup>st</sup> until June 30<sup>th</sup>, I had to postpone my arrival until the beginning of June, as I would not be sufficiently recovered from my April 22<sup>nd</sup> surgery to travel on May 1<sup>st</sup>. I was prepared to engage in phase two as planned, given that the composition sessions would now take place online. I felt confident that I would be able to participate in and observe the first four weeks of song-writing sessions from the comfort of my home during my recovery from surgery. Obviously, I had been keeping Helen and the other women participating in the study informed about my surgery, as I wanted to assure them all that we could proceed as originally planned despite my medical complications. After a lot of back-and-forth with Helen, however, it was decided that we would postpone phase two of the study until a later date. Helen told me that she was uncomfortable with the idea that I would be conducting my research while recovering from surgery, as she had experienced a long and difficult recovery from her own hysterectomy ten years previously, and believed that my experience would be equally difficult and drawn out. While I did not agree with Helen's perceptions of how my recovery would go, I did appreciate her concern for my welfare, and wanted her to feel comfortable moving forward with the PAR project. Thus, I reluctantly agreed to postpone phase two until an undisclosed later date, with the understanding that this phase of the study would need to be completed within a year so that I could finish my Doctoral degree on time (by the end of August 2023).

In addition to my own medical issues, Helen experienced some of her own during the summer of 2022, which necessitated further postponement of the second phase of the study. Planning for the song writing sessions became increasingly challenging, in part due to Helen's recovery from her medical issues, and also in part because all of the pandemic restrictions had now been lifted in the UK, which meant that the lives of the women participating in the study had become more normalized and, thus, busier. The result of these events was that Helen and I scheduled phase two of the study to take place over four online song writing sessions through November and December 2022. Additionally, three online practice sessions were scheduled in January 2023, with an in-person recording session scheduled for the last weekend in January 2023, at Eastcote Studios in London, England. Due to these schedule changes, only seven of the original eleven study participants were able to participate in the second phase of the study. Additionally, again due to schedule conflicts, I conducted the originally planned one-on-one interviews with the phase two participants, but was unable to conduct a focus group interview. Despite the complications and interruptions that arose during the planning and execution of my Doctoral study, I feel that I was able to successfully complete my fieldwork in a meaningful way. Having described the data collection processes above, what follows next is an explanation of the analysis phase of my research.

### **Data Analysis**

Charmaz (2014) developed her constructivist approach to data analysis out of a concern for the reality of researcher subjectivity. For Charmaz (2014), "subjectivity is inseparable from social existence" (p. 14), and so she developed protocols "to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data" (p. 14). Charmaz (2014) states that "a constructivist approach means more than looking at how individuals view their

situations. It not only theorizes the interpretive work that research participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 239). Here, Charmaz (2014) is alluding to the reality that researchers and participants do not come to the research as ‘blank slates’ of knowledge or values and, therefore, the research can never be devoid of theoretical assumptions or frameworks. As such, Letherby (2003) argues that,

Any piece of research refers to what has gone before by adding in levels of complexity or challenging previous perspectives. What research should provide is modification, reworkings, extensions and/or critiques of existing theory and the creation of new concepts. (p. 67)

My research sought to unearth the meanings derived from the experiences of the involuntarily childless singers of the Childless Voices Choir through the lens of community, solidarity, and empowerment theories.

The analysis phase of my research entailed the transcription and coding of fieldnotes, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and the observations I made about the singing sessions and the song writing sessions. Interview transcripts were sent via email to each participant for review and editing before the start of the analysis phase. This allowed the women I worked with to omit any information that they did not wish to be analyzed and/or published. They were also given the option to add any information they had missed in their interviews and felt was relevant to their experiences. My approach to data analysis involved “generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding)” (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018, p. 198). I approached this, according to Charmaz (2014), as an interactive coding process.

Within the analysis process, I looked for recurring texts from each participant's narrative, as well as from the group. I organized these recurring texts into thematic categories to be analyzed through the theoretical lenses of community, solidarity, and empowerment. The use of thick description (Geertz, 1973) enhanced my interpretation of the data in that I analyzed not only the musical interactions of participants, but also their social interactions. Additionally, throughout the analysis phase, I employed a reflexive approach whereby my researcher positionality was continually acknowledged and critiqued (Carroll, 2012; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Foley, 2002).

### **Validity**

The aim of my research was to examine whether, and in what ways, involuntarily childless women build community and develop self-empowerment through their participation in the Childless Voices Choir. By its very nature, this research demanded a sensitive yet rigorous approach. My epistemological stance in relation to this study required me to take a feminist approach that employed reflexivity at every stage of the research. The sensitive nature of the subject matter, and the meanings I sought to derive from participants' lived experiences, align with the transparent nature of my data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.

The word 'valid' is defined as "well-grounded or justifiable : being at once relevant and meaningful" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I sought to attend to issues of validity throughout the research process. As evidenced in the comprehensive description of my epistemological stance and methodological choices, I worked to ensure the execution of a meaningful exploration of the experiences and perceptions of the eleven women I worked with. This is in line with what McHugh (2020) terms "epistemological trustworthiness" (p. 217). For McHugh (2020), "epistemological trustworthiness involves multiple dimensions of credibility, including, for

example, research that is critical, contextual, committed and co-responsible, practical, political, pluralist, and participatory” (p. 217).

Throughout the research process, I aligned my work with Whitemore and Mandle's (2001) examination of issues of validity in qualitative research, whereby they state that, Creativity must be preserved within qualitative research, but not at the expense of the quality of the science. Creative work supports the discovery of the not yet known, going beyond previously established knowledge and challenging accepted thinking...However, it is essential that qualitative work should be highly creative at the same time that it is analytically rigorous and explicit. (p. 526)

I further align with Whitemore and Mandle's (2001) efforts toward a “reconceptualization of the concept of validity” (p. 529) that includes both primary and secondary criteria. Herein, the authors consider “credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity” as primary, and “explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity” as secondary” (p. 529).

Just as significantly, the analysis of my findings, rendered through the theoretical lenses of community and empowerment, proved relevant to the fields of music education and community music within which my research is situated. The reporting of my findings was performed reflexively, authentically, and creatively, attending to the sensitive nature of the research and, more importantly, the significance of the voices and experiences of the women with whom I worked.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I obtained ethics approval for my study through Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (REB). Once approval was obtained from the REB, I sought approval

from the facilitator of the Childless Voices Choir to begin recruiting participants (singers in the choir). Recruitment took place via an email sent by Helen to all members of the choir. The email included a letter of information about my research that detailed the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as participants' right to remove themselves from the study at any time. Participants were asked to sign a letter of consent to participate, as well as indicating whether they consented to be audio recorded for the purpose of the study. Participants were given the choice to use either their real first names or pseudonyms, to protect their anonymity as they so chose. As compensation for their time, participants were given £50.00 (approximately \$85.00 CDN) at the end of each phase of the study, after completion of their interviews. The recording session and sound engineering of the collaboratively composed song was paid for in full using funds from my SSHRC graduate scholarship. Additionally, all travel costs incurred on the day of the recording session were reimbursed to each singer. Helen was also financially compensated for her time as facilitator of the song writing and recording sessions.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological framework and research processes of my study. Ethnography and a participatory action research project (PAR) were selected as the most appropriate methodological choices in relation to my research questions, as well as the environment within which the focus of my study was situated. The feminist approach I took in my research was conducive to conducting rigorous and meaningful research that involved the exploration of the experience of involuntary childlessness, which is a deeply personal and sensitive subject. Additionally, a feminist approach ensured that my researcher positionality was continually acknowledged and critiqued in such a way that transparency remained at the forefront. The challenges and interruptions to the study timeline were also discussed, as they



played an important role in completing the study in a meaningful and ethically sound way. The constructivist approach to analysis that I took has also been discussed, wherein member checking of interview transcriptions was employed, as well as my own reflexive practice, to ensure an ethical co-creation of knowledge. It was my intention, from the beginning stages of planning this research to the final publication of my findings, to work as ethically as possible so that the women I worked with in this study would not be caused harm during the process. Given my 'insider' status in this research, it was also imperative that I remain reflexive in every phase of the planning and implementing of this project, with the aim of co-creating knowledge that would be beneficial to the fields of music education and community music but, equally (if not more) importantly, to the women I worked with and the broader CNBC community.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CHILDLESS EXPERIENCE: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Introduction

Involuntary childlessness is a complex phenomenon that impacts the lives of women, in particular, due to the gendered nature of pronatalist ideology. Through pronatalist discourse and a lack of public knowledge, understanding, and empathy, women who are unable to have children—for a variety of reasons—are often positioned as ‘other’ against those who have children, in a variety of community contexts (Archetti, 2019; Goffman, 1963; Greil et al., 2011; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995). I examine the experiences of eleven involuntarily childless women through the lens of Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory and Doka’s (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief as a way to recognize and critique the ways in which their lives are framed by gendered and pronatalist practices and ideologies that work to exclude women, whose circumstances do not fit normalized gendered ways of being, from their social communities (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Gotlib, 2014; Lewis, 1998; Miall, 1986; Schur, 1983). The othering of childless women is experienced through social interactions within communities of family, friends, work colleagues, and/or more distant acquaintances (including strangers) (Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Miall, 1989). Othering from broader (even global) communities is also experienced through portrayals of childless women in the media (including through film, television, and political propaganda) (Archetti, 2019; Gotlib, 2014; Petropanagos, 2017) and government policies (Lovett, 2018).

In this study, I gained a much more nuanced understanding of the stigmatized experience of involuntary childlessness than the preconceived perspectives and assumptions I held, as rooted in my own experience as a childless woman. Each of the women who spoke with me openly

about their experiences did so with courage and vulnerability, for which I am incredibly grateful. Through these discussions, Lu, Helen, Catherine, Nicola, Sam, Emma, Sue, Tracey, Sara, Anna, and Stephanie<sup>6</sup> painted a vivid picture with their narratives that depict experiences of involuntary childlessness framed by themes of *isolation*, *silence*, and *shame*. These themes arose through my analysis of the impact of childlessness on participants' social, professional, and personal lives and their perceived connections (or lack thereof) to the communities within which they engage. For Chaskin (2013), community “suggests both images and feelings of identity, belonging, shared circumstance, and common cause” (p. 105). Although my research does not seek to universalize the experience of involuntary childlessness, similarities between the individual experiences of the women who participated in this study point to an alarming and deep-rooted sense of stigma and exclusion faced by women who are childless not by choice. Whiteford and Gonzales (1995) state that “the lived experience of infertility is one of stigmatization, isolation and alienation. They feel as though they have broken some accepted, if unspoken, cultural rule and they pay for it by being classified as ‘other’” (p. 29). While the authors are discussing infertility specifically here, the narratives of the women who participated in my research, including those who are not medically infertile, reflect Whiteford and Gonzales's (1995) findings. The women I worked with expressed feelings of isolation, silence, and shame that led to feelings of exclusion from their professional, familial, friendship, and/or broader communities.

In the following sections, I explore the themes of isolation, silence, and shame that arose through my analysis of the collected data, in relation to childlessness. Here, I address participants' lived social experiences outside of the Childless Voices Choir, which were often in

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<sup>6</sup> Some participants chose to use their real names in this document, while other names are pseudonyms.

contrast to the women's social experiences within the singing sessions. These findings are drawn from discussions about direct interactions they have had with family, friends, work colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers in relation to their childlessness. Additionally, some women spoke about the impact of dominant social discourse more generally—often unspoken, yet prevalent through various other mediums—on their experience of involuntary childlessness. I begin by discussing the theme of isolation in relation to involuntary childlessness.

### **The Isolating Impact of Involuntary Childlessness**

According to the literature, isolation is a common experience for involuntarily childless women (Darroux, 2022; Day, 2013; Exley & Letherby, 2001; Gotlib, 2014; Loftus & Namaste, 2011; Miall, 1986; Schur, 1983). For many, feelings of isolation are a direct result of exclusion from communities to which one's membership is reliant on having children (i.e., the 'mom club') or through the exclusionary actions of others (i.e., not being invited to child-centric activities) or of the self (i.e., removing oneself from social interactions as a form of dealing with the grief, social awkwardness, and/or shame of being childless) (Darroux, 2022; Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Loftus & Namaste, 2011). Wright (2016) defines social exclusion as being "disengaged from mainstream society, suffering from isolation and social marginalization and failing to receive the benefits of the majority" (p. 271). For involuntarily childless women, exclusion may also occur in relation to feeling as if one is not an accepted member of society at large, when one's social circumstance (i.e., as a childless woman) does not conform to normative ways of being within a given society. Exley and Letherby (2001) discuss the notion of the "stranger," in relation to the involuntarily childless person, as someone whose "experience places them outside the boundaries of those around them" (p. 114). Certainly, for many of the women I spoke with, this

has been—and for some, continues to be—the case, when engaging with their workplace, familial, and friendship communities, as well as in society at large.

When one is, or perceives themselves to be, excluded from social interactions and communities and, on a broader scale, society itself, this can lead to feelings of isolation. Greenwald and Harder (1998) state that, “to feel or to actually be excluded is to suffer, in lesser or greater degree, from a sense of stigma” (p. 231). In addition to exclusion, avoidance of the subject of children and/or childlessness may also leave involuntarily childless women feeling isolated, particularly in relation to their grief. For many involuntarily childless women, the loss of a motherhood identity is experienced in much the same way as the death of a living person. For some, their route to childlessness involves the loss (or termination) of a pregnancy, for which no socially accepted grieving ritual is granted. For others, it is the loss of a potential identity (Loftus & Namaste, 2011) that is grieved; again, without the benefit of any socially acknowledged or accepted ritual. Doka (1989) discusses the grief experienced through these types of losses as “disenfranchised.” The author describes disenfranchised grief as occurring when “the loss cannot be openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned” (Doka, 1989, p. xv). Jody Day (2013) relates disenfranchised grief to the childless experience in her book, *Living the Life Unexpected*:

If we miscarry, fail to conceive or never have the opportunity to try for a baby, our loss can remain invisible to others; it’s known as ‘disenfranchised grief’ because it’s grief that our society does not recognise and which consequently many of us feel shame for experiencing, if we allow ourselves to experience it at all. (pp. 81-82)

The silence and avoidance that surrounds the subject of involuntary childlessness, and the disenfranchised grief that childless women experience due to a lack of acknowledgement and/or

empathy towards their loss from members of their various communities, very often leads to feelings of isolation. This was discussed by the women that I interviewed during the first phase of my fieldwork. Feelings of isolation were experienced within the workplace, through interactions with friends, and/or within their broader, more loosely based communities. I was surprised, however, to find that only one of the eleven participants in this study had experienced feelings of isolation from her family. Sara's family had kept information from her regarding the pregnancy of one of her cousins, which made her feel as though they didn't believe she would have anything to add to the lives of her cousin and the baby because she is childless. Wenger, Scott and Patterson (2000) state that "those without children are not necessarily isolated: many form primary links with collateral kin or with non-kin in the form of close family substitutes" (p. 163). While for Sara, this was not the case, many of the other women I spoke with mentioned feeling supported by their families, rather than isolated from them. In the following discussion, I examine the theme of isolation that arose during conversations with participants regarding encounters within their professional, friendship, and more broadly-based communities.

### ***Isolation Within Professional Communities***

Isolation arose as a theme in the conversations I had with all eleven participants. For Catherine, Tracey, and Anna particularly, this came up in discussions about their professional communities. Interestingly, each of these women work within the field of education. Catherine is an educational psychologist who works closely with students in the public education stream and their parents. However, it has been her interactions with colleagues that has at times created a sense of disconnect, specifically in relation to those colleagues' interactions with students' parents during meetings. Catherine stated that,

sometimes when you have meetings with a parent but sometimes you're in front of a parent and these members of staff, these school staff, other professionals...will mention their own children and it's kind of, um, it's a sort of bonding technique and it feels like, you know, it's how we all connect, 'cause it's mostly females.

These types of bonding rituals are discussed by Loftus and Andriot (2012) as performances of gender that are taught to women from a young age. Catherine's childless status leaves her feeling unable to connect in this way to her colleagues and her students' parents during these conversations. In addition to the conversations between her colleagues and the parents of the students with whom she works, Catherine has also felt "increasingly...alienated" from her professional community, due to the silence that she has experienced during conversations between herself and her colleagues when the subject of their children arises. Loftus and Andriot (2012) discuss the common occurrence of women's conversations centering around their children as a gendered act of community building that excludes those without children. While the authors' discussion focuses on women who are childless due to infertility, specifically, I believe that a relation can be made to women who, like Catherine, are involuntarily childless due to social circumstances. Similar to Catherine's feelings—arising from the experience of conversational exclusion—Loftus and Andriot (2012) state that infertile [and childless] women may "experience these situations as painful and feel alienated from other women" (p. 232).

Tracey works as a primary school teacher, and interactions with her students' parents have been complicated by her experience of failed IVF treatments and subsequent childlessness, particularly those who arrive at the school to pick their children up pushing prams (strollers) and showing her their babies. However, like Catherine, it is among her colleagues that Tracey has felt the biggest sense of isolation, due to her avoidance of the staffroom during her workdays. When

discussing the reason for this avoidance, Tracey stated that it was a “coping strategy...I wouldn’t go to the staffroom at lunchtimes because I didn’t wanna hear people talking about their children or anything like that...so I used to do that as a coping mechanism.” Loftus and Namaste (2011) state that it is a common occurrence for women experiencing infertility to avoid social situations within which they risk being subjected to insensitive and hurtful questions and comments, thus isolating themselves. Tracey’s relationship with her co-workers became distanced due to her status as an infertile and childless woman, which I argue can be considered a form of self-imposed isolation.

Tracey’s reluctance to join her colleagues in the staffroom falls under what Goffman (1963) terms the act of “passing” (p. 42). Passing is defined by Goffman (1963) as “the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self” (p. 42). In addition to overtly avoiding social interactions while at work, Tracey told me that she had shared very little, if any, information about her fertility treatments with her work colleagues, other than her very closest friends. The notion of coping mechanisms that Tracey employed are described by Goffman (1963) during his discussion of passing:

it is to be expected that voluntary maintenance of various types of distance will be employed strategically by those who pass...By declining or avoiding overtures of intimacy the individual can avoid the consequent obligation to divulge information. By keeping relationships distant he [*sic*] ensures that time will not have to be spent with the other, for...the more time that is spent with another the more chance of unanticipated events that disclose secrets. (p. 99)

One of the most obvious, and alarming, isolating social experiences among coworkers, related to me during an interview, came from Stephanie, who is a general practitioner (GP) in the



medical field. She spoke of a negative social interaction she had with another female GP in a “lady doctor’s group” of which she was a member:

I went to one of the meals and just got asked, you know, how many children I’ve got and you’re like, “I haven’t got any children,” and the woman turned away and didn’t speak to me again for the rest of the evening...and spoke to the person on the other side of her.

That was the last time I went to the lady GP’s group.

The isolating impact of this experience is very clear and incredibly unfortunate for Stephanie. It underscores the desire of the stigmatized to “pass” (Goffman, 1963, p. 42), avoiding social gatherings altogether, wherein they may be confronted by hurtful words and/or actions. In this particularly disturbing instance, Stephanie’s divulgence of her childless status immediately forced her “to the social periphery” (Gotlib, 2014, p. 333) of a community to which she should have every right to feel she belonged.

### ***Isolation from Communities of Friendship***

Six of the eleven women who spoke to me about their experiences with involuntary childlessness discussed experiencing a sense of isolation within their relationships with friends. For some, the experience has been blatant, based on specific interactions, while for others, it has been a more subtle and gradual experience. Some of these experiences were related to health issues that had arisen in relation to their childlessness, and some based on the complex nature of changes in social relationships that can happen between friends when some have children and others do not (Darroux, 2022; Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Miall, 1986). Five of the six participants spoke to me about the loss of friendships that has occurred due to their childlessness. One participant, Emma, made a conscious adaptation to the way in which she interacts with her friends, in order to navigate her feelings of isolation and maintain her friendships, albeit in ways

that look different from her original relationships. Regardless of the eventual outcome of these changes in relationships, the experiences of the women I worked with point to a sense of isolation within, and from, their friendship communities.

In our discussion about the impact of involuntary childlessness on her friendships, and any support that she had received from her friends after her diagnosis of ovarian cancer and subsequent radical hysterectomy<sup>7</sup> in 2020, Stephanie referenced Jody Day's (2013) use of the term 'friend apocalypse.' Day (2013) uses this term in relation to the loss of friendships based on one's childless status. Stephanie discussed the term in relation to her hysterectomy and subsequent recovery period, which took place during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. During this time, she reached out to friends, some of whom she had known for twenty years, to ask them whether they could do her grocery shopping while she was unable to leave her house, and they refused:

I had people sort of say, "oh, well, you know, there's a support group in the village, you can ask them." Um, or just, "no, I'm not doing shopping," 'cause they were scared about going to the supermarket or whatever...nobody would help.

While Stephanie's experience of the loss of friendships was by far the most sudden and drastic among the experiences of the women I spoke with, and was related closely to her illness, she was not the only one who spoke about losing friends in relation to their childlessness.

Sam, Sue, Sara, and Nicola discussed losing friends because of their experiences with infertility and their childless status. Sam spoke about the difficulty of not being able to share "your frustrations and your challenges and your difficulties about being, um, a childless

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<sup>7</sup> A radical hysterectomy involves the removal of the uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes, ovaries, and some nearby tissue, leading to immediate menopause and infertility (National Cancer Institute, 2023)

woman—couple—in a society that definitely favours people who have children.” Subsequently, she has lost many of her friends who have children, for various reasons, leaving her feeling alone:

[A] lot of my friends who do [have children], I’ve kind of, sadly, lost along the way.

‘Cause of one reason or another I’ve just not been able to cope with it, so I’ve sort of, we’ve gone our separate ways.

Sam also spoke about the loss of a good friend who became pregnant and had a child around the time that she had a miscarriage, after becoming pregnant through IVF in her early forties:

Oh, it’s sad really...one of my...really good friends...happened to get pregnant, uh, around the same time that I was, but then of course hers was a natural- I think she was, like, in her thirties. She was younger, anyway, and hers carried on and she was trying to be supportive, but I just totally cut her off and I’ve never made contact with her...but I just couldn’t. I couldn’t bear it, you know? I just knew I couldn’t be around, you know, her having her- I’m having the complete opposite, um, so yeah.

To clarify, when she says, “having the complete opposite,” Sam is referring to the miscarriage she suffered while her friend’s pregnancy went to full term without complications.

Similar to Sam, Sue has also lost friends due to her childlessness, having experienced blatant exclusion by her friend group near the beginning of her infertility journey:

I do remember being told one time that I hadn’t been invited to...a christening because I was ‘brittle’ and they didn’t want me ruining the christening, and I thought ‘brittle’ was a very interesting word to use because...actually, I can see why you might use that term.

Um, so I don’t have any contact at all with any of those. Um, I sort of made a conscious decision later to just stop...because I didn’t think they were good friends to me at the

time. Um, and you know, again, you can look at it whichever way you want to. You know, I probably didn't understand the difficulties they were having at the time. Um, they certainly didn't understand the difficulties I was having.

Isolation from friends by way of not being invited to certain events is a common issue among involuntarily childless people (Darroux, 2022; Gilbert & McGuire, 1998). Conversely, many childless women distance themselves from their friends with children by choosing not to attend events they've been invited to, such as baby showers and children's Birthday parties (Darroux, 2022; Loftus & Namaste, 2011; Miall, 1986).

During our interviews, Sue often described herself as being "quite far along" in her childless grief journey, to the point where she is now able to enjoy her life without children. In speaking with her, as well as in the process of analyzing the transcripts from our interviews, I found her ability to reflect upon the experiences she has had with her friends interesting and enlightening. Sue's perceived position within her grief journey is relevant to the ways in which she engages with the CNBC community, which will be discussed in more depth in further chapters of this dissertation.

Sara, too, lost friendships through her journey with infertility, reproductive illness, failed adoption, and subsequent childlessness:

I've ended a lot of friendships along the way because of [involuntary childlessness]. I mean, it's not necessarily because of that. It's because of what being involuntarily childless does to you in terms of your mental wellbeing and just in terms of everything, like, your awareness and things that you've been through and people not understanding and, you know, so it's not even that some of those friends are mothers, because they're not. It's just that level of understanding of what we find when we can actually say, you

know what? We're childless but actually we're childless not by choice and there's a difference, I find.

The difference that Sara points out here is between those who are childless not by choice, and those who are childfree, having made a conscious decision to not have children. She spoke of ultimately having very few friends with whom she could speak about her circumstance.

It was interesting to hear Sara speak about a lack of understanding from women who do not have children, particularly as my own assumption, before our conversation, was that women who do not have children might be better able to empathize with the childless experience than those who do. After our first interview, however, I did have a greater awareness of this issue when engaging with facebook groups specifically for people who do not have children.

There is a dearth of literature that examines the social interactions between women who identify as CNBC and those who identify as childfree. Since completing my first phase of data collection, however, I have witnessed, firsthand, a great deal of animosity between these two groups of women through 'private' facebook groups, as well as directed at me through comments on people's posts centered around childlessness, the childfree experience, parents, and children. Sara's experience with her childless/childfree friends, and my subsequent observations on social media, have given me cause to reflect upon and critique my previous assumptions about empathy among childless/childfree friends, and I perceive this as a potentially important area for further research.

The most subtle experience with the loss of friendships in relation to infertility and childlessness that was discussed during interviews with participants was that of Nicola. She discussed the impact of her involuntary childless status on her friendships as difficult to pinpoint:

I guess because we've moved about so much, friendships have got a bit splintered and most of my friends are people who are clergy or don't have children or who are infertile. Um, so yeah, there are people who I probably would have spent more- well, I know I would have spent much more time with and got to know better...because they had children and we kind of drifted and I guess it's less obvious because of moving.

For Nicola, the experience of 'drifting' away from particular friendships was related to a feeling of isolation she alluded to as not having "a way in" to relationships with friends who have children.

Feelings of isolation among friends may be navigated in such a way that friendships can be maintained, although in ways that differ from the original relationship, through making conscious decisions to adapt the ways in which they interact with their friends. For example, Emma discussed seeking support from her friends during the second round of fertility treatments she and her husband underwent, but finding her interactions on the topic difficult, because of a lack of understanding from her friends who have children, leaving her feeling alone in her experience. Ultimately, Emma has made a conscious decision to approach her friendships differently:

Yeah, I would say, to a certain extent, I think I've had to lower my expectations, if that's the right word, on what I talk to them about, to girlfriends, um, 'cause there are times when I've been disappointed, in terms of how they've responded, that kind of thing, sort of the whole toxic positivity thing and some of the little comments and things. So, I think I've just sort of decided to not talk to them about that stuff and just accept that they are- I don't want to lose them as friends, but they're just probably never going to understand this part of me, um, and yeah, that's okay.

By lowering her expectations and avoiding the subject of her childlessness, Emma employs what Goffman (1963) terms ‘covering,’ whereby a stigmatized individual will “make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large. The individual’s object is to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier for himself [*sic*] and the others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma” (p. 102). In their study examining issues of emotion work when managing a disrupted life course, Exley and Letherby (2001) found that many of their respondents worked to “cover” their stigma, “whereby individuals who are both aware of their stigma (stranger status) and prepared to accept it still make a great effort to prevent the stigma from taking over, by reducing any tension and thus enabling normal interaction to continue” (p. 126). Based on Emma’s response, I perceive her to have navigated her feelings of isolation from her friends through making conscious decisions about how she interacts with them.

### ***Isolation from Broader Communities***

While not all eleven women I spoke with discussed feelings of isolation specifically from within their friend groups, five of them did speak about feeling isolated from people they have been acquainted with more generally in their broader communities. The perceived causes of this isolation ranged from others’ reactions to chronic pain due to reproductive illness, conversational awkwardness with members of community groups, self-perceptions of worthlessness due to not having children, and the anticipation of feeling left out among people in general.

In our third interview, Lu spoke about the difficulties of going out in public caused by the chronic pain she suffers due to her endometriosis. She discussed the anxiety she experiences when having to leave her house. Her levels of pain fluctuate to such an extent throughout the day that she can be brought to a point of screaming out in pain, needing to sit or lie down suddenly, and/or having uncontrollable emotional reactions towards others due to the intensity of the pain.

These experiences of pain have led Lu to feel guilt and embarrassment. She described these instances, saying that it is,

just that feeling that you always feel like you're letting people down, you always feel guilty, you always feel embarrassed about it because you think, what if something happens when I'm out, you know?...So, I'd just rather be on my own when I feel like that.

In addition to having to manage her chronic pain and subsequent social withdrawal, Lu also finds conversations among people with children difficult to navigate. In our third interview, she referred to a conversation that she, myself, and three other participants had in one of our focus group interviews about how much of a relief it is to be among other women who are childless not by choice because,

we talk about everything else in the world apart from children, whereas...if you get a group of parents together—I remember you saying—within a half hour they're comparing bedtimes, who's sleeping through, who eats what, and you're like, this is boring me to death! You know? If I start talking about what my cat likes—I don't have a cat, but you know what I mean—everyone would be like, 'alright, but we don't have a cat.' Right, okay, well, I don't have a child, so let's talk about something else...and that's difficult.

I appreciated the sense of humour with which Lu discussed this experience. While the notion of social exclusion alluded to here is not something to laugh at, I found this point of discussion amusing in its relatability. This is because I have often felt similarly about conversations I've



had, with people who have children, about my two pet chickens, Henrietta and Rosie<sup>8</sup>, whom I care for deeply and treat as if they were my children. The point here, though, is that for women who are childless not by choice, conversations with friends who are mothers can feel isolating, despite our best attempts at joining in, and relating to, the discussions. Loftus and Andriot (2012) discuss the notion of “doing gender” in relation to social interactions with communities of women, and the ways in which infertile women struggle to be included within these communities due to their lack of firsthand knowledge of the experience of motherhood:

As adults, women experience many situations in which groups of women gather together and talk about childbirth and parenting. Women in these situations are doing gender by talking about childbirth and parenting. Through these conversations women are building group cohesion and a shared identity as women. These are conversations the infertile women encounter on a regular basis, and cannot participate in because they have not made the life course transition into motherhood. (p. 232)

While the authors speak specifically about women who are medically infertile, the experiences of the women in this study who are childless by circumstance also spoke to their point.

When discussing her participation as a singer in various church and community choirs, Nicola spoke about the feeling of discomfort she had felt when engaging with other choir members, particularly those with children:

I’ve found it hard quite a few times being there with people who I don’t know desperately well...so I’ve had a feeling of feeling left out because other people my age are having children and nobody has said anything or, you know, nothing negative, and yet there’s

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Rosie was killed by a fox on June 16, 2023; a traumatic event that I witnessed as I sat writing this dissertation. R.I.P. my sweet little nugget.

that kind of unspoken, uncomfortable, um, [feeling] about it...I suspect there's a bit of a thing about how do you relate to people you've just met and people talking about their children and so on, and the potential for loads of awkward questions. Yeah, so I guess there's a little element that's protecting myself.

Here, the notion of protection for Nicola relates to her unwillingness to commit to attending rehearsals regularly, due to the discomfort she often feels in the social environment of the choir. In this particular example, Nicola chooses to avoid contact with members of the choir in an attempt to evade awkward questions regarding her childlessness. We see here again a relation to Goffman's (1963) notion of 'covering' as a mechanism for self-protection.

Additionally, I relate Nicola's concerns about awkward questions being asked of her to Goffman's (1963) discussion on the issue of managing information through 'disclosure' when stigmatized individuals are engaged in conversations with non-stigmatized others. The author states that

The issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts, but rather that of managing information about his [*sic*] failing. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where. (Goffman, 1963, p. 42)

The choices with which stigmatized individuals are faced when engaging in their various communities are complex. It is no wonder, then, that so many of the women I spoke to in this study chose to avoid social interactions altogether.

In relation to another form of community engagement, Catherine discussed her experience participating in group tennis lessons, after which she and some of the other women in the group would go for coffee together. It was surprising to Catherine that the conversations

during these social interactions would inevitably revolve around the other women's children, given that all of the women "were intelligent, educated women with, you know, good jobs, etc. Presumably a fair amount to say about the world, but it was always about their children." Despite having developed a close friendship with one of the women in the group, these conversations led Catherine to seek out different activities because,

they'd all kind of speak about their children and I just found it really hard, basically.

Really, really hard...So I suppose I just wanted to do more activities where you don't have to have that reminder. So, the reminder, the silence, because they know because I don't mention children, sort of, um, maybe I kind of think they look down on me.

As can be observed here, the themes of silence and shame that came through in my analysis of the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork, in addition to the theme of isolation, also arose in Catherine's discussion of this social experience.

Similar to Catherine's perception of being looked down on for not having children, in our third interview, Anna discussed her experience singing for many years with a community choir, and her reason for eventually ending her membership with them. While she stated that she left the choir in part because she had moved and the commute to rehearsals felt too far for her, she spoke of another reason for no longer participating:

I'd been increasingly feeling like I didn't have much in common with the women there.

Um, there were men too, but, and quite a lot of the men didn't have children, for various reasons, but that didn't seem to- it was always the fact that the women had children and I felt very much like an outsider when having conversations.

Anna also spoke about the feeling of being an outsider more broadly, in relation to the shame she feels about her childlessness, which I will discuss later.

Moving away from specific social interactions that have taken place for the women I worked with in this study, three participants spoke more broadly about feeling left out. In a discussion I had with Nicola about the impact of engaging with the CNBC community, she spoke about the ways in which those experiences differ from engaging with those outside of the CNBC community. She mentioned specifically that engaging with the CNBC community gave her “the sense of not feeling alone,” which is the opposite of how she has felt outside of the CNBC community. As we discussed the notion of isolation from the general public, she made a very poignant and profound comment about a conversation she had had with her counsellor in one of her sessions: “I think last week I was thinking and talking a lot about- my line with my counsellor was, ‘how am I gonna feel left out today?’ It’s really exhausting, going into a situation and thinking that.” Her comment stood out to me because it brought to light how prevalent the feeling of social isolation is in Nicola’s daily life.

As mentioned above, Anna also spoke to me about her perception of being an outsider, broadly speaking:

There’s a lot of shame around being childless and a lot of us feel less than, and so even if you’re in a situation outside of our community, where the people are not going to say anything nasty to you, but they usually do, either intentionally or unintentionally, from my experience anyway, you feel less than. You feel ashamed [*becomes visibly upset*]...Yeah, you feel like an outsider. Um, that your view doesn’t count.

Clearly, for Anna, feelings of isolation and shame are closely connected in relation to her social experiences as an involuntarily childless woman.

While Anna feels an ongoing deep sense of grief in her childlessness, as mentioned earlier, Sue discussed feeling that she has moved through her grief. She feels that, although she is

still impacted by her childlessness, she has arrived at a place in her life where she no longer feels her childlessness as a shameful status. When asked in our first interview about what the word community means to her, Sue discussed the meaning from the perspectives of both her past and present selves:

Yeah, again, if you'd asked me a few years ago it probably wasn't something that I'd wanted to be involved with. Um, and I wonder if part of that would have been because, um, I would have felt that people would not have wanted that involvement with me, not have wanted me to be part of their community. Um, I don't feel it now...But again, if you'd asked me five years ago, I probably wouldn't have wanted to be part of the community. But you know, the why's and when's come back to my own, um, back to the worthlessness thing isn't it? Feeling that nobody would want me to be part of their community I think really.

The feeling of worthlessness that Sue discusses here was rooted in her status as a childless woman, and the impact of that status on her social life. She felt that others would not want to be associated with her not only because she did not have children, but also because of how not having children impacted her personally, emotionally, and psychologically—who she became through her experience of infertility and subsequent childlessness. The literature on infertility and childlessness speaks at length about the impact of these experiences on women's sense of self-worth (Galhardo et al., 2011; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Hill, 2014; Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Petropanagos, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2016; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995). Given the elevated social status bestowed upon women who have children, and the pervasiveness of evidence of this within dominant, pronatalist social discourse, those without children are very often made to feel excluded, less than, and worthless. Trevarthen (2002) states that “social alienation can diminish a

sense of self-worth” (p. 32). The exclusion experienced by many of the women I worked with in this study speaks to the ways in which they have been made to feel ashamed of their childless status, thus diminishing their sense of worth.

### *Changing Landscape*

While many women who are involuntarily childless may feel excluded and isolated by their circumstances, Helen discussed with me her perception of the ways in which the topics of infertility and childlessness have become more visible since she first experienced them in the 1980s. Based on her active participation and activist efforts within the CNBC community, she perceives the social landscape to be changing for the better:

I think isolation is gonna disappear. I think we're the last of the isolated, you know? But living your adult life in secrecy and shame, I think is a word that seems to be getting less. Because of isolation, shame was massive, and I think that's something that will be lost in my generation. Don't get me wrong, I think shame still exists. I'm not saying it doesn't exist. I know it still does in another format, but that level of not being able to connect with anyone back then.

Here, Helen refers to the changes she has witnessed through social media, as well as during in-person events she has attended, hosted through Gateway Women and other CNBC social groups. Her perception is that, due to the growing number of online social platforms facilitating open discussions around the topics of infertility and childlessness, women experiencing these phenomena are less likely to feel isolated than women going through similar experiences before the era of social media.

In relation to the changes in perceptions of the experience of infertility specifically, Letherby (2002) discusses the importance of acknowledging the potential impact of the

“historical period in which individuals experience fertility problems” (p. 15). The author relates this to “the development of technological ‘cures’ [fertility treatments]” (Letherby, 2002, p. 15). In the nineteen-eighties, when Helen was first dealing with her fertility issues, technological advances in reproductive healthcare, such as treatments for infertility, were still in the beginning stages, and those dealing with infertility did not have easy access to care and support. In more recent times, medical care and social support for infertility has become more widely accessible for many (though not all), particularly in western societies. I do not feel that this is the case for those who are childless by circumstances other than medical infertility, however. The discussions I had with the women participating in this study, and my subsequent analysis of those interviews, highlights the isolating impact of childlessness that contributes to the stigma felt by those experiencing it. While social media provides many involuntarily childless women with a platform to connect virtually with other women sharing similar circumstances, they do so in ‘private’ facebook groups and other closed membership-based social platforms to which people outside of the CNBC community have little-to-no access. Additionally, although there are spaces facilitated online for women who are CNBC, in-person social interactions with those outside of the CNBC community continue to be awkward, difficult, and exclusionary. A contributing factor to the isolation felt by involuntarily childless women is the silence that surrounds the topic, which I will now discuss.

### **The Silencing and Disenfranchising Impact of Involuntary Childlessness**

Silence plays a key role in Doka’s (1989, 2002) concept of disenfranchised grief, which situates a loss as unacknowledged and invalid. The complexity of involuntary childlessness positions the loss felt by those experiencing it as ‘unusual.’ Kuhn (2002) states that, “when a loss is unusual...those who are grieving...often feel awkward about expressing their feelings for fear

that others will not understand. This hesitancy to express grief can lead to silence” (p. 119). Regarding the losses involved with involuntary childlessness, silence may be enacted on the part of the other during social interactions, or by the individual suffering the loss. Darroux (2022) discusses “a code of silence” (p. 54) that is embedded in social discourse around childlessness. She equates this silence to people outside of the CNBC community not knowing how to respond to a childless woman’s grief, stating that, “sometimes, when people do not know how to respond to a sensitive situation, they tend to remain silent for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing” (p. 54). This speaks to what I perceive as a lack of effort to educate oneself about the experience of involuntary childlessness, as a means to develop empathy. Whiteford and Gonzales (1995) speak of a “secrecy” (p. 30) that surrounds reproductive behaviours and bleeds into discourse surrounding infertility specifically. The discussions I had with the women in this study, however, also point to the notion of secrecy in relation to being childless by circumstance.

Seven of the women I interviewed spoke of the silencing impact of their childlessness in a direct way, whereby they discussed the notion of silencing as something they perceived as related to their childlessness. For many of the women I spoke with, the notion of silencing was experienced as something enacted by others through social interactions with co-workers, family members, friends, and members of broader communities with which they engage, such as during public events and in retail environments. During the analysis of interview transcripts, key words and phrases repeatedly emerged, such as “silence,” “no response,” and “unspoken.” For some of the women I spoke with, however, the notion of *self*-silencing came up during my analysis of the interview transcriptions, whereby they made a conscious decision to not speak about their childlessness or the ways in which they came to be childless. In relation to self-silencing, key terms that came up repeatedly in our interviews were “didn’t want to share” and



“couldn’t/didn’t/can’t/won’t talk about.” Ceballo et al. (2015) discuss the choice to not speak about these experiences in relation to feelings of futility, whereby others are perceived as neither able to change the circumstances nor understand the experiences of childless/infertile women.

### ***Silencing at Work***

Four of the women I spoke to during my fieldwork discussed experiences they have had in the workplace that point to the notion of silencing. As mentioned previously, Catherine had experienced a sense of silence and “alienation” during casual group conversations with her work colleagues that, inevitably, revolved around their children. She found these situations “shocking,” given that the women in question are all psychologists who, according to Catherine, are “supposed to be empathetic, and they are empathetic, but when it comes to this...they’re not.” Additionally, she described one particular incident, with a support staff member from one of the schools she works with, where a casual conversation came to an abrupt halt due to the revelation of her status as a childless woman:

one time this woman asked me...about children—we were kind of walking up the stairs on the way to a meeting and she asked me about her own child’s holiday or whatever it was—and then she just casually mentioned “have you got children?” and I think I said “no, unfortunately” and there was no sort of response to that...that’s an issue. I find it difficult.

It is possible that the lack of response to Catherine’s status as an involuntarily childless woman, and the subsequent halt to any further conversation, may be related to what Darroux (2022) discusses as the other’s fear of saying the wrong thing.

Anna, who works in education as well, as a primary school teacher, also discussed with me the difficulties she has had interacting socially with her work colleagues, in relation to feeling

as though she is unable to express her views freely about several topics. Using the example of a forty-five-year-old female character on a television show becoming pregnant, she spoke about how difficult it was that she had a different perception of this event than her co-workers with children. While she had been upset by the episode, her co-workers spoke excitedly about it in a celebratory manner, and she felt unable to express her feelings about it:

it's so trivial on one hand, but on the other hand it's so massive because I wouldn't be able to go into work and say that. It's just a trivial comment, but I cannot say that to anybody in my normal life, whereas they come into work and say "oh, I just saw a brilliant program last night, this woman had a baby! She was 45!"...They can go on and on and on about it! But I can't say anything. And I think that's, I think that's what it is, that they- their lives are normal. They can talk- they talk about their children 'til the cows come home, but I can't mention my childlessness.

Anna's perception of not being able to speak freely with her colleagues about her status as an involuntarily childless woman, or to discuss topics through the lens of her childlessness, is also related to her experiences addressing concerns she has for her students. She stated in one of our interviews, for example, that,

sometimes I'm not listened to when I say I've got worries about a child and, you know, I talk about how the parents, uh, treat the child and I'm laughed at because it's like, you know, "what do you know about it?" I know quite a lot about it, thanks.

Letherby (2002) addresses this issue when she discusses the "stereotypically constructed image of nonmothers" as having no time for, or access to, children and, thus, "no knowledge or understanding of children" (p. 13). These two examples provide a snapshot of Anna's experiences of silencing in the workplace from both a social and professional perspective.

Differing from Catherine and Anna's experiences of perceived silencing by co-workers, Tracey has engaged in self-silencing regarding her childlessness, in relation to the fertility treatment processes she went through:

I told my boss that I was going through IVF but I didn't really share it with anybody else at work. So, I felt a bit, um, like obviously I used to have to go and have appointments, you know, and obviously staff would be, "oh, where are you off to?" you know, and I didn't really want to share that information with them, so that felt rather awkward.

The sense of awkwardness derived from her choice to not share information with her co-workers about her treatments is common to many women who experience infertility, as it is a subject which, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, is often considered taboo.

Interestingly, within her professional role as a priest, Nicola grapples with self-silencing as a form of self-preservation, as well as an attempt to facilitate open and comfortable communication with her parishioners:

I need to be careful about not telling other people too much, 'cause I don't quite know how they're gonna react... There's an odd thing about being in this role, where I don't wanna put people in a situation where they feel like they've got to support me or not talk about things that I might not be able to deal with. So, if I talk with them about it [her childlessness], I need to also go far enough to say, "it's okay. It's not that you can't talk to me about your children or anything else." So, that requires quite a lot of trust. So, as a rule... I don't bring it up as a topic, although obviously it's fairly obvious in lots of ways.

Kuhn (2002) and Darroux (2022) discuss the silencing impact of disenfranchised grief within the church from the perspective of the parishioners. According to Kuhn (2002), religious communities are historically constructed as comforting to those experiencing loss and grief but

are often experienced as uncomfortable when a loss is considered unusual. The author states that “if the loss does not fit the common experience of the religious community, the individual griever often self-imposes a silence to hide any personal discomfort... This silence is then reinforced by a communal silence” (Kuhn, 2002, p. 123). Similarly, Darroux (2022) discusses the ways in which a lack of clergy’s understanding of the loss and grief experienced by an involuntarily childless parishioner can impede the relationship between she and her church leader. Consequently, many involuntarily childless parishioners “encounter silence and even dismissal” (Darroux, 2020, p. 58). Nicola’s circumstance is unique in that she is an involuntarily childless church leader. The line that Nicola walks every day within her professional role, between protecting herself and protecting those she serves in a spiritual capacity, is precarious, as she is required to navigate her position within the church community with care not only for her parishioners, but also with her own emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing in mind.

### ***Familial Silence***

As discussed in chapter one, involuntary childlessness is a complex phenomenon in that people come to the point of not having children through a variety of experiences. For Sara, the journey to childlessness included having an abortion while in a past abusive relationship, followed by a debilitating reproductive illness (adenomyosis), unsuccessful fertility treatments and, finally, a failed adoption process. Abortion is discussed by Peppers (1989) as a potentially stigmatizing experience. The author states that,

If a woman perceives herself as stigmatized because of her pregnancy and abortion, she might understandably isolate herself from established support systems. She may impose

upon herself, or find imposed upon her, closed communication channels. Her decision will be made alone and her grief will be experienced alone. (Peppers, 1989, p. 143)

In relation to Sara's adoption journey, there is a dearth of literature on the impact of failed adoption processes on individuals seeking to adopt (Craven & Peel, 2017), which I deem to be a form of silencing in itself for those grieving this form of loss. Along this journey, Sara sought support from her parents by choosing to share much of her experience with them through open dialogue. Unfortunately, rather than support, Sara has faced silence from her parents regarding her situation. When asked whether her parents have spoken to her at all about her childlessness, Sara responded,

So, my mum knew about the abortion, not my dad. She knew about the guy and the abuse and all of that. Um, they've known about the adoption, that it didn't work out, and they've known about my health stuff. So, they knew that we wanted children. They don't really talk about it a lot, or at all, I should say. Um, but yeah, I don't know what they say to their friends or anything. I guess they say it didn't happen and, you know, what are you gonna do? It didn't happen, so, yeah.

In addition to the silence between herself and her parents, Sara also spoke during our interviews about the air of silence and secrecy with which her childlessness is shrouded among her large extended family, with whom she has a complicated and complex relationship.

Similarly, Nicola's parents also do not speak with her about her childlessness or her fertility treatment journey, despite having played a significant role in it through financial support:

So, they were very, very, very generous and paid for quite a lot of our treatment but didn't wanna talk about it, couldn't talk about it. Just couldn't. It was just like, can't go

there. Um, I tried, and then quickly realized that I wasn't gonna expend that energy. So, that's a bit weird. Well, it's more than a bit weird.

Nicola's statement speaks to the complicated nature of silence in that, despite full knowledge and, presumably, an in-depth understanding of her infertility journey and subsequent childlessness, her parents still refused to offer emotional support to their daughter through open communication about her experience. Kauffman (2002) states that, "Disenfranchisement may damage the safety and security of attachment bonds" (p. 69). The silence that Nicola experienced from her parents, as well as a sense of them having control over her health outcomes because of their financial role, placed a strain on their relationship.

### *Silencing in Friendships*

Because this study involved working with members of a previously established group of involuntarily childless women, those who chose to work with me were already engaging with the childless-not-by-choice community through, at minimum, the Childless Voices Choir. This meant that, at least socially, all of them had come into contact with other childless women by the time I began my fieldwork. This is not to say, however, that they all considered themselves to have *friends* in the CNBC community, although some of the women I spoke to did. Interestingly, these women experienced silence within and between those relationships as well. Others spoke to me of the silence surrounding their childlessness in pre-established friendships outside of the CNBC community.

Anna, whose musical experience includes over two decades of singing in community choral contexts, spoke to me about her experience in one of the choirs she sang in, with a friend whom she had known for a long time and considered herself to be fairly close to. Despite their

long-time friendship and their recent discussions about his sexuality, silence still pervaded the subject of her childlessness:

I've been involved with choirs and sort of musical societies for just over twenty years.

Um, but I found it to be very family orientated, which is weird because a lot of gay men [LAUGHS]. Um, but I guess I don't really talk about stuff with them, so I've, you know I've never, I mean I have one friend who's just come out as gay. I had no idea. Nobody had any idea. He's kept it very, very secret, and I've had lots of deep conversations with him, and I probably still could, but I haven't talked about being childless.

In addition to the silence within this long-time friendship, Anna also discussed her inability to speak with other friends outside of the CNBC community about her childlessness and the impact that it had on her mental health:

I went through a breakdown and, although people knew that I was depressed and there was the typical diaspora of reactions, from people who completely understood, to people who thought I should just pull myself together, um, but I could never tell them exactly what it was that I was depressed about 'cause I didn't think they would get it. And so, there was a long time when I was ill and I just couldn't talk to them about it.

Despite the magnitude of the impact her childlessness has had on her mental health and wellbeing, Anna has not been able to break through the silence and secrecy with which she protects herself among her friends outside of the CNBC community.

Sara spoke at length about her experience of silencing within her friendships during our interviews. She, too, has struggled to speak about her experience of childlessness with friends outside of the CNBC community. There are, however, a few people whom she has trusted with select parts of her story over the years, particularly if she had knowledge of shared experiences,

such as the abortion. On this topic, she said that she is more likely to speak about it if she knows that someone has had a similar experience. Goffman (1963) discusses the notions of disclosure and group formation between individuals who share a stigma, stating that,

Knowing from their own experience what it is like to have this particular stigma, some of them can provide the individual with...a circle of lament to which he [*sic*] can withdraw for moral support and for the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person. (p. 20)

Sara discussed a variety of reasons for not speaking about her experiences with those who have no knowledge or similar experience of the stigma, including expectation and fear of judgement, protection of self, and lack of understanding of her experience from an outside perspective:

So, you know, it's just that kind of level of judgement that I've experienced which made I guess the isolation- and also the advice, because I know that if I had said to some of my friends about what [Husband] and I were going through it would have been "try this, try that." It would have been all of those comments that we talk about all the time [in the CNBC community] which would have been super unhelpful, and I just didn't wanna go there. So, I just didn't talk about it. I guess it's the protection, right? And just not

bothering because you know what people are gonna say. Why bother? Just...why bother?

She also spoke about the isolation she experienced that was brought on by the silence around her fertility journey:

Like, even during my grief and during the years I had felt isolated, and what I didn't realize—which came to me just now—is I didn't realize that I had felt isolated also in friendships before. Like, the unspoken things, you know? Because I've been trying for



kids for ages and, you know, but it was so unspoken with everything. And actually, that to me, now, when I look back, that was isolating. Like, I could never be myself, right? And I could never actually tell people that we want children or we're trying. It was just all- everything was so hidden.

Because of my pre-conceived assumptions surrounding social interactions between childless women and those outside of the CNBC community, I was not surprised that Sara had struggled to discuss her fertility journey and subsequent childlessness with her friends who have children or are childfree by choice. What I did not expect, however, was to hear that she had also experienced silence around the topic of childlessness among her friends who are childless *not* by choice:

[M]y one friend, like, I think she's also involuntarily childless and I'm pretty sure she would have loved a family...but she never talks about it and she knows I'm part of Gateway. I talk about it...but she doesn't talk about it. It's like, I don't wanna, because she might still be in her pre-grief or grief or not realizing. I don't necessarily wanna bring it up too much as well because it can impact on her, 'cause I don't know what she's going through, but she won't- so that's difficult. I do find that friendship really difficult actually, as well, for the last few years, because it's like, this is something that I need to talk about.

Before hearing about Sara's experience with this friend, I had not considered the possibility of silencing within the CNBC community. However, this issue also came up in my discussion with Catherine. She was equally surprised by an experience she had within a CNBC group she engaged with regularly:

Catherine: I do think there is a sort of silence—as I’m just speaking to you I’m thinking about it—that comes up, you know, even within, even in the conversations with each other there are people, like for example one- I do have a couple of good friends that I’ve made actually, to be fair, in the...group, um, and one of them she- I, um, shared something on, um, facebook about, um, grief around childlessness, unrecognized grief, or whatever it’s called-

Laura: Disenfranchised grief?

Catherine: Yeah...maybe it was that. Anyway, so, um, she sent me a WhatsApp message saying “thank you for posting that” ‘cause she obviously wasn’t able to, um, comment on it on facebook. Um, and then also as I said within that WhatsApp group a sort of silence around, even with each other around, maybe it’s not silence- maybe there is a certain amount of silence but an internal silence, you know? A kind of avoidance, I feel, of feelings. Talking about feelings.

Catherine’s perception of her friends’ silence and avoidance of talking about their childless experiences brought to light a perspective on the silencing nature of childlessness among friend groups both within and outside of the CNBC community that I had not previously considered. The notion of disenfranchised grief among and between similarly stigmatized individuals is an area of research that would benefit from greater attention, as I have been unsuccessful in discovering any thus far.

### ***Silencing in Broader Communities***

As this section shows, the theme of silence and silencing in relation to childlessness came up multiple times, with many of the women I interviewed. Not only did these women feel silenced by others, but they also practiced self-silencing as a form of protection of the self. While

many of the examples of silencing discussed during these interviews took place within closely related communities, there were also a number of examples spoken about in more general terms.

Helen, whose infertility journey began as a teenager in the 1980s, spoke at length about how difficult her experience was for most of her adult life due to a lack of public discussion and representation surrounding the experiences of infertility and childlessness:

People didn't really talk about these things back then. No one talked about anything like this. Um, we didn't even have Oprah. That just goes to show you. It was pre-Oprah [LAUGHS]...No other adults I knew, knew what to say. No one said anything. There was no books, there was no nothing, there was no anything. You couldn't go into a bookshop and think, "oh, I know, I'll just look for a book about childlessness"...I can remember going into a bookshop, um, and looking in self-help books and, um, nothing was ever mentioned.

Similar to Helen's experience, I remember going into a large Canadian bookstore to look for books on childlessness after my final unsuccessful round of fertility treatments and asking a sales associate where I might find them. They had no knowledge of any books on the subject, but directed me to the self-help section, where I found one book titled, *When You're Not Expecting: An infertility survival guide* (Hoenk Shapiro, 2010). I distinctly remember becoming visibly upset that I could not find more books that might be helpful to me at a time when I was desperate to gain a more varied perspective and in-depth understanding of the experience.

In our first interview, Nicola spoke about a traumatic event that she experienced only a few months after her final unsuccessful attempt to conceive through IVF. She was attending an event where a terrorist attack took place and two people were stabbed to death within close physical proximity to her. The event was widely publicized and she had a number of

conversations about what happened with a variety of people in her familial, work, and friendship communities. Based on her experiences of silencing between herself and her parents, as well as through the church, Nicola made an interesting comparison regarding the differing levels of social acceptability of discussing terrorism versus infertility and childlessness that I found quite poignant:

So, I think a terrorist attack, at some level, unless people really don't want to, everyone can relate to it. It's very visceral, it's very- everyone understands knife, person, blood, death. It's really obvious. It's really clear and obvious why it's scary. Um, yeah, and everybody hears about it and, yeah, everybody gets it...[S]o, there's the very obvious terrorism thing and there's the huge hiddenness, secrecy, shame of infertility and involuntary childlessness and the fact that people just don't recognize- and if you try, some people will get it but you're probably gonna get people misunderstanding and say things that are deeply hurtful, so it's almost like, am I gonna try?

The comparison that Nicola makes here speaks to her perceptions of grieving two forms of personal trauma: the invasive procedures she underwent to try and conceive a child (IVF) and her close encounter with a potential violent death shortly after walking away from fertility treatments. Due to people's lack of acknowledgement and understanding of her infertility journey, but willingness to openly acknowledge and empathize with the terrorist attack experience, Nicola's childless grief was overshadowed and effectively disenfranchised.

The misunderstanding and hurtful comments that Nicola spoke of here also came up as a common theme among the other women I interviewed. Jody Day (2013) has used the term 'jellyfish' to describe the hurtful comments that many involuntarily childless women receive from a number of individuals, including family members, friends, acquaintances, work

colleagues, and strangers. This term was ‘borrowed’ from the movie, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Maguire, 2001), wherein the single and childless main character, Bridget, often received comments from family, friends, and strangers, that came seemingly out of nowhere and ‘stung’ like jellyfish. It’s an analogy that I have often heard used when engaging with the CNBC community. These ‘jellyfish’ usually incite shock and silence from the receiver.

When Anna recognized that her depression was directly linked to her childlessness, she sought help through a counsellor in hopes that she could work through her grief:

I got to the point where it’s like, yeah, I’m never gonna have children, and it was only then that I suddenly thought, oh my God, all this time it’s been about my childlessness. So, I did kind of broach it with a counsellor. Um, I broached it first of all with a CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] counsellor and he just [LAUGHS]- he related it, he just said, “Oh, it’s just like, oh I see people who expected to go into the same job as their job and then they didn’t. It’s just like that.” So that put me off speaking to anybody about it.

Unfortunately, Anna’s negative experience with this mental health professional’s blatant lack of knowledge and understanding of the experience of involuntary childlessness, as made obvious through his failed attempt at analogy, could be considered a major setback in her grief healing process, due to the shame that already surrounded her childlessness.

### **Involuntary Childlessness and Shame**

Shame is discussed in the literature as a concept associated with negative feelings towards oneself, attributed to failure in relation to standards constructed by the self and/or others (Lewis, 1998). When one feels a sense of shame, she may perceive herself as “devalued, disgraced, demoted, and dishonoured” (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998, p. 111). According to Gilbert (1998),

Shame is related to the belief that we cannot create positive images in the eyes of others; we will not be chosen, will be found lacking in talent, ability, appearance, and so forth; we will be passed over, ignored, or actively rejected...More negatively, we may even be an *object* of scorn, contempt, or ridicule to others. We have been disgraced; judged and found wanting in some way. (p. 17, emphasis in original)

For involuntarily childless women, shame is often related to the perception of a “failed life course transition” (Loftus & Andriot, 2012, p. 227). We have been conditioned by gendered social discourse to believe that there are ‘logical’ steps we must take into adulthood that include having children, and our failure to accomplish these steps makes us feel inadequate and ashamed (Miall, 1986). The social stigma that surrounds involuntary childlessness contributes to the shame we feel as childless women through the isolating and silencing impact of disenfranchised grief (Attig, 2004; Kauffman, 2002).

During analysis of the interviews with the eleven participants in this study, the theme of shame emerged multiple times from the discussions regarding their childless experience. The words and phrases related to shame used by the women I spoke with, when describing their experiences and feelings about involuntary childlessness, included, but were not limited to: “shame,” “failure,” “feeling awful,” “guilt,” and the notions of ‘the infantilizing of childless women’ and ‘not living up to societal expectations.’ Often, the shame that participants felt about their status as childless women was induced through direct social interactions with those outside of the CNBC community. Interestingly, however, one woman spoke of people *within* the community who cast shame upon those who struggle to come to terms with their childless experience. Additionally, many of the women I spoke with had experienced feelings of shame in a broader sense, through their exposure to pronatalist discourse embedded in multiple forms of

media and societal ideologies. These women were labelled, whether directly or indirectly, as socially deviant, lacking in some way, and/or undesirable, and made to feel ashamed of their childless status.

### ***Familial Shame***

The theme of shame arose from my discussions with nine of the eleven women I interviewed, when speaking about direct interactions they had with family, friends, and other people they were acquainted with in their broader communities of engagement. Helen discussed the notion of infantilizing childless women, when she spoke about her perceptions of her family's feelings towards her:

So, like, when I was a teenager, I didn't get on with my parents at all. I was quite a rebel child and they were quite controlling. And I feel that because- if I'd had children, I could have moved on from that, but I feel that our relationship never really moved on from that. They've always seen me as, like, someone who's irresponsible, not to be listened to...I mean, honestly, it's just so, you know, the infantilizing people, you know?

The literature frequently addresses the notion of equating adulthood with motherhood (Day, 2013; Exley & Letherby, 2001; Greil et al., 2011; Letherby, 2002; Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Schur, 1983). Childless women are often labelled "irresponsible" (Day, 2013) and "immature" (Schur, 1983). For Helen, then, family gatherings have always been difficult to navigate, as she perceives her place within the family as less than, due to the way in which her family views her in relation to her childless status: she is seen as less of an adult.

Similar to Helen's experience of the infantilization of childless women by her family, Catherine spoke about her mother's perception of one of her aunts who was childless:

I remember her saying that my aunt wasn't, uh, what was the phrase? It was like she wasn't an adult woman, she wasn't a, yeah, something like that...Um, yeah, that stuck with me, that idea of not being, um, an adult woman.

The notion of childless women not being considered adults due to their lack of children is a troubling theme, considering the responsibilities that the women I worked with, and myself, have in our everyday lives. We have all worked in a professional capacity, some of us have cared for sick loved ones, and we all have financial obligations that we uphold. I find it troubling and difficult to understand what it is about being a mother that makes a woman more of an 'adult,' in the eyes of society.

Family interactions have also been difficult for Lu, through unintentionally hurtful comments made by members of her extended family. One particular experience involved an aunt whose religious beliefs include the notion of punishment as atonement for sins in a past life. In one particular instance, Lu's aunt said to her that, "perhaps...if people are suffering a lot in this life it might mean they did something bad in their past life." Lu stated that she had, in fact, grappled with the notion that her chronic pain and infertility caused by endometriosis might be a form of punishment for something she had done. Upon reflection, however, she struggled to understand how she could "possibly atone for something in a past life that I don't remember and I may not even believe in." Kuhn (2002) discusses interactions such as these, whereby one's grief is disenfranchised within religious communities:

well-intended people, trying to explain a loss to themselves as well as the griever, might suggest that a stronger faith would help the bereaved cope or that God intended to take the loved one or the relationship away in order to teach a lesson or achieve a greater purpose. (p. 125)



The author states that these kinds of comments (such as the one that Lu's aunt made) "assumes that the comforter knows everything there is to know about the griever and about the will of the divine. This drives one who may be hesitant to express grief into further silence—especially if the loss is unusual" (Kuhn, 2002, p. 125).

In relation to feelings of shame, the struggle Sara faces with her family is not so much about things that are being said *to* her about her circumstances, but the possibility of things being said *about* her. Because of the silence that surrounds her childlessness, between her and her family, she often wonders whether her mother, who she describes as having "narcissistic tendencies," speaks about her childless circumstance with members of her extended family. Because her mother speaks freely to her about other family members' circumstances, but does not engage in conversation with Sara about her own, she assumes that her mother speaks with others about her circumstance instead.

Not all of the women I spoke with felt a lack of open communication and support from their families. Emma, for example, stated that her family have been very supportive throughout her and her husband's journey with infertility and childlessness. Despite, or perhaps because of, the comfort they derive from this support, from their parents in particular, there is a "sense of guilt" that they both feel because they have not provided their parents with the experience of grandparenthood. Emma's sister does have children, but lives far away from the rest of the family and, therefore, does not engage with Emma's parents regularly. Additionally, Emma's sister-in-law has also struggled to conceive and retain pregnancies and is now involuntarily childless. These familial circumstances add to the feelings of guilt that Emma and her husband have towards not 'providing' their parents with the grandchildren that they desire.

Tracey also expressed similar feelings to Emma, in relation to a sense of guilt towards her parents for not providing them with the experience of grandparenthood. Tracey has maintained open communication with her parents regarding the fertility treatments that she went through to try to conceive, particularly with her mother. In fact, her mother often administered her hormone injections during the IVF treatments. Despite knowing that her mother had a deep awareness and understanding of the lengths Tracey was going to, to try and conceive, in our first interview she stated that, “I felt like a failure. I felt as if I’d let my parents down that I wasn’t able to provide a grandchild for them.” Tracey has a niece, her sister’s daughter, which means that her parents have had the opportunity to experience grandparenthood.

My own experience is akin to that of Emma and Tracey. My parents were aware of the efforts my husband and I made to conceive and we were open with them about the fertility treatments we pursued, although we did not speak about our feelings towards the situation in depth. There were many instances, however, when I felt immense guilt towards my parents for not having children. For me, this was very much related to my gender, as I have two older brothers and am the only daughter. I often felt that my relationship with my mother might be stronger and closer if I had had children. I felt guilty not only for my failure to have children, but also for the fact that she would never get to experience the kind of relationship that I know she wanted to have with me, her only daughter. I know that my mother would have relished being able to support me through pregnancy and childbirth, as well as the raising of my children, and I have felt immense guilt for the loss of that opportunity on her behalf.

Failure to perform the dominant gendered role of Mother impacts multiple relationships and the ways in which childless women identify within those relationships. Loftus and Namaste

(2011) discuss the “tremendous pressure” (p. 44) experienced by women whose potential identity as Mother is felt as tightly interwoven with their identity as Daughter. The authors state that, the connections between being female, a wife, a daughter, and a mother can be incredibly strong for many women. Regardless of which identity is most salient, the fact that they appear to be so inter-connected shows how strong the commitment and thus salience of being a fertile woman can be, even if only in a potential state. (Loftus & Namaste, 2011, p. 45)

The commitment that many involuntarily childless women make to their relationships (i.e., with their parents) requires what Exley and Letherby (2001) discuss as “emotion work” (p. 125). Emotion work may include not speaking about their childlessness, hiding their feelings about their experience, and/or attempting to ‘make up’ for not having children through extra care work, which relates closely to Goffman’s (1963) concept of covering.

In relation to feelings of failure based on the mother-daughter bonding opportunities that are lost due to childlessness, Sue and Anna also spoke about this issue. In our third interview, Sue associated her feelings of failure with the expectations she felt from her mother regarding what a successful life course ‘should’ look like. She had worked through much of her grief through therapy, dealing with her childlessness, the breakdown of her first marriage, and also her complicated relationship with her mother, and felt as though she had come a long way in her healing process:

I would have viewed that, at the time, that I had failed at the idea of children, family, failed at marriage. Um, that would have come very much from family expectations, um, you know, my mother’s sort of expectations of life.

Because of the therapeutic work she has done, she was able to speak about where her feelings of failure came from in the past tense, during our interviews.

The notion of family expectations was also spoken about by Anna, who still feels an immense sense of grief towards her status as a childless woman. Feelings of shame are also heavily intertwined with her childless circumstance:

[S]o, the expectation, again, like with my upbringing, is that you will have children, and if you haven't got children, why haven't you got children? When are you gonna have children?...I just find it very difficult...most people made me feel ashamed and it's just such a big thing, shame, isn't it? So...it's not just feeling your shame that you haven't got children, you then feel ashamed of just existing. Well, I do anyway.

Lewis (1998) describes shame as relating to one's sense of responsibility for failing to meet standards (one's own or other people's), resulting in a belief that "the failure reflects a damaged self" (p. 126). For involuntarily childless women, shame is often linked to the sense of failure to meet societal expectations which—for cis-gendered women in particular—revolve around the role of Mother as their dominant purpose in life. Thus, when the expectation of motherhood is not met, involuntarily childless women are often left feeling as though they have failed not only to have the children they wanted, but to fulfill their perceived life's purpose.

### ***Shame within Friendship Communities***

While shame emerged as a theme through familial relationships for some of the women I spoke with, for others it emerged in relation to their interactions with friends. My initial assumption, when inquiring about the impact of childlessness on social relationships during our interviews, was that friendships outside of the CNBC community would be more difficult to navigate than those built between involuntarily childless women, in relation to support, empathy,

and belonging. My assumption was challenged, however, when one of the participants in this study spoke to me about feeling judged by a friend she had made *within* the CNBC community because of where she was in her grieving process.

Sara's experience of shame within friendships happened with friends who were outside of the CNBC community. She felt she was unable to talk to her friends about her experience in any significant or meaningful depth because she felt criticized and judged by them. She discussed how this led to her ending a number of her pre-existing friendships during and after her journey with infertility, adoption, and subsequent childlessness. Sara spoke about the disappointment she felt regarding her close friends, due to feeling unsupported by their criticisms and judgements of her experiences and situation, stating that, "even though I had close friends, or thought I had close friends, they weren't."

Sara's experience with her friends outside of the CNBC community is not uncommon among other childless women. Catherine also experienced criticism and judgement from friends who have children. She spoke about other women in the CNBC community who have friends with children who express empathy towards their situation, particularly when the experience of involuntary childlessness is discussed among them as a form of awareness raising. When speaking about the notion of support and empathy from friends outside of the CNBC community, Catherine stated that "I don't feel like that, unfortunately, with those who are friends....I feel there is a kind of looking down on you, sort of." Gilbert (1998) describes shame as "an involuntary response to an awareness that one has lost status and is devalued" (p. 30). For Catherine, the feeling of being looked down on by her friends with children may be perceived as a loss of social status among those friends.

Interestingly, Catherine has also felt a sense of being looked down on for her childless grief from *within* the CNBC community. She had an experience with one woman in particular, whom she had met at an event hosted through Gateway Women and stayed in touch with for a while: “I said to her, ‘I still feel bad about it [childlessness]’ and...I know she judged that, yeah...She was like, ‘well, I just decided that, you know, that I just wanted to be happy’.” The feelings of judgement and shame elicited by this comment have been compounded by the way Catherine perceives another of her friends within the CNBC community views women who struggle long term with their childless grief:

I do have another friend that hasn't been able to have children...and I think she feels, she thinks that people who haven't been able to have children and then get over it are amazing and strong people, and people who still feel sad about it...there's something wrong with them.

Goffman (1963) discusses the “sympathetic other” (p. 19) as an individual who shares a common stigma. While the author speaks about group formation among similarly stigmatized individuals as a means of support, he also notes that within these groups there will be individuals of differing status within the group. The experiences that Catherine described here point to a perceived social hierarchy within the community of involuntarily childless women she spoke of. Despite these examples of feeling judged by women within the CNBC community, Catherine said that she feels more comfortable among involuntarily childless people than those with children. She discussed with me her desire to spend more time with women and men who are involuntarily childless, stating that, within this population, “I don't feel odd or shame or less than.”

### *Shame within Broader Communities*

The theme of shame arose not only in relation to direct interactions with friends and family, but also when interacting with people acquainted more loosely with the women I spoke to. Additionally, shame arose as a theme from discussions around dominant discourse in the media, medical fields, and embedded within political ideologies. For some of the women I interviewed, shame arose as something felt more generally through societal expectations framing their everyday lives. While direct negative social interactions within all forms of communities may be difficult to navigate, they are not the most pervasive form of shame-inducing rhetoric in the lives of involuntarily childless women. Loftus and Namaste (2011) speak to this point in their discussion on the experiences of infertile women:

Women with infertility not only have problems with what people say to them, but also have problems just being out in public. Children and pregnant women, constant reminders of their potentially failed status as a biological mother, are everywhere. Even being in their own homes does not keep them safe from these reminders, as images appear in commercials, television shows, and movies that indicate their perceived failure.  
(p. 46)

While the authors speak specifically about infertile women, the experiences of women who are childless by other circumstances are often the same.

Sam's journey to childlessness includes treatment for infertility, as well as failed adoption. The theme of shame arose most prominently from my analysis of her discussions about the failed adoption, which was a complex and challenging process. Sam and her husband experienced a lot of guilt when they made the extremely difficult decision to release their two adoptive daughters back to the foster family from which they came. The year during which the

girls lived with them was incredibly challenging not only for Sam and her husband, but also for the girls, as they were unable to form a close bond due to radical differences in personality and expectations of family life, as well as past traumas the girls had suffered.

It is difficult for anybody outside of Sam's situation to understand or empathize with what she, her husband, and the girls went through, as it is such a complex circumstance. Compounding the lack of empathy and understanding is the dearth of research on the topic of grief in adoption failure and/or social support networks put in place for those experiencing it. When speaking with me about the notion of empathy and support for her situation, Sam stated that, "I think a lot of people don't understand... 'cause I think, obviously, if it doesn't work out, you're almost disgraced." One example of this is when the parent of a child who went to school with the girls sent their child over to Sam's table while having dinner at a local pub, to ask what had happened to the children after they had moved away. Sam was shocked and embarrassed by this experience, stating that she and her husband abruptly left the pub without giving an explanation to the child, saying that the situation made them feel "awful." She explained that, with the failed adoption, they felt a lot of guilt, despite knowing that their decision to give the children back to their foster family was the best decision for the girls, and that, "if you're feeling bad enough about something, you don't need it [judgement] from other people." Sam also spoke about the fact that failed adoption is not an uncommon experience, but that because it happened during the pandemic, it had been even more difficult to find a support network, including from the social workers who handled their case:

It's not as if we're the only people it happens to, but you do feel so bad from the social workers, of course, 'cause it looks bad on them as well...so you're not given any- it's just like, okay, that's it. Cut off.



According to Gilbert and McGuire (1998), “[s]hame motivates desire to escape, conceal, and hide” (p. 111). Sam and her husband moved away from the small village they were living in shortly after the adoption fell through, as they were feeling so much guilt and shame about the situation and finding it difficult to remain living in their small community where so many people were aware of what had happened but did not understand or acknowledge the complexities of the situation.

Lack of understanding of the childless experience is, unfortunately, common among those outside of the CNBC community. All of the women I worked with on this study have experienced a lack of understanding and/or empathy towards their childlessness at some point in their lives, from a variety of people known to them through both personal and professional relationships. With this lack of understanding often comes hurtful comments and/or actions that cause a sense of shame to the women who are subjected to them. One deeply concerning example of hurtful comments from a medical professional was discussed by Helen, whose experience with reproductive health issues began when she was a teenager. At eighteen years old, she decided to seek treatment for her fertility issues, despite being told by her doctors that there was no treatment and “nothing could be done” for her. When she spoke to her doctors about her desire to have children, and her concern that she might not be able to get pregnant, she was made to feel, by the medical professionals, that because she was unmarried and only eighteen, she should not even be bringing up the subject. Helen equates this experience with her doctors to the fact that “being an unmarried woman with a child back then was really frowned upon. It was the eighties.” Unfortunately for Helen, the lack of medical attention and delay of care she received throughout adulthood for her endometriosis, as well as fibroids she developed in her uterus later on, led her to have a hysterectomy in her forties, having not been able to carry

her one pregnancy to term. When discussing her hysterectomy, Helen brought up the negative and hurtful reactions she had experienced from others when telling them about her surgery: “so yeah, after I’d had that done, people were like, ‘oh, how awful for you, losing your femininity like that!’” This kind of comment is evidence of an alarming lack of understanding of gender that is informed by sexist and pronatalist discourses.

Another example of lack of understanding of the childless experience within the medical field was raised by Stephanie who, as mentioned earlier, is a medical doctor herself, working in a family medical practice as a GP. She spoke about her role within the practice as one involving female reproductive healthcare. She works closely with women everyday who come to her for medical help in the form of birth control, pregnancy, afterbirth care, and also reproductive illness and disease, such as ovarian and cervical cancer screening and diagnosis. Shortly after having her radical hysterectomy, Stephanie went back to work, as her ovarian cancer was diagnosed and treated in 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, she was dealing with not only her physical recovery, which did not go well and resulted in multiple surgeries due to complications, but also with the emotional distress of becoming suddenly—and permanently—unable to conceive. Despite the trauma that Stephanie was enduring, she was treated with a complete lack of care and empathy by her colleagues—other doctors—at her practice. One example in particular stood out to me as a stigmatizing and shame-inducing experience, whereby one of Stephanie’s colleagues became angry with her for asking for an accommodation at work due to the emotional struggles she was navigating after her hysterectomy:

[A]t one point, sort of not long after I’d got back, I’d sort of asked the nurses if I could not do the six-week baby checks, um, in a “can I just have a break for a bit?” sort of thing, “can you ask one of the others?” And then I had one of the other partners yelling

“Why won’t she see babies?!” outside my room, and give me a talking-to about it, um, when we met later in the morning. They’d technically had fertility issues when *they* were trying to conceive, yet still said that.

Lewis (1998) speaks about stigmatization as “the marking of a spoiled self” (p. 136) which, particularly when publicly executed, may be “shame-inducing” (p. 128). Stephanie found this exchange shocking and hurtful, but felt unable to speak up for herself because, “it’s not done in medicine!” Most surprising, however, is the fact that a person who had experienced fertility issues would degrade their colleague who is experiencing infertility, particularly in such a public way.

Through some of the interviews I conducted, the theme of shame in relation to childlessness arose when discussing pronatalist discourse embedded within daily life in the media and in the words and actions of the general public. Sam spoke to me about the ways in which she feels ‘society’ puts favour on people who have children. She described being made to feel as though biological mothers hold a position of superiority above women who do not have children, “as if suddenly these women are something, you know, *more* than, because they have children...it’s almost like they’re lifted up in value...because they’ve been able to produce a child.” She feels as though mothers are viewed and described as “softer and kinder” and more empathetic than non-mothers, which comes through in phrases that begin with, ‘as a mother...’ For Sam, the ‘as a mother’ trope implies a lack of understanding by non-mothers, which positions the childless as lacking in empathy and caring capabilities.

Similarly, Lu discussed the pronatalist ideology of biological mothers being placed on a pedestal, thus holding a position of power above those who do not have children. She spoke about this power dynamic as making her, as a childless woman, feel like “a bit of a failure.” Lu

also spoke about the fetishization of the pregnant body in the media, particularly the image of a pregnant woman holding her ‘baby bump,’ which she feels is “where this kind of pure Madonna image” of pregnant women comes from. Gotlib (2016) speaks about the ways in which “broad pronatalist narratives tend to offer the mother as an image of female self-actualization and the fulfillment of an essential, natural role” (p. 330). In contrast to the pure and martyred image of the Mother figure, Lu also discussed the ways in which childless women are portrayed as desperate, obsessive, and evil in the media. She cited episodes of two separate television shows that she had recently watched, wherein childless females were portrayed as antagonistic characters who either attempted to steal people’s children or murdered the parents of children they wished to have as their own.

Sadly, the portrayal of childless female characters as antagonists in television and film is quite common (Disney is renowned for this in the portrayal of the villains Cruella Deville and Ursula, for example) (Abdullah, 2022). It is not very often that relatable female childless characters are depicted in the media and, as Archetti (2019) states, “When images exist...they tend to portray childless women in relation to what they do not have or are not” (p. 178). Additionally, when childless women *are* portrayed through film and/or television, their status as childless is often temporary. ‘Hope tropes’ abound, whereby every childless woman ultimately achieves the fulfillment of her gendered role and has a child. Archetti (2019) speaks about this in relation to film specifically:

Beyond the negative stereotypes, the problems with these representations are that life without children is never an option and that a woman who is not technically barren can always get pregnant, and mostly at first attempt...In fact, childlessness appears as a

‘temporary’ condition until it gets ‘solved’. Childlessness by circumstance does not exist.

Miracle babies are the norm. (p. 186)

During interviews with research participants on reflections about film portrayals of infertility, Archetti (2019) found that some childless individuals were led to believe that getting pregnant through fertility treatments would be easy. Through participant narratives, the author found that “the discrepancy between the high hopes supported by these false impressions and the reality of infertility created even more suffering” (Archetti, 2019, p. 188) for childless individuals.

When discussing damaging pronatalist discourse, Lu also spoke to me about her concern for showing interest in other people’s children, due to the perceived notion of childless women as sad, desperate, and evil kidnappers. Given her past experience as a primary school teacher, and her love of children, Lu’s concerns are particularly unfortunate. When thinking about childless women as antagonists, both fictional and in real life, I’m drawn to Goffman’s (1963) discussion on the use of metaphor and imagery to depict and, thus, label stigmatized individuals as being “deviant, flawed, limited, spoiled, or generally undesirable” (p. 131). In relation to childless women specifically, I am reminded here of terms such as ‘crazy cat lady’ and ‘career woman’ to label childless women in a derogatory fashion that positions them as people to be feared, scorned, stigmatized and, ultimately, pushed to the boundaries, if not outside, of their communities.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have explored and discussed the themes of isolation, silence, and shame that arose from interviews I conducted with eleven women in relation to their childlessness. The purpose of this exploration was to understand, through the lens of Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory and Doka’s (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief, the ways in which these women’s

childless circumstances impacted their social relationships and their positions within familial, workplace, friendship, and broader communities. During the interviews, the women spoke about the ways in which their childlessness impacted multiple forms of social engagement within these communities. According to Delanty (2018), community can be differentiated as a sense of “meaning and solidarity, recognition and collective identities” (p. 4) felt by those within it. My analysis of the narratives presented here depict multiple and varying means of exclusion experienced by the women who spoke with me. These exclusionary experiences point to the notion that these incredibly resilient women lack supportive communities of empathetic and/or similarly circumstanced others due to their stigmatised and disenfranchised positions as involuntarily childless women.

## CHAPTER V

### SINGING IN SOLIDARITY

#### **Introduction**

During analysis of my singing session observations, and the interviews I conducted, there emerged evidence that the social and musical interactions that took place within the Childless Voices Choir singing sessions aided in mitigating the isolation, silence, and shame that participants spoke about in relation to their childless experiences. Through weekly online musical and social engagements, as well as occasional in-person interactions, the women who participated in the singing sessions developed meaningful relationships with each other. Feelings of connectedness and belonging developed, which led to a sense of community among and between the participants. The development of these relationships, as well as their shared singing experiences, instigated a growth in self-confidence through the development of their literal (as in, physiological)—and figurative (as in, metaphorical)—voices, thus lessening the silencing impact of their childless circumstances. Additionally, the sense of shame that many of the women expressed in relation to their childlessness was reduced by the social and musical interactions that took place.

What follows is an exploration of my findings emergent from the singing session observations, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews I conducted during the first phase of my fieldwork (findings from the PAR project will be discussed in chapter six). I begin this chapter by exploring the Childless Voices Choir singing session environment and the role of the facilitator, Helen, from both pedagogical and social perspectives. I do so as a way to describe the setting through which the singers' experiences emerged. Next, I situate myself as researcher/participant within the space so that the reader can better understand my relationship to

the Childless Voices Choir members and environment. Following, I discuss the acts of community building that took place within and between the weekly singing sessions, which aided in mitigating the isolation felt by many of the participants. Next, I explore the ways in which the acts of singing together and socializing worked to mitigate the silencing impact of the women's childless circumstances. Finally, building upon the development of their perceived sense of community and the emergence of their voices, through social and musical interactions, in what was perceived by the singers as a comfortable and liberating musical environment, I discuss the ways in which the women I worked with developed a sense of self-empowerment that worked to mitigate the shame felt through their positions as involuntarily childless women.

In all, I paint a complete picture of the impact of singing in the Childless Voices Choir on the social, personal, and musical lives of the singers and facilitator, in conversation with music education and community music literature. The discussion that follows takes place through the lens of community, solidarity, and empowerment theories, as well as the findings I laid out in chapter four in relation to the isolation, silence, and shame experienced by the women I worked with in this study. I begin this conversation by framing the group singing environment in dialect with the facilitator's pedagogical and social experiences.

### **Setting Up the Childless Voices Choir Environment**

The Childless Voices Choir, based in London, England, experienced their first and only in-person rehearsal in March 2020, just weeks before the UK went into their first government-sanctioned lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The facilitator of this newly formed, non-auditioned singing group for involuntarily childless women, Helen, had planned twelve three-hour monthly sessions to take place on Saturday mornings in London. After only one in-person session, which had fifteen attendees, Helen's plans were drastically changed by the COVID-19



pandemic, and she took the sessions online via Zoom on Saturday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020. One benefit of the online format of the sessions was the fact that the group's membership was no longer restricted to those living in close proximity to London. While a few of the singers who participated in this study live in London, many hail from areas outside of—and far away from—the city. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, due to high demand, Helen added Tuesday evenings to the—now weekly—singing session schedule. Because of the online format of the sessions, Helen had to adapt some—though not all—of her goals for the choir, as well as the session structure. Similarly, adaptations were made by many choral directors/group-singing facilitators during the COVID-19 pandemic (Daffern et al., 2021). According to Daffern et al. (2021), these adaptations required an extensive time commitment that, while greatly appreciated by the members of the singing groups, was usually unpaid, and involved “extensive learning of new skills, and immense energy into the preparation and running of sessions” (p. 13). The same can be said about the efforts made by Helen to move the previously intended in-person sessions to a virtual platform.

When I asked Helen what her original goals were for starting the Childless Voices Choir, she explained,

For people to enjoy themselves musically, to be able to sing together, to get to know each other, to sing songs all the way through, and to have a sense of achievement. I think that achievement is quite important...It's important for anyone, but I think for childless women, given the fact that singing is such a physical thing and we have not been able to do something physically that we wanted to do [have children], I think physical things are important. Also, um, I think it's important to reconnect internally with your body, and singing does that in a way that maybe not everything else does. It physically does. You're physically breathing from your pelvic area, aren't you? You're physically tightening it

and using it and strengthening it and appreciating it...It's like, actually, you know, we've got to take care of ourselves and this is just another way of taking care of ourselves.

Hearing Helen speak about her intentions for starting this singing group, which were rooted in her own experience as an involuntarily childless singer, gave me a deep sense of her caring nature, and the awareness with which she approached her work, in relation to the childless-not-by-choice community. Her extensive experience as both a performer and a pedagogue are deeply entwined with the relationship she has developed with her own body in relation to singing and childlessness. These experiences, as well as her childless circumstance, inform her practice as facilitator of the Childless Voices Choir from both pedagogical and social perspectives. Below, I explore the pedagogical and social environments of the Childless Voices Choir online singing sessions as shaped by Helen, through dialogue with music education and community music literature.

### ***The Pedagogical Environment***

When asked in one of our interviews about her intent for the Childless Voices Choir singing sessions, Helen stated that, “my main aim is to teach vocal techniques, encourage freedom of expression, and empower individuals to be able to sing whole songs, building a repertoire they can discover and experiment with alone, as well as together.” As discussed in chapter two, traditional choral singing environments are fraught with issues of power imbalance (O’Toole, 2005). Likewise, virtual group singing spaces, which differ in many ways from in-person practices, have their own issues of hierarchical imbalance (Daffern et al., 2021). From a pedagogical perspective, the online facilitation of a singing group poses challenges to facilitators and singers alike, due to the nature of virtual musical interactions. One challenge in particular is the notion of ‘gatekeeping’ that arises when facilitators have control over the virtual space by

way of muting participants. Despite the desire of community music facilitators to “eradicate hierarchy,” however, Higgins (2012) states that,

it is in fact essential that demarcations be in place because without them nothing responsible would happen. Community music relationships are therefore unequal, operating within an asymmetrical structure in which the music facilitator and participant are able to share their world as a gift through intersubjective communication. (p. 165)

While communication in the online environment of the Childless Voices singing sessions was often—though not always—controlled by Helen through the mute function on Zoom, singers had the freedom to unmute at will, thus helping to balance the hierarchical nature of Helen’s role as facilitator.

Helen spoke at length about the ways in which she navigated the pedagogical challenges of the online sessions. Given the necessity for muting singers, it was important to Helen to have some understanding of each singer’s musical ability. Thus, before confirming membership, she offered private, one-on-one Zoom meetings with each interested singer; aiming to gauge their level of comfort and ability with their singing voices. As the online sessions progressed, Helen offered all singers an opportunity to unmute and sing whichever song was being worked on that week, if they felt comfortable doing so. This was an attempt to facilitate confidence building among the singers, as well as to give Helen the opportunity to hear how singers’ voices were progressing. In relation to the desire to ‘empower’ singers that Helen noted as an intention for facilitating the singing sessions, the musical development of each singers’ literal (as in, the physiological) voice played a key role in the development of their figurative voices; their ability and desire to speak freely about their experiences as involuntarily childless women. Higgins (2012) discusses the notion of enabling a “sense of ‘voice’” (p. 136) through the provocation of

discourse and stimulation of active participation in community music engagements, which Helen worked to facilitate during every weekly singing session. She employed a flexible approach in her role as facilitator, wherein time was allotted specifically for social engagement at the beginning of every session. Additionally, Helen made it clear to the singers that they were welcome to unmute and speak at any point about relevant musical and non-musical topics as they arose. She also encouraged feedback about the pedagogical aspects of the sessions, with the aim of creating a comfortable learning environment.

I was curious about Helen's perception of her facilitator role in this virtual setting, wherein she was the only person that we could hear singing while we worked through the songs each week. Her self-perception was largely informed by her performance experience:

Well, I feel I'm just one of you...we're just all there together and I'm the one doing most of the talking. That's how I feel. I don't feel like I'm- I mean, I do feel I suppose like I am teaching. I don't know, it's really weird, isn't it? It's really weird, because I've done so much performance and not so much teaching, I feel like it's kind of a gig [LAUGHS]...it's an intimate gig. So, it's like I'm doing it and I'm telling you what I'm doing as I'm doing it, and do it with me. That's how I feel. That's kind of my approach.

Helen's perceptions of herself as facilitator reflect the notion of breaking down and balancing hierarchies within the singing/learning environment that Higgins (2012) speaks of.

A core goal of Helen's for this singing group was to work on singing harmonies. Every week, Helen used YouTube accompaniment tracks to teach a song to the group. She shared her screen and sang along to the accompaniment, stopping to talk about—and model—challenging sections of the songs, including melodic, rhythmic, and textual issues. Singers were encouraged to work through these issues as they sang along. As the sessions progressed, Helen began to also

model harmonies. She frequently checked in with the singers during—and at the end of—each singing session, relying solely on their subjective verbal responses to how they felt they were doing. While this may seem problematic from a pedagogical standpoint, each of the ten singer participants in my study explained in some way, during interviews, that they appreciated being able to speak openly with Helen and the other singers about how they felt they were progressing. This aligns with Daffern et al.'s (2021) findings in relation to varying formats of virtual choirs, wherein the authors discovered that, despite the necessity of participants to be muted while singing together and, thus, hearing only the facilitator's voice, "there is a sense of collective action in knowing everyone else is singing too" (p. 13). I relate the notion of the collective in the authors' discussion to the sense of community that developed within the pedagogical environment facilitated by Helen, which Jorgensen (1995) discusses as "a collective as well as individual process" that "provides a sense of reflective action" (p. 77). Reflective action, here, can be related to the active learning engaged in by the singers in their responses to Helen's questions about their progress.

The act of 'empowering' the women singing in the Childless Voices Choir, which was a foundational intent of the sessions, can also be viewed as a process. McLaughlin (2016) discusses empowerment in relation to power dynamics, whereby empowerment, rather than being viewed as an outcome, should be understood as "a generative process, whereby strategies of empowerment can lead to increased power for all involved" (p. 62). One strategy employed by Helen was to encourage individual interpretation of the songs we learned each week. Listening opportunities were a key component of the singing sessions. Helen chose a variety of recorded tracks of each song to listen to each week. She provided these tracks to singers via email before every weekly session and spent time discussing the varied interpretations of each song before

teaching it in her own way. She often stated to the singers that the interpretation *she* was modelling was what she called “singing it straight.” She then spent time discussing and modelling the ways in which singers could choose to vary how they sang the melody, explaining that she did this so that singers were able to learn the basic melody of a song and then choose to sing it in a way that became “their own.” The use of multiple and varied pedagogical processes by Helen, then, relate to Higgins’s (2012) view of the community music facilitator as someone who employs “flexible facilitation modes” and “multiple learning relationships and processes” (p. 177). The author states that, “community musicians recognize that the participants’ social well-being and personal growth are as important as their musical development” (Higgins, 2012, p. 177). The musical learning environment facilitated by Helen, and her pedagogical processes and intentions mirror Higgins’s (2012) description.

### ***The Social Environment***

Helen’s intentions for starting the Childless Voices Choir were founded in both pedagogical and social aspirations. As such, she employed a reflexive practice not only in relation to her vocal teachings, but also regarding the social environment that she facilitated through the weekly online sessions. Ultimately, Helen aimed to facilitate a group singing environment that promoted learning and confidence building, as well as social connectedness, as a means to allow for the development of empowerment among the involuntarily childless women who participated.

Although she originally planned to facilitate the group singing sessions in person, she had to adapt them to an online platform that can make socializing challenging. I have argued that the act of muting singers places a facilitator in a gatekeeping role that automatically situates her within a position of power. Regardless, Helen perceived herself as ‘one of us’ during the sessions, despite her ability to control who gets to speak, when, and for how long.

Interestingly, one of Helen's concerns, stemming from the position of power that her role as facilitator on Zoom granted her, related to the singers' perceptions of her. She spoke about this in relation to how she navigated social interactions during the singing sessions:

I suppose you could say we could do chat rooms, but then...that's me saying "you go in there." It is quite contrived...I think we do pretty well, considering the Zoom meetings I've been on. Not our ones. But considering I've been on, like, work things where, God, it seems like a bloody court room! "Yes, would you like to speak now?" I think we're quite free by comparison [LAUGHS], but...it can still feel contrived sometimes, and sometimes I just think, if I ask something and no one says anything, I'm like, oh God, do they all hate me? [LAUGHS] You know, there is a bit of that. I think, oh God, have I really fucked up here? I shouldn't have said that! Or sometimes I really worry, if we've had a bit of a laugh and joke and it's gone a bit too far and someone's been upset. Not intentionally, and the thing is, I think we know, we have enough respect for each other that we know that if that happens, we know it wasn't intentional.

In Jorgensen's (1995) exploration of music education as community, the author describes community within the learning environment as feelingful, whereby feelingfulness "involves an attachment to the community that is emotionally and cognitively as well as physically experienced" (p. 74). Helen's concerns regarding her relationship to the Childless Voices singers relate to Jorgensen's (1995) notion of feelingfulness in that she experienced her role as facilitator, and her attachment to the CNBC community at large, emotionally, cognitively, and physically. Additionally, Helen's concerns regarding the ways in which the singers perceived her during the singing sessions relate to how Higgins (2012) describes the role of community music

facilitators whereby, “community musicians who lead projects encourage dialogue between themselves and their participants that are built on trust, respect, and responsibility” (p. 176).

In addition to speaking about the ways in which the mute function impacted her perceptions of herself as ‘gatekeeper’ in a pedagogical role, Helen also spoke about the difficulties of navigating the online environment, and the difference between facilitating online versus in-person singing sessions, from a social perspective. I cite her at length here:

I try and get ‘round to everyone. And then some people are kind of really quite off screen while we’re singing. Um, but on the whole, yeah, there’s different moments, aren’t there? And if...someone’s got something to say, they’ll just unmute and say it, which I like that, actually. I like that. It’s only when we’re deep into the song, or if we are talking, people might say, “well actually-“ and then I got to the point where that was happening a lot and then I thought, oh God, hang on, I’m gonna start asking people, “what do you think?” which, to be honest, I don’t really like, but then I know what we’re like. It could be forty-five minutes of just free-for-all, chatting [LAUGHS]. So, it *is* hard. That is probably, Laura, honestly, I think that’s the hardest thing about it, because everyone’s got- we’ve got people there with all different personalities. Some people are really strong and some people are quite quiet...but the quiet people are kind of okay...with being quiet. That’s probably the hardest thing. If we were all in the room together, people would just be having a chat with each other and I wouldn’t even notice, which would be quite nice really. That’s another thing, because it’s online, everyone has to say things in front of everyone else. There’s no little groups going off, do you know what I mean?

As a community music project facilitator, Helen framed the Childless Voices singing sessions not only from a pedagogical point of view, but also with the intention to foster community



building among and between involuntarily childless women, as evidenced by her facilitation of the social interactions that took place. As Higgins (2012) states, “[p]articipating in community music projects is more than *just* music making” (p. 176, original italics). Here, the author discusses the facilitation of community music projects as an act of hospitality, whereby they “flourish through accumulative personal interactions, because human interaction is viewed as paramount” (Higgins, 2012, p. 176).

During our final interview, Helen spoke about her perception of the overall social environment of the online singing sessions as being supportive. She discussed the social interactions between herself and the singers as kind and well managed. She also stated that she felt the connections forged through the singing sessions were not taken for granted. She elaborated on this point saying,

I think we realize, because we come from a place of isolation, how precious it is...I don't think we take our connections for granted with each other because we can't find those connections easily. I mean, you can say, “oh yeah, there's loads of stuff online” but, like, it was highlighted, wasn't it, when we all went for lunch. I could feel it. There was an energy there that people were- it's like we're handling something very precious and we won't drop it. We won't.

Here, Helen alludes to an in-person get-together that she organized for members of the Childless Voices Choir in December 2021, while I was in the UK conducting my fieldwork. Speaking from my own experience at the lunch, I resonated with the idea of not taking our ‘precious’ connections for granted, and the energy she spoke of among the group of roughly twenty women in attendance that day.

As relating to the connections Helen spoke of between involuntarily childless women, Sartwell (2002) writes about subalternate communities, those forged out of exclusion from dominant communities, stating that,

Subalternate communities do not, by and large, worship texts or worry much about whether they have a system of shared beliefs: they just engage in a constantly fluctuating process of real communication. They bathe in each other's noise. That's what a community is, and it's not something that you make happen; it's something that just happens, and happens by an incredibly elaborate process of nested exclusions that is different in each case. (pp. 56-57)

During the lunch that Helen organized, in a restaurant directly across the road from St. Paul's Cathedral in London, that is exactly what I felt happened: we bathed in each other's noise, holding space for each other in such a way that the special uniqueness of our connections was honoured and protected. I relate this get-together to Delanty's (2018) discussion of the connection between liminal moments, "in which normality is suspended," and "moments of symbolic renewal when a society or group asserts its collective identity" (p. 49). Our time together that day was one of these moments when our collective identity, as a subalternate community forged out of exclusion, was asserted in a beautiful way, through our childlessness and subsequent participation in the Childless Voices Choir

In relation to holding space for, and facilitating, social connections between the singers in the Childless Voices Choir, Helen also stated that she felt a sense of responsibility, as facilitator. When I asked her what she meant by this, she said,

I don't want anything that I do to make them feel- I don't want anything that I do to make their experience of childlessness worse. I only want to make it feel better, you know?...I

wouldn't wish it on my worst- what some of those women are going through...And especially women that don't have any support, you know? And some of them are going through medical stuff alone, you know? We're like a lifeline of friendship. We're the only friends that they've got that understand.

Reflecting upon Helen's statement here, I turn to Stein (1997), who discusses the role of communal activities and organizations in the empowerment of women, highlighting how they "should reflect the needs and aspirations of the participants" and be "designed so that the participants are comfortable within the structure" (p. 64). Helen worked hard to facilitate a space within which the singers felt comfortable, particularly as relating to the social interactions that took place during the weekly online sessions.

As discussed previously, one of Helen's core intentions for the Childless Voices Choir was to 'empower' the women she worked with both musically and socially. In her examination of the role of queer choral musicking in social justice activism, Balén (2017) states:

The act of singing together organizes and claims social power through specific forms of embodied communal practices. Singing together in general creates and defines space and social relations, sometimes allowing singers the opportunity to reframe the space and the meaning of the space itself for themselves and for others. (p. 42)

The necessity for Helen to facilitate the Childless Voices singing sessions in an online format, while not her original vision for the group singing space, proved positive in many ways. Not least of which is that involuntarily childless women who may not have had either the access—or desire—to attend in-person singing sessions, were able to participate in a comfortable, informative, and lively educative and social space that facilitated community building and empowering musical and social interactions.

Because of the online nature of the Childless Voices Choir, despite living in Canada I was able to participate in the weekly singing sessions prior to beginning my fieldwork. Thus, I bore witness to the pedagogical and social environment described above, as a singer, for twelve months before I entered the space as a researcher. This positioned me as an 'insider' to the research environment, wherein I had already developed musical and social relationships with Helen and many of the singers who participated in this study. My deep connection to this research is discussed in chapter one through an examination of my 'insider' position from the perspectives of involuntary childlessness and singing. Additionally, In chapter three, I explored potential issues posed by an 'insider' status in ethnographic research, and the methodological choices I made as a means to navigate these issues. My dedication to the notion of transparency in research is evidenced by the steps I have taken thus far to acknowledge and critique my positionality as researcher. I move now to a brief description of my role as researcher-participant within the musical and social space facilitated by Helen in the online singing sessions.

### **My Role as Researcher-Participant**

As stated above, I sang with the Childless Voices Choir for a year before beginning my fieldwork for this study and had already begun developing relationships with the Tuesday singers. I had only engaged a few times with the women who regularly attended the Saturday sessions, but felt quite comfortable during our social time and welcomed the discussions we had when I was able to attend. My feelings towards the women who attended the Tuesday sessions had already developed into the beginnings of what I felt could be considered friendships, although my knowledge of the upcoming research project sometimes led me to tread carefully in this respect. My relationship with Helen was, of course, the strongest, as she and I had

communicated via email and Zoom multiple times from our first communication in December of 2019. Helen picked me up from Heathrow Airport on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021—

this was the first time we had met in person—and as we embraced in the Arrivals section of the terminal, I felt excited and also comforted in the knowledge that we were about to embark on this research journey together.

Entry from first fieldwork journal, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021:

It was fantastic meeting Helen. It felt like we were old friends. And she's so excited about this study that it gives me a feeling of renewed excitement every time she talks about it. We both feel as though we're at the start of something really special. Powerful. Meaningful for the CNBC community, as well as ourselves.

The first month of my fieldwork passed by very quickly as I got settled into my house in York. I began conducting one-on-one interviews with the research participants during the first week of October, to give everyone a month to feel settled into the idea of the study taking place. I had been conducting my singing session observations twice a week since September 4<sup>th</sup>, so things were feeling well under way by the time I began conducting interviews. As my fieldwork progressed, I began perceiving bonds being formed between the singers in each group (Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings) both during and between sessions. These bonds were spoken about during interviews in ways that revealed the impact of participation in the Childless Voices Choir on participants' experience of involuntary childlessness. What follows, then, is a discussion of my findings, as analyzed through the lens of theories of community, solidarity, and empowerment, in three focused sections that address the themes of isolation, silencing, and shame, as emergent through the findings discussed in chapter four.

### **Mitigating Isolation in the Childless Voices Singing Sessions**

In chapter four, I explored involuntary childlessness as an isolating experience for the women I worked with on this study, in dialogue with the literature on stigma and shame (Darroux, 2022; Day, 2013; Exley & Letherby, 2001; Gotlib, 2016; Loftus & Namaste, 2011; Miall, 1986; Schur, 1983; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995). Isolation emerged in my analysis, as perceived by participants, through a lack of understanding and empathy. This was demonstrated within familial, friendship, work, and more distant communities within which the women engage. While members of the Childless Voices Choir often continued to experience isolation within those communities, there was an overall sense of belonging and community felt among and between Helen and the singers both during and between the weekly singing sessions. The liminal space (Turner, 1969; Turner, 2012) of the sessions provided them with an opportunity to engage musically and socially in ways which worked to reshape their identities as musical and social beings. Balén (2017) speaks of the potential of communal music making “to hold...performers...in new identities” through the act of “expressing the beauty and pain, the joy and grief of being human by mingling voices together in song” (p. 143). While the online format of the Childless Voices singing sessions did not allow for each individual voice to be heard collectively, my analysis of singing session observations and interviews showed that the singers felt musically connected to each other as they sang.

Through social and musical encounters that took place during and between the weekly singing sessions, the women became aware of each other, and themselves, as unique and interesting musical and social beings. Their shared common circumstance (involuntary childlessness) was perceived as the ‘thread’ that tied them to each other within the liminal space of the singing sessions, yet their differences were acknowledged, often in a way that was critical

to their awareness of the complexities of the experience of involuntary childlessness. Here, Higgins's (2012) notion of community without unity becomes relevant, as the expansion of the definition of community was made manifest through the multiple and varied identities of the women who came together to engage in group singing. Additionally, differences in affect towards their experiences, as well as the ways in which they each navigated those differences both individually and as a community, worked to support empathetic bonding and solidarity (Delanty, 2018; Hemmings, 2012). Despite differences of affect, the women I worked with formed what they perceived as genuine friendship bonds with each other, through musical and social interactions that they perceived as open, honest, interesting, meaningful, and supportive. During my analysis, there emerged a sense of belonging, solidarity, and community that developed between the women through their social and musical engagements within the Childless Voices singing session space which aided in mitigating the sense of isolation they felt as a consequence of their childless circumstances.

The act of 'covering' (Goffman, 1963), which many of the women spoke about using as a means of self-protection when engaging socially outside of the CNBC community, was spoken about as often unnecessary when engaging with Helen and the other singers. The perception of the singing session space as one in which the women felt comfortable revealing themselves authentically aided in breaking down personal and social barriers, thus revealing the potential for new social bonds to form. For some, shared circumstances such as health issues or their routes to childlessness were factors in forming bonds with particular group members. Outside of the Childless Voices environment, the women who function within the bounds of their illnesses are profoundly impacted by feelings of isolation on two fronts: their childless circumstances and their health issues. Engaging weekly with singers who bore an understanding of the social

impacts of these issues aided in mitigating the feelings of isolation that were so prevalent in their lives. Additionally, conversations that took place during the singing sessions, experienced as uplifting, meaningful, and poignant, gave the women an opportunity to discover further commonalities of personalities and interests. This often led to social engagement outside of the sessions, through WhatsApp chats, social media engagement, and in-person meetups, thus further expanding the women's friendship communities. While not explored in depth here, these interactions offered important insight to the women's perceptions of the social experiences that took place within the CNBC community but beyond the boundaries of the Childless Voices singing session space.

### ***No Need to Hide***

As discussed in the previous chapter, emotion work and 'covering' are two ways in which involuntarily childless women manage their stigmatized identities when engaging outside of the CNBC community. These methods of self-preservation lead women to feel isolated in the disenfranchised grief (Darroux, 2022; Doka, 1989, 2002) of their circumstances and, thus, often unable to participate fully and authentically within their close, and broader, communities of engagement. Within the Childless Voices singing space, however, I observed that there was an openness and honesty in the conversations had between singers regarding their childless experiences that was in sharp contrast to the ways in which many of them said they managed conversations with those outside of the Childless Voices Choir. The women who came to the sessions entered the space with the knowledge that those in attendance shared the common experience of involuntary childlessness. The space that Helen facilitated, rooted in her own experience with childlessness and singing, was intended to foster musical and social enjoyment and achievement, while acknowledging the ways in which members of the group had been



stigmatized through their childless experiences (Archetti, 2019; Goffman, 1963; Greil et al., 2011; Lovett, 2018; Petropanagos, 2017; Whiteford & Gonzales, 1995). Thus, there was a sense of understanding that this was a musical and social space in which they could participate more fully than they felt able to in other social spaces.

In our one-on-one interviews, Lu, Nicola, Emma, and Anna spoke to me about the experience of speaking freely among women who share similar circumstances. Lu stated that the conversations she had had within the Childless Voices singing sessions made her feel “supported” through being able to speak freely. Nicola felt a sense of safety in her engagements with the other Childless Voices singers in that, “there’s just so much respect there...so it feels, um, really safe and really held and really possible to be recognized for who I am, for who we are. And that’s just so affirming and confidence building really.” For Emma, too, there was a sense of comfort and acceptance within the group, which led her to feel that she could be herself,

and not put on any kind of front...whereas in other social situations you sometimes feel like you’ve got a bit of a mask on, just in case, you know, you need to be on your guard kind of thing.

Anna, whose childless circumstances have negatively impacted her mental health, described how it has felt for her to be able to be herself with women in the CNBC community:

I just feel like I can be myself because...I’ve had to hide this massive part of me [BECOMES VISIBLY UPSET] this, um, this being childless not by choice that I’ve now learnt to call it but didn’t know what it was for a long, long time. I had to hide that away...So, I wasn’t only hiding my childless not by choice, I’ve had to hide everything. I’ve had to hide my whole self, so um...[LONG PAUSE] and I think a lot of people don’t like that and they feel a bit suspicious of that. It’s like, you know, “Why is she so

reserved?” I’ve been called “cold” and I’m the opposite of cold, but because I keep myself back...[LONG PAUSE]

The relief felt by Anna in being able to speak freely among other childless women was very apparent. During our one-on-one interviews she often became overwhelmed with emotion and/or animated when describing the benefits of social and musical engagement within the CNBC community, especially within the Childless Voices singing sessions. Additionally, I observed, within the singing sessions, moments when Anna was visibly moved to tears by particular songs that Helen had selected to teach. For Anna, as with many of the other singers, the emotional impacts of singing together, influenced by the musical environment facilitated by Helen, in addition to the social engagements that took place, were experienced as fostering a sense of solidarity.

Some of the women I worked with spoke during our focus group interviews about their social experiences in the singing sessions in relation to their level of comfort being among the other group members. Sara spoke about not feeling the need to put “boundaries” up during the sessions because she felt safe from unexpected hurtful comments. She perceived conversations during the singing sessions as “more honest” than those she had had with her friends and family outside of the CNBC community: “I think honest is really a word that I would say when we have our conversations at the start [of the sessions], like, we can talk about anything, um, and also we can be very open.” Here, Balén’s (2017) discussion of group singing as a powerful form of communing is relevant to Sara’s point about openness. Balén (2017) suggests that,

an important reason that people come together in this particular social form is to express and share in a potentially vulnerable and transcendent manner the full range of human

emotions surrounded by others expressing and mirroring these emotions together in ways we do not commonly allow ourselves. (p. 165)

For the women in this study, the notion of allowing oneself to express emotions and share experiences freely, through song or speech, was one not often experienced outside of the CNBC community.

In relation to freedom of expression as experienced through online musical and social interactions, some of the women from the Saturday singing sessions had a conversation in our focus group interview about how the virtual environment of the sessions was helpful to them because of having the freedom to turn their cameras off when they felt the need. This allowed the women to feel comfortable attending the sessions even when they weren't feeling at their best, whether physically or emotionally:

Emma: Yeah, and that we can kind of still attend off camera as well, so if we're not feeling that great, Helen sort of always encourages us to come anyway, doesn't she? And not feel that we have to show our faces, just be there.

Lu: Yeah.

Stephanie: That's what I was just thinking. It sort of slightly doesn't matter how you turn up sort of thing. Um, you don't have to kind of be looking fabulous [LAUGHS] or whatever. You just can come, you can be off camera, and it doesn't matter if, I don't know, you need to go off and have a cry and come back or whatever. It's just really a safe space that you can sort of just turn up and don't have to worry about how you are or putting up a front sort of thing, and that's really valuable.

Emma: Yeah, I think it's one of those places where it's ok not to be ok, if someone's having a bad day, is feeling teary, then that's fine, you know? We all get it and it's that

kind of support as well. You don't have to come or, you know, you can still turn up and be off camera or if you're feeling a little bit emotional then Helen always says, you know, "if you need to go off camera, go off camera." She's just so lovely and supportive for that kind of thing as well.

I perceive these singers' affirmations of the comfort they derive from within the singing session space, through one's ability to choose whether or not to engage visually while singing and/or speaking, as relating to Delanty's (2018) notion of communication communities. The author states that, "the idea of a communication-community can be theorized in a way that lends itself to a world of multiple belongings and in which integration is achieved more by communication than by existing morality and consensus" (p. 140). Specifically, I view the facilitation of an environment in which the singers can engage with each other through varied means (i.e., on-camera, off-camera, muted, un-muted, using the chat function) as allowing for group members to enact community within this space on their own terms. For involuntarily childless women, this is a novel idea, given the many boundaries and restrictions within which they often function in their daily lives.

Despite the comfortable space that Helen and the singers held for each other, not all participants felt able to attend singing sessions when they were not feeling physically or emotionally well. Sam, for example, stated that she struggled to attend the sessions when she is "not feeling it," stating that, "you see I probably do a lot of protection things myself anyway, by maybe not coming if I'm feeling very vulnerable." Vulnerability was a significant factor of involuntary childlessness, for Sam in particular, given her previously discussed experiences with shame in relation to her childless circumstance. It should be noted, however, that her choice to occasionally not attend the sessions, based on how she was feeling on any given day, could be

viewed as a sign of feeling comfortable enough with the singing community as to make that choice, knowing that there would be no negative social or musical repercussions. Conversely, the need to ‘protect’ herself by not attending some sessions might be evidence that the complexity of Sam’s childless circumstance, and the ways in which she manages her affective response to these complexities, may not be congruent with a sense of solidarity with similarly stigmatized others. Hemmings (2012) states that, “the expectation of reciprocity central to empathy risks universalising the subject’s experience as a sound basis for engagement with others; it ignores the historical and political reasons why others may not be able or not wish to reciprocate” (p. 153). In this way, while the Childless Voices community may be one formed through the common thread of involuntary childlessness, it does not guarantee sameness of affect or the desire for empathy among and between the singers.

In contrast to Sam’s management of the impact of her feelings on her attendance, Sue found herself at times forcing herself to go to the sessions, despite not feeling up to it. She spoke about the positive impact that attending the sessions had on her frame of mind:

I’m sort of the opposite to Sam. It’s not so much now. When I got a little bit down in, I think it was the third lockdown, whenever we went back in again in January, and I was quite down and I actually found myself making myself come to this and, actually, that was always a good idea, ‘cause although it took me a long time to get into it, when I finished, I felt much more, I suppose, uplifted and present.

Additionally, Lu navigated her anxieties about being on camera on bad days by keeping her camera off during all of the sessions she attended. In order to personalize the experience, she added a fun profile picture to her Zoom window, in which she is smiling and holding one of her favourite mugs. She got compliments from Helen and all of the singers on the photo when she

showed up to the September 18<sup>th</sup> session. There were a few times during my fieldwork that Lu turned her camera on during the social time, when she wanted to speak directly to one of the women about something heartfelt and important, and then she turned the camera off again.

The varied experiences of the singers described above are evidence of the sense of community felt through Hemmings's (2012) notion of affective solidarity. In this way, through a variation of communication practices within the singing space, the singers came to recognize that each woman was at a different stage of their childless journey and felt a sense of solidarity with each other through this acknowledgement of difference.

### ***Sharing the Pain***

As discussed previously, Helen carved out social time at the beginning of each singing session as a way to check in with the singers and to facilitate discussions guided by those who wished to speak. She was always attentive to each singer, asking how each woman was feeling that day, as well as how they had been since our last session. During this initial social time, most of the singers shared openly about the state of their emotional and physical wellbeing, whether they were feeling well or not. Those who shared good news, amusing stories, or ambivalence towards their daily goings-on were usually met with smiles, exclamations of congratulations and well wishes, and/or a desire to hear more about their news from Helen and the other singers. The women who were struggling spoke about the issues they were facing and were met with empathy, words of encouragement, and/or what I perceived as genuine care and concern from the rest of the women in the sessions.

In particular, the physical health issues experienced by Lu, Emma, Sara, and Stephanie were discussed quite often during the Saturday morning sessions they participated in (i.e., endometriosis, ME - myalgic encephalomyelitis or chronic fatigue syndrome, adenomyosis, and

a challenging recovery from ovarian cancer and radical hysterectomy, respectively). It is important to note here that the women who attended the Saturday morning sessions were more likely to suffer from health issues that impacted their energy levels than those who attended the Tuesday evening sessions. Additionally, given the energy required to participate in the act of singing, and Helen's understanding of this from both a pedagogical and personal perspective, the women were free to choose which sessions they would like to attend, if they were able to attend at all. While not all singers attended the sessions every week, most were able to attend regularly and consistently on the same day (Saturday versus Tuesday), particularly in the four months during which this study took place.

In addition to the benefits of the social time that Helen facilitated during the singing sessions, some of the women discussed with me the positive emotional impacts of the physical act of singing, in relation to their experience of chronic illness. My analysis of our conversations, through the lens of theories of community, yielded insights related to the emergence of *communitas* within the musical and social engagements between members of the Childless Voices Choir. According to Turner (2012), *communitas*,

resides in the poor and those considered inferior in their culture [as in those with disabilities], a gift coming up from below. In concrete circumstances, *Communitas* may be found when people engage in collective work. They may find themselves "in flow." That is, they experience a full merging of action and awareness, a crucial component of enjoyment. Once in flow, there is no need for conscious intervention on their part. In *communitas* there is a loss of ego. One's pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In the group, all are in unity, seamless unity, so that even joshing is cause for delight and there

is a lot of laughter. The benefits of *communitas* are quick understanding, easy mutual help, and long-term ties with others. (p. 3)

In relation to Turner's (2012) description of *communitas*, then, the women participating in the Childless Voices singing sessions, and in particular those who suffer with chronic illness, often found joy within their musical and social engagements through the acts of singing and speaking with each other.

Of the four women who spoke with me about chronic physical health conditions in their one-on-one interviews, Lu, Emma, and Stephanie described the positive impact of the Childless Voices Choir sessions on the feelings of isolation they had experienced, due to their health conditions, when engaging outside of the CNBC community. Lu described the singing sessions as an "absolute lifeline" that gave her hope. She spoke to me about the pressing need for online interaction, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, for people like her who are unable to leave their homes on a regular basis because of chronic health issues. She also talked about the positive impact of the emergence of multiple forms of online engagement that arose from the pandemic, stating, "I think there's a huge invisible community that are now visible, and that's something that I was part of, feeling invisible, and I now feel that there's something for me that wasn't there before."

Similarly, Emma felt a sense of gratitude for the pandemic because of the online activities that emerged from it, saying that being able to attend the singing sessions online had been "quite helpful" because of the difficulties she faces, due to her ME, when having to attend in-person events:

Being able to actually chat with people and sing together, um, having that connection.

Um...with my health problems, it's difficult for me to meet in person, because that brings



with it a lot of difficulties and fatigue. Um, often if I do meet up with friends in person, I'm often exhausted the next day and have to have a day in bed to recover. Um, whereas online meetings, um, yeah, I do feel a bit tired afterwards but I can have a rest and then be okay for the day after.

She found attending the online singing sessions “manageable” and stated that the physical and emotional benefits of group singing also kept her going, particularly when she was having a bad day or week:

If I had children now, perhaps I wouldn't have joined an online choir, and it's allowed me to do that, as a childless woman, and explore a new sort of hobby, I guess and, um, a new experience...it's some time for me, um, so it's almost like a piece of selfcare, in a way.

For Turner (2012), shared musical engagements are particularly conducive to the experience of *communitas* in that, as the author states, “we can find a key to the nature of *communitas* through the flow of music, one of the greatest endowments that gives joy” (p. 43). For Lu and Emma, then, the act of musical and social participation in the weekly singing sessions can be viewed as *communitas* wherein, as Turner (2012) states, it is a pleasurable and transformative experience that emerges through “sharing common experiences with one's fellows” (p. 2). It should be noted here that, in addition to joy, many of the singers also experienced other affective responses to the ‘collective work’ of the musical and social interactions that took place during the weekly sessions. In particular, I observed, on many occasions, emotional responses to the songs we sang that were not joyful but instead displayed feelings of frustration, sadness, and/or emotional overwhelm. These feelings were often articulated during the sessions when Helen checked in with the singers after singing through whichever song was being learned. In some cases, I

witnessed singers becoming visibly moved by a song, and was not immune to these feelings myself.

Stephanie discussed the importance of having support from Helen and the other singers during the online sessions when she spoke with me about the isolating and identity-shaping impact of her cancer and subsequent treatments and surgeries. For Stephanie, the fact that her diagnosis came during the pandemic isolated her more than usual, as the supports that might have been available through the hospital, pre-pandemic, were not made available at the time of her diagnosis and surgery. However, she described engaging with the Childless Voices Choir as a “sort of group solace, where you can talk about things and it’s safe to talk about things.” Additionally, given her position as a physician who works closely with women who suffer from reproductive and sexual health issues, her identity was challenged by her own health issues. Through the Childless Voices singing sessions, Stephanie met another singer who had the same type of cancer and surgery as she had, and she found speaking with her about it was helpful:

She’s the only other person I’ve met with ovarian cancer who wasn’t a patient of mine...so it’s- that’s been really important, just to sort of have somebody who’s had a similar sort of experience, *such* a similar experience really...and I just wouldn’t have met people like that [outside of the choir].

Having been treated extremely poorly, and effectively brushed aside, by her work colleagues at the doctor’s surgery during her illness, it was a relief for Stephanie to have found an environment in which to chat freely and get to know each other, “and then kind of the friendship sort of expands out of the choir as well.”

In addition to the positive social implications of engaging with someone other than a patient about the impacts of ovarian cancer, these interactions were highly beneficial to her sense

of self. Trevarthen (2002) discusses “affective understanding with others” as “the development of a secure recognized and valued ‘identity’—being somebody, placed in the world with others as a ‘knower’ and ‘doer’, making sense of oneself” (p. 22). In relation to Stephanie’s experiences of isolation emergent through her experience with ovarian cancer, then, and the communal outcomes of her engagements in the Childless Voices singing sessions, there emerged for her a transformation of identity through a sense of solidarity with other members of the group.

***It's Not All Doom and Gloom: Identity Assertion Through Social and Musical Interaction***

Through analysis of the social interactions I observed during the Childless Voices singing sessions, I became aware of a radical difference between the ways in which society often portrays childless women (as sad, unfulfilled, lonely women) and the reality of these women’s vibrant and diverse personalities. Chaskin (2013) states that “Communities are not monolithic; they include a range of interests, values, priorities, and expectations” (p. 113). During my four months observing the singing sessions, I noted a variety of conversations we had that were equal parts funny, uplifting, meaningful, silly, lighthearted, and poignant. Topics of conversation included speaking about our various hobbies (including the Childless Voices Choir and other arts-based activities), fashion and hair, movies we’d seen or wanted to see, music we enjoyed—or did not enjoy—listening to, and holidays we’d recently been on or were planning to go on. Additionally, we discussed rediscovery of the self, perspectives on life (sometimes as pertaining to particular songs we were listening to), everyday life responsibilities, and CNBC research and advocacy work (past, present, and future). We also discussed in-person get-togethers we were planning and attending while I was in the UK, our jobs and volunteer work, powerful CNBC female role models (particularly CNBC singers/song writers), and the positive social outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The multiplicity of perspectives and identities that emerged through the social interactions I observed during the singing sessions spoke to Higgins's (2012) notion of community without unity as the recognition of "the importance of diversity in the modern space of communal relationships" (p. 136). While the members of the Childless Voices Choir were connected by the common experience of involuntary childlessness, their identities were in no way defined purely by their childless circumstances. Many of our conversations that took place during the singing sessions had everyone laughing, such as speaking about our neighbours hearing us singing, a pole dancing experience, singing braless, and how funny it would be if we were to get arrested for busking without a license in London when we got together in person for our Christmas lunch. While all of us still experience the grief of childlessness to varying degrees, it was obvious from our conversations during the singing sessions that our lives are far from empty and meaningless, despite the socially constructed stereotypes by which childless women are portrayed, and subsequently treated, outside of the CNBC community.

Having the opportunity to speak freely with one another in a joyful way had a noticeably positive impact on singers' lives, which five of the women I spoke with in our one-on-one interviews talked about. For Lu, the humorous conversations she had in the Childless Voices sessions were found to be uplifting. She stated that,

ah, it's given me a social life darling! Yeah, it's brought me close to fantastic women, given me a good laugh every week...the people I've met...have been very generous and non-judgemental and sympathetic and funny. Lots and lots of funny women.

Catherine also said that she enjoyed the social time during the sessions, despite perceiving herself as "not a hugely outgoing person." She spoke to me about the atmosphere of inclusion and bonding created in the sessions through the social time that Helen carved out for us, stating

that “I feel it’s a chance to bond and have a laugh, and Helen is, I find, very funny and witty...and very socially skilled as well.” Catherine appreciated that the social time during the sessions gave the women a chance to speak about their childless circumstances without it feeling like a therapy session. She said,

I feel that’s one of the reasons I feel the women are so cool, is because it [childlessness] gets mentioned, if something comes up in a day or whatever, and then we can talk about it and then we can talk about something else, have a laugh.

For Emma as well, the light-hearted nature of many of the conversations that took place during the singing sessions was enjoyable.

Like Emma, Sara also discussed the lighthearted and upbeat nature of the singing sessions, saying that,

I definitely enjoy it. I mean I like listening to people anyway and I do enjoy that, and I think it’s just that interaction with people and listening to what people have been doing during the week, or maybe just like a funny story or something. I mean, I love Helen’s stories ‘cause she has so many stories and they’re really good, you know?...So yeah, I love her stories, and I love everyone else’s. I love, like, you know, people talking, and also I think it’s important, like, the chatty funny things.

During our third interview, Sara also touched on her perception that people outside of the CNBC community often think childless women’s lives are empty and unfulfilled, and that the women who participate in the singing sessions are proof that this is a socially constructed myth. After the Christmas lunch organized by Helen in London for members of the Childless Voices Choir, she commented on her experience of spending time with a large group of involuntarily childless women, stating that, “we spoke about hundreds of different things [LAUGHS] and we were like,

‘whoa, we’re so interesting, we’ve got so many conversations, we’ve got so much depth!’”

Delanty (2018) describes the notion of community as “essentially social; it is expressed in communicative contexts and is the basis of social recognition of the Other” (p. 6). Like many of the social interactions that took place through the Childless Voices singing sessions, the realization—and subsequent verbal affirmation—of each other’s unique identities that emerged through this particular event is a key element of the formation of community among the women I worked with in this study.

In relation to the depth and interesting nature of the women in the Childless Voices Choir that Sara described, Lu also spoke quite animatedly about her experience engaging musically and socially with Helen and the other singers in the weekly sessions:

I just think the people are just amazing. So many creative, so many clever people.

Businesspeople, just every kind of people and just, I’ve just been really blown away by how incredible the women are, and I feel really, really lucky to have made so many good friends and to have met so many just fantastic people. Um, so I don’t feel like I’m in the club nobody wants to be part of. I feel like I’m in the best club there could’ve been, and that other people should be very jealous of us. That’s how I feel because I just feel like everybody’s just fantastic. I really feel that, honestly feel that. And so, I think it’s been really, really powerful to do something that I love with people, um, who I think are brilliant. That’s what I think.

The creativity that Lu spoke of in relation to the other women in the group was often made apparent during the singing sessions by way of musical interactions between Helen and the singers, as well as between the singers themselves. There were many conversations that took place during the weekly sessions that related to musical preference, interpretation, performance,

and impact, which demonstrated the unique musical identities of each participant. In addition to conversations about music, there were a few occasions on which individual singers would unmute and sing by themselves, revealing their individual interpretations of the songs being learned, as well as any difficulties they might be having with a particular phrase of music. The affective reactions of the group members were often varied, and a supportive and encouraging learning environment was made manifest through verbal responses to these musical engagements.

The focus group interviews I conducted proved to be incredibly enlightening in relation to the sense of community that was developed, and the subsequent mitigation of isolation that transpired, through membership in the Childless Voices Choir. Through these conversations, there emerged a sense of what Jorgensen (1995) terms, interconnectedness. For Jorgensen (1995), interconnectedness can be described as “the belief that one is part of a larger group of persons, that one has something to offer and something to take from others, that one is interdependent with others for comfort, personal affirmation, intellectual stimulation, a livelihood, goods and services, friendship and love” (p. 74). The recognition of these elements of interconnectedness thus “contributes to one's sense of personal identity and corporate cohesion” (Jorgensen, 1995, p. 74) which, in turn, supports the development of new relationships.

### ***Forging New Relationships***

Throughout my four months of fieldwork observing the Childless Voices singing sessions and conducting one-on-one and focus group interviews, I bore witness to multiple meaningful relationships forming between Helen and the singers. As mentioned earlier, some of the women reached out to each other through social media (facebook and Instagram) or WhatsApp, engaging in conversations regularly. Others, particularly those who live in close proximity to each other,

met up in person to take part in leisurely activities such as walks, meals, holidays, and sports. Helen often got together with some of the singers to socialize outside of the singing sessions, and also organized the Christmas lunch at the beginning of December, which was open to all of the women who participated in the Childless Voices singing sessions, as well as the online chanting sessions that she also facilitates. According to Ackelsberg (1988), “women not only see themselves as members of communities...they work hard at developing and maintaining the networks and relationships that give life to these communities” (p. 303). The efforts made by the members of the Childless Voices Choir were reflective of the life of this thriving community of women.

During the online sessions, singers would sometimes speak to each other directly about plans they were making to get together. Catherine and Sue, for example, spoke about wanting to meet up to play tennis. In one session, Stephanie mentioned planning a camping trip with another singer from the group who wasn't involved in the study. Helen and Sara also spoke about getting together, close to where Sara lives, for a day out. During one of the sessions, Lu apologized to Stephanie for not having responded to a WhatsApp message she had sent. Each of these encounters was evidence that some of the singers were engaging with each other and developing friendships outside of the Childless Voices singing session times.

Feelings of friendship, connection, support, and belonging that were developing for the singers were brought up in the one-on-one and focus group interviews that I conducted. For Helen, she felt her desire to facilitate a space where “genuine friendships” can develop among involuntarily childless women had been achieved. She explained, in our first one-on-one interview, the development of these friendships as “a natural growth of people coming together” through the supportive nature of the singing sessions. Balén (2017) describes group singing



activity as facilitating “a space for people who might not know each other on any other terms to come together to create something beautiful that they cannot create alone” (p. 143). While the author is referring here to the act of singing together in person, the ‘something beautiful’ she speaks of relates closely to both the musical and social outcomes of the online singing sessions.

As touched on previously, Stephanie spoke with me about the emotional support she had received through the singing sessions while coping with her health issues, and the friendships that had developed for her through that. She stated that, “the friends I’ve made through the choir, um, I don’t know how I would have got through the last year without it really.” Shakespeare and Whieldon (2017) explore the impact of group singing on mental health and wellbeing through the Sing Your Heart Out project. The findings from their research reinforced the notion that group singing in a community context can provide benefits for individuals experiencing mental health issues. The authors’ conclusions were based on participant perceptions of the social and musical interactions that took place during the singing sessions.

Emma also felt friendship connections developing through her participation in the choir. Despite being quite shy, she reached out to other singers in the group through WhatsApp, building on her social engagements within the weekly sessions. She spoke about the Childless Voices Choir as being central to her social interactions within the CNBC community, and that the emotional support she received from the group had “a big impact” on her social life. As with Emma, Sara and Nicola both spoke to me about the impact of the Childless Voices Choir on their social lives. Sara talked about the ways in which being among the women at the in-person lunch mitigated the isolation she had felt when engaging outside of the CNBC community:

So, it was like that kind of, on Saturday, was the complete opposite of isolation. It was comfort, friendship, it was just coming together, belonging. You know, belonging in a

community, you know? I think that's really powerful. And it's interesting because we come together via two things, so involuntary childlessness and the singing, so it's like two things bring us together. That real sense of belonging.

According to Delanty (2018), the social bond is essentially communal...It is the basis of solidarity, trust, the gift, and belonging” (p. 12). Communities developed through multiple common threads, such as involuntary childlessness and singing, have the potential to fill both social and emotional needs, given the sensitive and vulnerable nature of both of these threads (Balén, 2017).

Nicola spoke with me about the sense of belonging and “shared love” she feels, between herself and the other women in the singing sessions, as being similar to belonging in a religious community. She attributes this, in part, to the freedom to express feelings through musical and social interactions, as well as the acknowledgement of joy that she experiences through the ‘safe space’ of the singing sessions. Balén (2017) discusses the importance of having a safe space in which to engage with empathetic others when stigmatized individuals have been isolated from communities due to their social differences. Although the author’s research represents the queer choral community, I perceive a commonality in the experience of isolation between the queer community and the CNBC community, due to the stigmatized nature of both.

The act of singing together online also played a role in the development of friendships for Stephanie, who became what she perceived as “quite good friends” with some of the other singers. She stated that, for her, connecting with the other women in the group through learning the songs each week, particularly songs that she was familiar with from her past, was akin to singing a favourite song with good friends. Given music’s deep-rooted connection to human

identity, the transformational possibilities of singing together, for one's identity, are many. To this end, Trevarthen (2002) states that,

Our identity is our place in a collaborative awareness of the world and what to do in it... We gain this identity and keep it alive by celebrating the actions, feelings and experiences that we can share—and among the most intimate and powerful of things to share are the ritualized patterns of art, and especially the temporal arts, of which music, song and dance can be the most spontaneous and sincere. (p. 34)

### ***We are Not Alone***

While many of the women I worked with continued to feel isolated outside of the CNBC community, they experienced bonding and community building within the Childless Voices singing sessions that helped many of them to feel supported in their childless circumstances. Much of the perceived sense of community that developed between Helen and the singers was spoken about as developing through the open, honest, judgement-free, and understanding nature of the musical and social engagements that took place during and between the singing sessions. My observations of the weekly sessions corroborated what the women said to me about their experiences. They often spoke about the importance of feeling as though their experience of involuntary childlessness was understood by those they engaged with on a weekly basis. Additionally, as well as providing them with a means of enjoyment and, in some cases, healing and self care, the act of singing together also provided a means of connection and a sense of belonging.

As discussed in chapter four, involuntary childlessness is a stigmatized identity that worked to isolate the women in this study from familial, friendship, work, and broader communities. Analysis of the words and actions of the women who participated in this study,

evidenced that participation in the Childless Voices Choir cultivated what Jorgensen (1995) describes as a sense of belonging, personal affirmation, and emotional connection—community. Jorgensen (1995) states that the building of community may foster a sense of belonging, personal affirmation, and emotional connection that “empowers one to find one’s own voice and, by so speaking, act to change not only the community, but the world beyond” (p. 75). Higgins (2012), too, states that a sense of “voice” (p. 136) is enabled among individuals who participate in community music activities such as group singing. What follows is an exploration of the ways in which musical and social participation in the Childless Voices Choir aided in mitigating the silence that permeated the lives of the involuntarily childless women I worked with in this study.

### **Mitigating Silence Through Group Singing Participation**

The silencing impact of involuntary childlessness emerged as a prevalent theme through discussions with the women who participated in this study. As explored in chapter four, many of the women felt unable to speak about their experiences openly outside of the CNBC community. For some, their grief was disenfranchised (Darroux, 2022; Doka, 1989, 2002) by insensitive and often hurtful comments made by family members, friends, work colleagues, and even strangers. The emotional labour that was involved in ‘covering’ (Goffman, 1963) and avoidance among these communities often led the women to silence themselves as a means of self-protection. In contrast, within their participation in the Childless Voices Choir, singers felt freer to express themselves and talk about the impact of their childless circumstances on their overall physical, emotional, and social wellbeing.

From a musical perspective, many of the women felt that singing played an important role in (re)discovering their voices, both within and outside of the CNBC community. For some, this was expressed through the development and growth of their physical voices, and for others

the impact was felt through the building of their confidence as singers. Many of the women I worked with had lost their desire and ability to engage with music during their childless journeys, which they felt was mitigated, at least in part, through their participation in the Childless Voices Choir. In all, the impact of singing together, for many of the Childless Voices singers, was evidenced by their ability to speak out about the experience of involuntary childlessness (both generalized and personalized) with and among those both within and outside of the CNBC community. As evidenced below, participation in the Childless Voices choir included both musical and social interactions that impacted singers' perceptions of their overall experience of finding their voices.

### ***Free to Speak...Or Not***

Throughout my four months of fieldwork, I observed numerous occasions during the Childless Voices singing sessions when Helen, the singers, and I spoke freely and openly about both our feelings and our childless circumstances. As mentioned previously, conversations were varied and often lively, but also included meaningful discussions around the impact of childlessness on our wellbeing. Additionally, I witnessed moments when singers chose to remain silent and felt content doing so. Both the singers and I attributed this to Helen's facilitation of a comfortable environment in the online sessions, as well as the singers' efforts to hold non-judgemental space for each other. We were afforded the space to sing and to speak—or not—without question or judgement, to use our voices or remain silent as we wished. Four of the women I interviewed spoke about the impact of this affordance.

In contrast to spaces she had engaged with outside of the CNBC community, Nicola discussed the singing session environment as a safe and respectful informal communal space. Similar to Nicola, Sue enjoyed the lack of formal social structure within the sessions, whereby

she was afforded the space to choose freely to speak or to remain silent, which she found “freeing.” Nicola stated that to engage socially in the singing sessions was “affirming and confidence building.” Additionally, she found the freedom of choice to speak or to remain silent during social interactions meaningful, saying, “there’s so much that can happen within silence.” Nicola spoke about holding silent space together as different from being silenced, as it is a choice rather than something imposed upon a person. In relation to having been silenced in the past by her childlessness, she said that she had learned to flourish through “finding new spaces in which I can express myself, whether this is literally through choosing silence or through music or singing.” When asked what flourishing looks like for her in those silences, Nicola stated, “I guess it’s choosing, some of the times, it’s choosing not to be vulnerable in that way by sharing something.”

In my analysis of Nicola’s perception of the notion of flourishing through silence, I was drawn to Attig’s (2004) exploration of disenfranchised grief as an “ethical failure...to respect the bereaved” (p. 204). The author states that,

Respect requires understanding and valuing a person’s potential for thriving or living meaningfully. Respect requires understanding and appreciating a person’s vulnerability and potential for suffering. And respect requires acting respectfully in accord with these understandings. Minimally, it requires acting in ways that avoid making things worse: 1) ways that reinforce or enhance vulnerability or exacerbate suffering; or 2) ways that hinder, undermine, interfere in, inhibit, or even block effectively contending with suffering and hardship or returning to thriving. Optimally, it requires acting in ways that contribute constructively: 1) ways that acknowledge, reflect genuine concern about, and

comfort in response to suffering and hurt; and 2) ways that actively support thriving or a return to it. (Attig, 2004, p. 204)

I understand Nicola's perception of flourishing through silence, in relation to Attig's (2004) discussion, as having been respected and reinforced through the space afforded her to chose silence during the Childless Voices singing sessions.

Stephanie discussed her perception of the singing sessions as a "safe space." When I asked her what made the space safe for her, she told me that she felt, because Helen went out of her way to meet with each singer one-on-one before allowing them to join the group, it was more likely that each group member would be "a real person and they are who they say they are." She also attributed her perception of safety in the sessions as being rooted in respectful interactions between the singers. For Stephanie, the feeling of safety that she perceived in the singing sessions contrasted sharply to how she had been made to feel by friends and coworkers, particularly when speaking about her childless experience. When asked how it felt to engage in a safe space, she said that, given how she had been treated so poorly outside of the CNBC community, "it's quite liberating that I can actually talk, and that other people actually listen."

The notion of 'safe space' is one that I grapple with in the context of music education and community music environments, given its vague connotations of safety for everyone, and the issues I perceive as inherent in such sweeping notions of possibility. I turn here to Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019), who critique the notion of safe space in educational spaces:

'safe space'...is understood mainly in terms of classrooms where students can speak freely, without being afraid of their peers or their teacher. On one hand, safe spaces need to be open enough to include all kinds of perspectives and positions coming from the students. On the other hand, this 'openness' needs to be structured by certain rules to

which everyone can agree, in order to make the exchange of ideas safe for both students and teachers. In the two requirements, there is an inherent tension, and a central question is whether a safe space can be open to all kinds of opinions and attitudes...and at the same time be a safe place for everyone. (p. 276)

My observations of the weekly singing sessions, as well as the interviews I conducted, support Stephanie's perceptions of the space as "safe" in general. However, the complexity, and sensitive and silencing nature of the experience of involuntary childlessness is such that some topics of conversation were, at times, upsetting to members of the choir. In particular, the topic of adoption was discussed during one session, causing Sara to turn off her camera and then leave the session a little early, as she felt emotionally overwhelmed by the conversation. The freedom to remove oneself from the sessions, or to turn the camera off, proved beneficial to her wellbeing in this experience.

For Tracey, the weekly online singing sessions played an important role in supporting her through a very difficult divorce, whereby she felt a transformation of her identity. Tracey and Helen had similar marital experiences, wherein their ex-husbands were abusive towards them. Thus, Tracey felt comfortable speaking about her experience knowing that somebody in the group understood what she was going through. Additionally, she felt a lot of support from the singers in the group as they listened and offered kind words of encouragement to her when she spoke about the divorce. She told me that she felt encouraged to "speak up" about her situation during the singing sessions, which helped her to feel supported despite a lack of shared experience between herself and the other singers. Hemmings's (2012) notion of affective solidarity reflects the interactions that took place in relation to Tracey's divorce in that the author discusses affective solidarity as a transformative concept. Herein, difference is recognized



between one's virtual and actual identities, and one's social experience and social reality, through transformative action. Transformation, for Hemmings (2012), takes place "not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds" (p. 158).

While Tracey's experience was not shared in common with the other singers, the transformative shift of affect that took place within and between these interactions became the basis for seeking solidarity with them.

Similar to Nicola, Sue, Stephanie, and Tracey's perceptions of the singing session space as one of safety and comfort, I, too, felt supported by Helen and the singers and was able to speak openly about the emotional and psychological difficulties I was facing during my fieldwork. I was missing my husband and friends in Canada, who were an important source of strength and support to me. Additionally, there was a great deal of emotional labour involved in my fieldwork, given my personal relationship to the experience of involuntary childlessness and the intense nature of conducting interviews that dealt with this experience. When I began conducting the first round of one-on-one interviews, I struggled to manage my emotions within and between these interactions. I was concerned this may become an ethical issue, so I sought help from my psychotherapist through weekly virtual sessions. I felt comfortable letting Helen and the singers know when I was having a difficult day or week, and choosing to go off camera during the online singing sessions as needed, based on my emotional state. It felt freeing to be open and honest about my emotional and mental health with these women, knowing that they were empathetic to my situation and holding space for me to express myself.

### *Finding Our Voices Through Song*

Expression of the self during the Childless Voices sessions was not only demonstrated through the freedom to speak, but also through the act of singing. Being muted as we sang together was not perceived as a barrier to feeling a sense of connection to each other during the singing sessions. Additionally, the act of singing helped many of us to feel a freedom in the experience of using our voices that had often been negated through our experiences of childlessness. In addition to carving out a space for us to speak freely during the sessions, Helen also played an important role in the notion of finding our voices musically. Jorgensen (1995) refers to the ways in which community may foster a sense of belonging, personal affirmation, and emotional connection that “empowers one to find one’s own voice” (p. 75). In my analysis of discussions with the singers, I developed a sense of the emergence of both a literal and a figurative voice. Here, I refer to the literal voice as the physiological, audible, functioning singing and speaking voice. By figurative voice, I mean the desire, motivation, and perceived ability to speak out, particularly in reference to the experience of involuntary childlessness.

As explained earlier in this chapter, Helen’s pedagogical approach included aspects of listening and modelling, with the aim of teaching singers the basic melodies, rhythms, and texts of each song in such a way that singers were afforded the space to make the song “their own.” She did not want us to feel limited by trying to emulate the voices of the professional artists we heard on the recordings she played for us, nor her own voice as she modelled singing the songs. She encouraged us to infuse each song with our own personalities and to embellish the melodies as we saw fit, saying things like, “you can sing it however you want to sing it” on multiple occasions. Because of my years of experience with classical voice training, during which I struggled with feeling as though my authentic singing voice was never truly free, I found Helen’s

approach to teaching refreshing and inspiring. The idea of singing a song freely and making it my own positively impacted the way that I experienced the sessions, as it also did for the other singers. Additionally, I learned a lot from Helen from a pedagogical perspective that I feel has positively impacted my own teaching approach.

**The Benefits of Informal Teaching.** Similar to my own experiences with singing in traditional, formal environments, Nicola spoke to me about having felt “quite tightly controlled” in many of her past singing experiences, which included school, church, and community choral contexts. In contrast to these experiences, she acknowledged a positive impact that Helen’s more informal approach to teaching had on her and her voice, saying,

I realized that, actually, this is a way of expressing myself and actually there don’t have to be rules if you don’t want there to be rules and it can be a deeply affirming, helpful, expressive thing to do; of joy, or sorrow, or anything else. And I guess the singing sits with...that thing about acceptance and recognizing who I am and what I have to bring.

Those things all sit together really.

Nicola also spoke of the ways in which her experience in the Childless Voices singing sessions had impacted her work as a priest, particularly when she had led some evensong services that include singing in a call and response style with the congregation. Whereas previously she had been incredibly nervous and vocally constrained in her role, through the work that she did with Helen in the weekly online sessions, she began to feel a sense of “liberation” and confidence in her ability to lead the services using her singing voice.

Lu, who had extensive past formal vocal training, noted in one of our interviews that she felt Helen’s approach of telling us to try out new ways of singing each song was “really, really

important” and different from other teachers she had worked with in the past. She stated that this was,

because we’re encouraged to find our own voices, not just sing the notes exactly. She always says “I’m gonna sing it like this but you don’t have to sing it like this.” You play around with it, when you’re in the shower, when you find yourself humming, and I think that makes you feel a bit more powerful. That it’s your voice, you know?

Wright (2016) discusses the value of an informal approach to music learning, stating that it “could address issues of inclusion, particularly for those pupils unable to realize their musicality through traditional learning models” (p. 275). The benefits of the informal approach to music teaching that Helen employed in the weekly singing sessions were evidenced, in part, through the “liberating” and “powerful” experiences of Nicola and Lu.

**Free to be Seen and Heard.** Helen’s informal approach to teaching included invitations for solo singing, modelling of melodies and harmonies to YouTube backing tracks, and checking in with singers for real-time feedback on their progression. This approach was discussed by each of the singers, during our one-on-one and focus group interviews, as helpful to their musical learning and vocal development, as well as the building of their overall confidence as singers. Additionally, the online format of the sessions was discussed as a positive element of the overall experience. In all, the singers appreciated the comfortable, informative, and lively learning environment facilitated by Helen. Lu spoke to this point in our focus group interview:

I think a lot of people would think “oh, we do a Zoom choir. It’s not the same”...But you wouldn’t have your freedom for your voice to come out. That wouldn’t happen maybe... ‘Cause that’s an incredibly private thing that you need to be—your body needs to be—ready for, your mind needs to be, well, often unprepared, but something needs to

give, and if you're in a room full of people trying to get all the notes right, which you are when you're in a choir, you don't have that freedom. That wouldn't happen. There's not enough of a relax or a break... That's really powerful... the safety, yeah... where no one can hear you.

The notion of “trying to get all the notes right” in an in-person group singing context speaks to O'Toole's (2005) comparison of the traditional choral rehearsal space to the panopticon. Here, the author references an architectural prison design that facilitates continual surveillance of the self and other, as discussed by Foucault (1979). Within traditional choral practices, singers and choral directors employ modes of surveillance as a means to control the musical output of the singers, with the aim of achieving a “unity of vision” (O'Toole, 2005, p. 17). The informal format of the online Childless Voices singing sessions, during which the singers were muted, addressed issues of surveillance of the other, although not surveillance of the self.

In addition to inspiring us to find our own ways of expressing ourselves through each song we learned, Helen also encouraged us to “protect” ourselves when singing songs that we found emotionally challenging. She let us know that we had the option to turn off our cameras or move out of view if we became visibly moved by what we were singing and felt uncomfortable in any way. Interestingly, many of us kept our cameras on and stayed in view during these moments, which is a testament to how comfortable we were in this space with each other. There were a few occasions when I did turn off my camera due to becoming visibly emotional while singing, particularly when my emotional reaction impacted my ability to continue singing in the moment. Having struggled for many years with vocal tension during my post-secondary classical voice training, I sometimes found it challenging to navigate the feelings of freedom that I experienced while singing in the Childless Voices sessions when I felt a sense of emotional

release that I found difficult to control. However, I did feel comfortable on some occasions to leave my camera on and also discuss how I was feeling with everyone in the session when these moments arose.

During one session in particular, Helen demonstrated her desire to create a more freeing musical environment. She asked us all to turn off our cameras so that we could work on “bigger and freer expression” while feeling we could perhaps be more “vulnerable” and open to feeling things. She was hoping that we would all feel able to “let it rip!” while we sang. When we had finished singing the song we were working on, Helen asked us to turn our cameras back on and talk to her about the experience. Sue, Nicola, and I all said that it felt “freeing” to sing with nobody able to see us. Sam, too, stated that she “felt easily capable of singing with feeling” through this experience. Helen’s approach to facilitating a singing practice that fosters freedom of the voice was in vast contrast to the traditional choral practices that O’Toole (2005) discusses. Through this practice, Helen relinquished all power to the singers, as she could neither see nor hear us. Thus, in that moment, we had complete control over our voices and the ways in which we chose to use them. This was a powerful moment, particularly as so many of the women I worked with had experienced silencing through their experience with involuntary childlessness.

**Growing Through the Breath.** In addition to the practice of turning off our cameras, Helen also worked to help us free our voices through breath work. She guided us through breathing exercises at the beginning of each session, as well as helping us to decide where to breathe while singing the songs we learned. Balén (2017) describes the communal nature of choral singing as “powerful” and entwined with the breath:

It begins with literal inspiration—to take in breath—the first requirement to singing.

Doing this well, as a group, in time, together, is a challenge at first clumsily attempted.

Slowly, through practice, it becomes a pleasurable rhythm, each body in tune with each other's breath. (p. 165)

While she is discussing the impact of breathing together in an in-person context, I perceive what Balén (2017) says as reflective of the online singing sessions. In this way, although we could all be seen breathing at different times, due to latency issues inherent on Zoom, the intent of the breath was there in a way that bound us together.

Sue expressed the freeing nature of the singing sessions in our final interview, which she attributed, in part, to the breath work that Helen did with us in each session. She stated that,

it feels quite freeing, I think. You know, apart from what I've said about being tired sometimes on a Tuesday night, sometimes you are tired, but actually it's quite opening and quite freeing, isn't it, to be sort of breathing and singing.

The benefits of breath work were also felt by Tracey, in relation to the development of her voice. Through the growth she felt in her vocal abilities, Tracey's confidence in herself as a singer grew. When asked whether she had noticed any changes in her voice since joining the Childless Voices Choir, she stated that she had been recording herself singing and felt that her breathing had improved. She equated this to Helen's guidance with where to breathe throughout each song that she taught us, saying, "the fact that Helen has taught us when to breathe, my singing has actually improved."

Sara also spoke about the benefits of breath work in the singing sessions. She had been suffering with respiratory issues that necessitated the use of an inhaler and was struggling to breathe and sing when she first began attending the sessions. She perceived some of her struggles as being related to the act of holding her physical voice in, which she equated with the state of both her physical and emotional wellbeing at the time. Sara is a meditation coach, a writer, and a

poet, and she spoke about the benefits of these activities in helping her find her voice through her childless grief. Additionally, she talked to me about the ways in which singing had also helped her in this journey:

I think I'm still exploring how I'm finding my voice through the singing...and the seeds are kind of growing, but I don't- because I do other things, you know, I can't pinpoint it just to that, but then I think it's the collective coming together, but I do find as well, the deeper- when I breathe better and I sing out more and I can be louder, I feel as though that's something of me, you know, embracing my voice as well. Because sometimes with the poetry and the writing it's more of that internal voice, right? It comes to the surface, but I think because we're singing outwards and it's that voice coming out...yeah, that can definitely strengthen and come out.

Similar to Sara's sense of growth in her voice, Catherine also found that the breathing and vocalizing warmups Helen began each singing session with contributed to a growth in her confidence as a singer. She spoke to me about this in our final one-on-one interview:

I do feel I've got, um, a much stronger singing voice, um, which obviously you can't hear, unfortunately. If only you could hear me! [LAUGHS] But...you know, I do feel- Yeah, and it's just something about learning about the breathing and breath and stuff. Yeah, the scales I think- I used to hate scales when I did piano as a child, but I think the scales are amazing, really helpful. Yeah, so I feel I'm a much stronger singer now than I was.

Building on the benefits of breath work, Sara explained to me that she perceived the 'coming out' of her voice as a physical thing that was supported by the internal work she had already been doing through her poetry and meditation. She had perceived her voice as "a bit



childish,” “high,” and “a bit girly” previous to working with Helen, but felt that, through the singing sessions, her voice had grown stronger:

I feel that with the singing, I can be more secure in who I am, but also I can be a bit more precise with my voice because I've held it with singing. Like, you know, I've done the inhale, I've sung, exhale, I can just be a little bit more precise, if that makes sense. Um, and it's just a bit more 'oomph' [LAUGHS] to the voice. So, I guess more physical, um, but also it could be finding the inner voice as well, right? Because, yeah, I've got my poetry and my writing but everything together is like a huge, you know, it's just a huge, yeah, a huge volcano that's just erupting.

I found the notion of Sara's voice—the literal and the figurative—being perceived as an ‘erupting volcano’ incredibly powerful, and reflective of many of the women's perceptions of their voices as being strengthened through singing.

As previously discussed, the online platform is not conducive to hearing all voices at the same time, due to issues of latency. However, through my analysis, there emerged a sense of togetherness from all of the Childless Voices singers because we were all singing along with Helen, whose voice we could hear. In relation to the formation of community, Turner (2012) discusses music as “no ordinary aspect of human experience” (p. 48). The author states that, “Our bodies have boundaries—skins—so we cannot merge all of our body with all of the others. But by intimately sharing precise *time*, owing to the transformative power of rhythm, we *can* merge, and we find we are not separate” (Turner, 2012, p. 48). Despite not being able to hear each other, and sometimes also not seeing each other, we perceived ourselves as a unified group, a singing community.

### *Singing Out*

For some of the women in this study, the grief of involuntary childlessness impacted their desire and ability to listen to music and/or to sing. According to these women, the emotional impact of listening to music had become challenging to navigate at varying points in their childless journeys. They perceived singing to have been made difficult due to both the emotional and physiological impact of childlessness. For these women, then, the act of joining the Childless Voices Choir, while exciting from a social perspective, was one which required both vulnerability and courage in relation to singing. Not all of the women who participated in the study had expectations of musical growth and development. For some, the idea of getting together online every week with other childless women, from a social perspective, was enough to entice them to join the sessions. However, the women who spoke to me about having lost the desire to listen to music found themselves once again enjoying musical listening through their participation in the weekly singing sessions. Additionally, the women who joined with the desire to develop their singing voices all perceived a positive difference, as did some whose intentions for joining did not originally centre around vocal development.

For Emma, listening to music had become too difficult during her journey with infertility and childlessness. By attending the weekly singing sessions, however, she found that she had begun to “reconnect with music again” and to enjoy it. She stated that “singing has definitely given me...a sort of channel to express myself...to sort of, um, connect again with music.” She was surprised at the level of enjoyment she had gained for singing, as her original focus of intent for joining the Childless Voices Choir was to connect socially with other childless women. She noticed an improvement in her singing voice, however, which led her to begin singing and humming more frequently around the house.

Tracey, too, had stopped engaging with music, both listening and singing, during the course of her treatments for infertility. She also frequently suffered with laryngitis during and after the treatment period, which caused her to fear joining the choir originally, as she feared losing her voice through singing and being unable to perform her teaching job. She spoke to me about her perception of her voice since participating in the weekly sessions, saying that she felt she had gained confidence in her singing voice. I found one example of this particularly important:

I did a recording and I actually sent it to a friend, which I wouldn't have done in the past...and they went "oh, you've got a beautiful voice!" and they were, like, saying to me "oh, I can't sing" and I said, "Don't say that. You can sing" [LAUGHS]...Yeah, so I have- I know I wouldn't have done that 'cause I know, um, like, I know I would have been too shy to have done that [before joining the Childless Voices Choir].

Singing is a vulnerable act that provides opportunities for personal growth (Welch, 2005). For many people, it takes a lot of courage to share a recording of themselves singing. Tracey spoke a lot in our interviews about feeling more courageous through her engagements with the CNBC community in general. It was clear from our conversation that participating in the weekly singing sessions played an important role in building her confidence levels, in relation to her singing voice.

Similar to Emma and Tracey, Anna had also stopped listening to music for a number of years due to the emotional impact of her childlessness. When she met her husband, she rediscovered her love for musical listening with him. When it came to singing, however, she found that the weight of her childless grief caused a heaviness in her chest that negatively impacted her ability to breathe effectively, which in turn impacted the quality of her vocal sound.

This was difficult for Anna because she had many years of community choral singing experience and, therefore, singing played an important role in her identity. Through her participation in the Childless Voices Choir, Anna rediscovered her love of singing, particularly through the freedom to choose the weeks that she attended the sessions, based upon which songs would be learned on any given week. Additionally, through what Anna described as the “relaxed” atmosphere that Helen created within the singing sessions, she once again “started to enjoy singing and just for the sake of singing.”

Lu and Catherine, who both had past experience with singing in a variety of contexts, also spoke to me about the positive impacts they perceived their participation in the Childless Voices Choir to have had on their singing voices and their connection to music in general. For Lu, whose musical background includes years of formal vocal training and engagement in professional and community singing, the sessions became very important to her overall feelings of musical and emotional wellbeing, particularly as she had felt unable to sing for a number of years because of her health: “Oh, they’ve been absolutely wonderful. It’s given me my singing back, which has been really therapeutic.” The notion of group singing as a therapeutic practice is supported by Bailey and Davidson (2005), who found in their work with a choir for homeless men that “group singing and performance can produce satisfying and therapeutic sensations” (p. 299).

Catherine had a multitude of varied singing experiences throughout her life, including choral singing through school, church, and community choirs. During our second interview, she stated that her mother and grandmother (an opera singer) both had very good singing voices. She also spoke about often feeling concerned that her pitch wasn’t correct when singing with others, and at times having had “a very strong [emotional] response” to this. She had been told on more

than one occasion, however, by people she was close with, that she had “a good voice.”

Catherine perceived her singing voice to have become “a little bit stronger” through what she deemed the “very strong, non-judgemental experience” of the weekly singing sessions.

Stephanie noticed an increase in her enjoyment of singing since joining the Childless Voices Choir. Her history with singing was not always positive, as she had been told as a child, by a teacher at school, that she could not sing. When she first met with Helen on Zoom for her one-on-one session before officially joining the choir, Stephanie sang for her. We had an interesting conversation about this interaction in our third interview:

Laura: So, as a child you were told you couldn't sing. Since singing with Helen's group, have you had any change of how-

Stephanie: Helen says I can sing. But then I am paying her [LAUGHS]

Laura: [LAUGHS] Not enough to make her say what wasn't true, I wouldn't think!

Stephanie: I mean, my flute teacher at some point...he sort of said, you know, you can tell whether a note's on pitch or not, so you can learn to sing...so he was of the opinion that I could sing, um, but I never opened my mouth in front of him. Uh, but then Helen said “You're not flat” um, and you're like, oh, well that's nice to find out, forty years later!

Laura: How did that really make you feel when she said that?

Stephanie: Um, lightly disbelieving, don't really trust it. Um, I'm definitely going to be a backing singer when we're on tour. I'd be better at that. Um, slightly angry in a ‘teachers shouldn't go ‘round saying that to kids’ kind of way. Um, but better I find out now and I can sing than not, sort of thing.

Despite the humour infused in our discussion, it was a poignant conversation. The idea that a teacher would tell a child that they cannot sing can have life-long detrimental outcomes to their musical identity (Forshaw, 2018), which rang true for Stephanie. She was grateful for the experience she had with Helen, however, as it helped to build her confidence in her voice and had a positive impact on the ways in which she began to engage with singing.

Stephanie also spoke to me about having stopped singing at some point in her childless journey, despite having been someone who sang regularly to herself while driving or when she was at home alone. Because of her participation in the weekly sessions, she began to notice herself singing at various times throughout the day, in the car or in the shower, for example. It was especially meaningful to hear Stephanie speak about how she felt about her voice since working with Helen:

I think I have improved over the year. Um, obviously there was a bit of- of course, from having the op in the middle of it, sort of thing. Um, but something that we sang that we'd sung last year I noticed that, sort of, I could get to the end of a sentence, sort of thing, that I hadn't been able to last time, and then you're like "Oh!" And I normally notice over the length of the session, towards the end when I've warmed up, that my voice has been a lot better. And occasionally I sing things and I think "oh, that sounded like a proper person!"

[LAUGHS]

It was heart-warming to hear how Stephanie's perception of her voice had been positively impacted by her experience singing with the Childless Voices Choir, particularly as her perception of her voice and herself as a singer had been lacking in confidence for the last forty years.

Harkening back to Sara's analogy of her voice as an "erupting volcano," the discussions I had with Lu, Catherine, Emma, Tracey, Anna, and Stephanie point to the emergence of musical enjoyment and vocal development through participation in the weekly singing sessions that facilitated the growth of these women's self confidence, both musically and personally.

### *Speaking Out*

Each of the women I worked with for this research came to the Childless Voices Choir at different stages of their childless grief. In this way, their perceptions of the impact of the weekly singing sessions on their experience of childlessness differed. Likewise, the impact of singing together, and learning from Helen, on their singing voices was varied. However, through my analysis of the weekly singing session observations, as well as the one-on-one and focus group interviews, there emerged a common theme for most—though not all—of the women, of growth and development of their literal and figurative voices in relation to how they perceived themselves to function in their circumstances as involuntarily childless. Many of the women noticed that, since joining the Childless Voices Choir, they were beginning to feel more confident in themselves and, thus, more likely to speak out about the experience of childlessness generally, if not always about their own circumstances specifically, within their familial, friendship, and work communities. They had begun to feel that the silencing they had experienced in the past did not take up as much space in their lives as it had previously. For some, this was equated with the new-found confidence they had developed in their singing voices. For others, their perception was that coming together with the other women in the choir for the weekly singing sessions, and being able to speak freely with them regarding their personal wellbeing and childless circumstances, aided in feeling a sense of solidarity with the other singers that improved their confidence in themselves. Hillier (2012) discusses the "feeling

of liberation from one's normal state" (p. 70) that group singing can foster. The author states that "to sing is also to place oneself in a special place...and...singing in chorus is if anything more powerful because of its communal nature and subservience to a common flow of feeling" (Hillier, 2012, p. 70). I relate the common flow of feeling that Hillier (2012) mentions to Turner's (2012) description of *communitas* as "the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning" (p. 1). Through the development of their self confidence, many—though not all—of the women who participated in this study felt that they had found their voices, both literally and figuratively.

As mentioned previously, the women I worked with came to the Childless Voices Choir at different times in their grief journeys. Some of the women had already established connections with the CNBC community through social media platforms such as Gateway Women, Facebook, and Instagram, which had helped them to meet other involuntarily childless women both online and in person. I spoke with all of the women about their perceptions of where their feelings of isolation, silence, and/or shame around their childlessness might have come from, as these themes arose, and some spoke to me about pronatalist ideologies and practices that had impacted their circumstances and their sense of disassociation from broader communities. Similarly, I spoke with them about their perceptions of the impact of singing together weekly on their experiences as childless women.

Chaskin (2013) discusses membership in communities as "partial; individuals belong to a multitude of associations and relationships and are tied to a number of different—and differently defined—communities" (p. 109). It is important to note that for some of the women in this study, their experience of participating in the Childless Voices Choir was not the only source of support and encouragement to speak out about their childless circumstances, nor about the adverse



impacts of pronatalism on how they function as childless women outside of the CNBC community. For most of the women I worked with, however, singing together in the weekly online sessions played an important role in mitigating the silence that permeated their lives in relation to their childlessness.

Catherine discussed with me the ways in which the weekly singing sessions, and Helen's approach to selecting and teaching songs, impacted her feelings about being involuntarily childless. Although she spoke about perhaps not feeling as emphatically as other members of the group about the positive impact that singing together has had on her experience as a childless woman, she did talk about singing as having made a small difference to how she feels about her circumstances, through the notion of "building up" her voice:

There is this idea of singing, you know, giving you a voice, isn't there? Which is one of the sort of difficulties about being involuntarily childless...I feel...it's sort of, I'm feeling a little bit easier about things, um, and I do feel...it's very difficult to look at what impacts what, but I do feel, going back to this idea of 'diva', kind of the strengths of the women who are also in the choir and the strengths of the songs, um, and also the emphasis on building up your voice, um, building up my voice has made me feel a little bit easier about not having children.

Like many of the women in the choir, Catherine had also worked hard to build community with other childless women through a variety of social activities, which she felt made it difficult to discern whether one activity could be singled out as having made the biggest impact on her life.

Sue, who perceived herself as "quite a long way down the childless journey now," spoke to me about the weekly singing sessions having played a role in freeing up both her singing and

speaking voice. She told me that she had spent many years of her adult life not speaking out “about much at all.” She attributed this to her childlessness, stating that,

I think I lost a lot of my confidence and self-esteem really, in terms of, um, I lost who I was, um, and I think it’s taken me a long time to get back to that really...Do I speak out now? Yeah, I do. I speak out more now when I don’t agree with things, which I probably didn’t for years. I would have just sort of sat, um, and sort of, just said nothing really.

While Sue felt that participating in the weekly singing sessions helped to free her voice, she also attributed this to a combination of other interactions she had had within the CNBC community:

Um, how much of that is down to the singing? I don’t know. It’s interesting, isn’t it? I think- it’s sort of interesting ‘cause I feel like, that the sort of singing has come as part of the package when I’ve done a lot of, um, well done other things as well, and I feel like all of them have sort of worked together really...which has been really beneficial, I think.

In our focus group interview with Catherine, Nicola, Sam, Sue, Tracey, and Anna, Sue mentioned that she had recently been speaking more openly about her participation in the Childless Voices Choir, and her experience as an involuntarily childless woman, with her colleagues at work, saying to the group,

I think most people know this, I’m quite a long way down my childless journey now.

Um, I feel like it’s freed up my breathing and I feel like it’s freed up my voice to be a bit more honest. I mean, I’ve told a lot of people at work that I’m in this choir, um, and that it’s a childless choir and all sorts of other things, which I never really have before. So, I’ve had a lot more conversations, particularly at work with people, um, about my circumstances, which, um, yeah, which has been really interesting actually, and really

positive. Um, so yeah, although it sort of involves my singing voice, I feel like it's also just freed up my ability to speak really, if that makes sense.

Tracey, too, spoke to me about the positive impact that singing in the Childless Voices Choir had on her confidence in relation to speaking out and speaking up for herself outside of the CNBC community, stating that, "I think the singing has definitely made me more confident." Similar to Sue, Tracey also attributed the growth in her self-confidence to participation in other activities related to involuntary childlessness; specifically, a course she took that focused on empowering women who had been abused by their partners. Through joining the choir and taking this course, she noticed that she had become "quite outspoken" with family and friends in relation to both her childlessness and her feelings in general, which she perceived as a vast difference from how she used to engage within her personal relationships. She stated that, "I've become more confident in speaking up. I've got more of a voice now than I used to, since singing." One specific example of her new-found confidence that Tracey gave in our focus group interview, after Sue had spoken about her work interactions, was a conversation she had at church with a past work colleague:

When I went to church on Sunday, um, I actually met a person I used to work with in London, which was a surprise 'cause I haven't seen her for five years, and she said, "I can't believe the transformation in you, Tracey!" She said, "I remember in London you were really timid after your treatment," 'cause obviously she knew I'd had [fertility] treatment, and she said, "I can't get over how much you're now speaking out and how confident you are." So yeah, so I agree with you Sue. I think I found my voice. I'd lost my voice for many years, and I think I've got it back.

Even in putting this interaction down on paper, I am moved by the feelings that Tracey expressed during that focus group interview. Hearing her speak about the positive impact of singing on her voice and, consequently, her self-confidence, was an important reminder of why I undertook this research, and why the work that Helen has done for the CNBC community in starting the Childless Voices Choir is so meaningful.

Stephanie also engaged in multiple activities related to the CNBC community, which she perceived as having had a positive impact on her desire and ability to speak out against injustices she faced in her personal and professional lives. In addition to participating in the Childless Voices Choir, she also attended a Reignite Weekend<sup>9</sup> hosted through Gateway Women, which she found to be a helpful step towards working through her childless grief. Stephanie spoke to me in one of our interviews about an email she had been working on composing, regarding a traumatic gynaecological experience she had had that was tied in with her ovarian cancer diagnosis. While not a formal complaint towards the consultant whose care she was in, Stephanie felt it was important to speak out about her experience so that it might prevent a similar experience happening to somebody else. She told me about a meaningful encounter she had with another member of the Childless Voices Choir at our Christmas get-together, in relation to this issue:

I was talking to one of the girls at the Christmas meal and she'd done the same in that she had done a formal complaint and she felt the same in an 'I need to stop this happening to

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<sup>9</sup> Reignite Weekends are hosted multiple times a year and in multiple countries around the world (UK, USA, Canada, & Australia). They were founded by Jody Day (2013), whose book, *Living the Life Unexpected*, acts as a sort of 'Holy Grail' within the CNBC community. The purpose of this book is "to support childless-not-by-choice women as they move forward with their lives (Day, 2013, back cover). The Reignite Weekends build upon the steps outlined in Day's (2013) book to guide childless women in healing from their grief in an in-person group setting.

somebody else' kind of way. Um, and that was like, Yes! She's got it, I can do it! Of course, every time I go back to the email it's hugely triggering on my PTSD and I end up no good for anything for a few days, sort of thing. And I'm trying to get the bloody thing sent...and you're like "Gah!" Um, but you're like, "no, I can do this." Um, and yeah, it's sort of that solidarity bit with each other, sort of thing, to speak out about it.

Adams (2008) states that, "empowerment is about taking control, achieving self-direction, seeking inclusiveness rooted in connectedness with the experiences of other people. It concerns individual achievement and social action. One aspect feeds another" (p. 18). I perceive the combination of CNBC-related activities that Stephanie had sought inclusiveness and connection through as leading to a sense of empowerment. Her efforts to take control and achieve her goal of speaking out against injustice regarding highly personal and sensitive issues is evidence of this.

Sara also spoke to me about the impact of engaging in multiple activities within the CNBC community on her self-confidence and her ability to speak more openly about her childless experience. She explained how, when asked whether she had children, it had become easier for her to discuss her situation, which was "a really big thing. That I could say to someone I didn't really know, 'no, we don't have children. We tried,' about the adoption, 'no, we tried, didn't work out.'" Sara perceived this as an important realization, as she felt that she would not have said this to anybody earlier in her grief journey. While Sara attributed a large part of her speaking out to the online meditation classes she facilitated for involuntarily childless women, and the work she did through social media to advertise them, she also spoke about the beneficial nature of her combined experiences:

I do sometimes put things up about the singing, that I'm in this group, but I don't- I tag Helen but I don't necessarily say- oh no, I do tag childless not by choice, too, so I guess I do tell people, but I don't outwardly tell people...I mean, they can see that for themselves I guess. It's more subtle...I mean it's not singing as such that has, um, has allowed me to speak out for, to speak up about that, but it's a part of the bigger picture. It's like all parts coming together, um, which is the collective. So, it's just building that up...I don't even know if I'd be able to really be so vocal about my classes if it wasn't that I had the support of everyone, that I had the singing, that I had Gateway, you know? It's that kind of support network which then helps come out in all ways.

Here, Sara's experiences of publicly speaking up and being vocal about her meditation classes seems to have been inspired, in large part, by the empowering nature of a sense of community and solidarity felt within the CNBC community. Adams (2008) defines empowerment as,

the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. (p. 17)

Sara is very active in the CNBC community through her online meditation classes. As mentioned previously, she is also a writer and a poet. She has worked hard to market herself and to provide meaningful services to the CNBC community as both an advocate and an ally in the healing process of other involuntarily childless women.

In our final interview, Lu talked about the benefits of engaging with other childless women, through the Childless Voices Choir specifically, to her self-confidence, and the ways in which she addresses the rising need to speak more openly and publicly about the experience of

childlessness. She discussed the importance of educating those outside of the community as a means to de-stigmatize the experience, including speaking about topics that are deeply personal and uncomfortable for her to discuss, such as her medical issues and the feelings that surround her childless experience:

we're all guilty of not seeing things that aren't there until somebody tells us, but...when it's compounded with other things, you do start to feel like you've gotta vocalize things, you've got to say things, you've got to show things because otherwise people won't know. And that's been good for me in a way actually because it's just meant that I've had to get more comfortable saying things, 'cause I never used to talk about private things at all.

Lu's drive to publicly raise consciousness about her experience with chronic illness and involuntary childlessness speaks to a sense of empowerment gained through her participation in the Childless Voices Choir. Her desire to advocate for acknowledgement and critical awareness of her experience reflects that of other stigmatized individuals "who are denied full social recognition and value" (Balén, 2017, p. 15). Balén (2017) states that those in Lu's position "must begin the journey of social change by developing safe places where they can counter the social narratives that deny them dignity and affirm their stories of themselves and thereby experience being held in their full human dignity" (p. 15). The Childless Voices Choir is one of those spaces.

### **Mitigating Shame: Identity Transformation and Affective Solidarity**

Shame is attributed, in the literature, to the perception of oneself as less-than, worthless, inadequate, and/or lacking, among other negative self-perceptions (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Lewis, 1998). For involuntarily childless women, these self-perceptions are

often rooted in the socially constructed gendered notion that the successful fulfillment of a woman's life course is dependent on having children (Loftus & Andriot, 2012). Thus, by not attaining the status of Mother, we are perceived as having failed in some way (Miall, 1986). The disenfranchised grief that permeates the experience of involuntary childlessness emerge through their isolating and silencing impact (Attig, 2004; Kauffman, 2002). Isolation and silence work to stigmatize the identities of involuntarily childless women. Thus, isolation and silence can be named as key components of their experience of shame.

Emergent through my analysis of social and musical interactions between members of the Childless Voices Choir was the ability of community building and the development of empowerment to mitigate feelings of shame. The women I worked with in this study developed a strong sense of community both within and outside of the weekly online singing sessions, which worked to mitigate feelings of social isolation. Through social cohesion and the experience of *communitas* within this social and musical space, they expressed feelings and acts of solidarity with members of this singing community that helped shape their individual and collective identities. The act of singing together, in addition to social interactions that took place during the singing sessions, aided in developing their literal and figurative voices so that their confidence in both their ability to sing and to speak out was positively impacted. Additionally, a growth in many of the women's critical awareness of the impact of marginalizing and stigmatizing pronatalist discourses, on their own—and others'—experience of involuntary childlessness, contributed to the development of self-empowerment that worked to mitigate feelings of shame. While engagement in the Childless Voices Choir aided in mitigating isolation, silence, and shame for most of the women who participated in this study, it is important to note that for some, feelings of shame were still experienced when engaging outside of the CNBC community. In the



following, I explore the ways in which shame was mitigated, within the Childless Voices space, through the theoretical lenses of community, solidarity, and empowerment.

*Singing Together, Apart: Community as identity*

**Group Singing and the Transformation of Identity.** Group singing is an activity that, in ‘normal’ circumstances, takes place in person. Individuals come together to engage both musically and socially in one geographical location. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, in-person group singing was forbidden in the UK (as in many other countries), due to policies put in place by the government. Online platforms such as Zoom are not set up to enable coherent group singing, due to latency issues. However, as explored earlier, the Childless Voices singing sessions were structured by Helen in such a way that both social interactions and musical learning took place regularly and with equal importance, positively impacting singers’ musical and social experiences. Despite the challenges posed by online group singing formats, most of the women I interviewed spoke about their experience in the singing sessions as singing *together*. In this way, many of the women felt connected to Helen and the other singers, musically, socially, emotionally, and personally, through the act of singing.

When analyzed through Delanty’s (2018) theory of community, the sense of togetherness discussed by the singers emerges as an identity-shaping experience on both individual and collective levels. For Delanty (2018), “community is essentially social; it is expressed in communicative contexts and is the basis of social recognition of the Other” (p. 105). The musical and social environment of this singing community helped to both define and shape the musical and personal identities of the participants through “images and feelings of identity, belonging, shared circumstance, and common cause” (Chaskin, 2013, p. 105). Below, I explore the ways in

which singing in the Childless Voices Choir impacted singers' musical and social identities through silence, song choice, and social interaction.

*Shaping Identity in Silence.* Despite the necessity to mute singers during the weekly sessions, Helen facilitated a musical learning space that felt welcoming, safe, non-judgemental, and encouraging to the women I worked with in this study. In fact, for some singers, the necessity of being muted while singing was something that gave them comfort, as they preferred to not be heard. For Sue, singing while muted was an aspect of the sessions that appealed to her because of how she perceives herself as a 'non-singer': "I'll be honest, for me, the sort of Zoom idea is very nice, 'cause I know people can't hear me, so it doesn't matter, um, that I'm a bit hopeless." Stephanie, too, given her history of being told she couldn't sing, was happy to not be heard by other members of the group. When I asked her in our third interview what her initial goals were when joining the Childless Voices Choir, the first thing Stephanie said was, laughingly, "to sing without being heard." She later added that she didn't intend to sing out loud initially, but that she found herself joining in because "the marvelousness of, um, the choir being on Zoom is, nobody hears me! Yay! [LAUGHS]"

Neither Sue nor Stephanie self-identified as 'singers,' which they spoke to me about in their one-on-one interviews more than once. Lu and Anna, however, had many years of experience singing in both solo and group contexts and, thus, felt comfortable self-identifying as singers. Unlike Stephanie, the notion of being muted appealed to Lu not because she did not want people to hear her voice, but because she felt there was less pressure on her to sing at a particular level of achievement in the informal group learning environment. This made the musical experience one that she felt could be for herself. In relation to this, she stated that,

it's almost like a singing lesson but it hasn't got that pressure, 'cause it's gonna be, you know, I'm not gonna have that pressure of thinking, "oh, I'm not improving," or "I'm gonna be like this or like this," because no one can hear me, so it's just for me, you know?

Additionally, the nature of Lu's chronic illness is such that she is often unable to participate in in-person group activities due to the concern of sudden onsets of debilitating pain. The anxiety caused by these experiences has led Lu to avoid activities such as singing in choirs because she fears letting people down if she is unable to participate fully. In relation to this, she spoke to me about the perceived benefits of the online format of the Childless Voices singing sessions:

it's a real community feeling and there's not, like, pressure. You turn up when you wanna turn up, so...I think that probably makes the difference with it being online. That is really the difference. Because your voice can't be heard, it also can't be *not* heard if you're not there [LAUGHS]. You're not causing a vacuum. You're not causing a problem because you're not there, because you do feel that very much as somebody with health problems.

The nature of the Childless Voices singing space quelled Lu's fear of letting down the other members of the singing group, which enabled her to identify as an integral part of the community despite her illness and the complications and limitations she faced because of it.

For Anna, part of the appeal of the singers being muted during the singing sessions was being able to hear Helen modelling the songs while teaching them to us. We would be encouraged by Helen to sing along but, for Anna, being muted meant that she could stop singing at any given point to listen to Helen, which had a positive emotional impact:

I love listening to Helen sing. Um, she's got a lovely voice, and when she's...feeling it, 'cause you know, we all go through ups and downs, but when she's feeling- and you can

tell when she is and she'll get into a song and she'll start scatting and she'll start, you know, doing her own thing, and I love that. Sometimes I'll just stop singing and listen to her but, you know, that's equally as nice, um, as singing myself.

Having gone years without being able to listen to music due to the emotional impact of her childlessness, the experience of active listening played an important role in Anna's enjoyment of the singing sessions and the rediscovery of her identity as an active musical listener.

Hillier (2012) states that, in group singing contexts,

[t]he singers may sing for themselves, but the experience is always a collective one as well, and the song is experienced as a social act, a shared reenactment of the story – though of course this does not negate the individual reactions and feelings of each singer and listener. (pp. 74-75)

The author's discussion on group singing as both an individual and communal act, while focused on in-person choral performances, can be related to the ways in which Sue, Stephanie, Lu, and Anna experienced the online format of the Childless Voices singing sessions both individually and as a community.

*Shaping Identity in Song.* For some singers, the songs that Helen thoughtfully selected to teach each week contributed to the shaping of individual and collective identities through the ways in which singers connected with the musical, textual, and/or emotional elements of each. According to Trevarthen (2002),

[t]he function of music is to enhance in some way the quality of individual experience and human relationships; its structures are reflections of patterns of human relations, and the value of a piece of music is inseparable from its value as an expression of human experience. (p. 21)

In relation to the expression of human experience, one song in particular, *Both Sides Now*, by Joni Mitchell, had a profound impact on Emma's sense of emotional connectedness to the group, which she said felt "empowering." When I asked her what it was about the experience of singing this song together that impacted her, she responded:

I think the lyrics. Um, also the melody. It's such a beautiful song. Um, I think seeing how emotional everybody was together, it's sort of like that's ok. It's ok to feel like that and it's ok to feel emotional together and...we all kind of accepted each other's grief in that moment, um, and sort of, um, yeah just felt it together.

Balén (2017) describes the act of singing together as one which "defines a space and creates an experience of identity within community" (p. 29). Given the disenfranchisement of grief that permeates the lives of involuntarily childless women, the communal acceptance of feeling that Emma perceived within the singing space is validation of the childless identity not as defined by childlessness, but as shaped by it.

Catherine referred on more than one occasion during our interviews to the strength of the group, and its individual members, as related to the idea of the 'diva.' She defined a 'diva' identity as rooted in "being strong, feeling strong, but not in a kind of stronger than other people, but feeling as strong as others," which she felt had an impact on her feeling of connectedness to the group. At one point in our interview, Catherine also used the term 'diva' to describe the nature of the songs we learned during the singing sessions, again relating to the notion of "strength." She also spoke about the impact of the notion of 'diva' on her identity as emerging through the songs that she learned:

What I really loved is sort of reframing myself as a sort of middle-aged, single, childless woman as not becoming a diva but this idea that you can still be a sort of glamorous

person singing these fabulous songs... 'cause they're glamorous, but also there's a lot of us in these songs. A lot of strength in these people who sang them, so the original singers.

Many of the songs that Helen selected to teach us were written and/or originally performed by women; some who have children and others who do not. Helen spoke often in the singing sessions about the notion of empowerment in relation to some of the songs she taught us, labelling some as rooted in "early girl power," which relates to Catherine's notion of the 'diva.' While almost all of the songs that Helen selected to teach us resonated with most of the singers, some did not. For most of the women, there were particular genres of music that they did not enjoy listening to or singing (e.g., Jazz, musical theatre, etc.). At times, the mood of particular songs did not fit singers' emotional needs on any given day. There were times, however, when even the most resistant of singers were pleasantly surprised by the experience of learning a song they did not originally believe they would find interesting or enjoyable. In these moments, singers' musical identities were shaped by the educative experience of exploring new genres of song.

*Shaping Identity Through Community.* In addition to the experience of singing together, the social interactions that took place during the weekly singing sessions also worked to shape—and validate—the singers' identities, particularly in relation to their childlessness. Chaskin (2013) describes communities as "affective units of belonging and identity" through which "social support, mutual aid...[and] collective action" (p. 109) can be assumed. Here, I relate Chaskin's (2013) notion of community to the feelings of support felt by the singers, as expressed in our interviews. The isolation, silencing, and shame that was experienced due to their childlessness worked to stigmatize their identities through the gendered notions of what it means to be a woman. Through social interactions that took place during the weekly singing sessions,

however, the participants articulated the ways in which their identities were reshaped through the experience of community building.

Anna discussed the ways in which her social interactions in the weekly singing sessions impacted her identity, saying that making new friends in the group and being able to talk to them about her experience as an involuntarily childless woman “helped me to find out more what I am.” She attributed her ability to connect to the other women in the group, in large part, to not having to hide who she was behind “a mask.” Sara also discussed the positive impact of social interactions that do not involve feeling judged or criticized. She described the singing session space as understanding, kind, and one in which she felt “comfortable” speaking openly about her experience as a childless woman. She perceived herself as being able to engage in the space authentically, as her true self.

Stephanie, too, spoke about feeling free to “just be how you are” and not having to “put on a front about it” as having a positive impact on her experience in the singing sessions. Because of her cancer diagnosis and subsequent surgeries, Stephanie suffered an immense amount of trauma, which is in itself an identity-altering experience (Wirtz, 2014). Her inability to engage in her normal activities, because of her health issues, also impacted her identity. Feeling “safe” to express herself authentically in the Childless Voices singing sessions thus aided in reshaping her identity in a positive way. Further to the authentic expression of one’s identity, Lu discussed the benefits of not needing to “hold back” and feeling free to be “completely yourself” in the singing sessions. She attributed this to the non-judgemental atmosphere of the group, which she likened to “a bit of a confessional sanctuary,” stating that, “it’s like everybody knows it’s a vault and whatever they say just stays in the vault and it’s not judged, you know?” Given the high propensity for feeling judged and found wanting outside of the CNBC

community, having a space in which one can feel free to express themselves authentically without being made to feel ashamed was incredibly important to the Childless Voices singers.

Lu spoke about the Childless Voices Choir, and the CNBC community as a whole, as a group to which she is happy to belong and identify with:

This is what I mean about it being kind of something where you feel a bit special as well because if all these great women are in this group, then I must be a bit special 'cause I'm in it as well. I know Jody [Day] always says it's the group you never wanted to be a part of but once you're part of it, it's quite, you know, it's quite good.

The notion of feeling “special” based on membership in a community to which stigma and shame are generally attached, is evidence of a positive transformation of identity in relation to Lu's perception of herself as a childless woman.

***Communitas and Collective Identity Assertion.*** Sartwell (2002) states that, “community and identity are bound up with one another...[Y]our community bequeaths you an identity: it articulates a range of possible or acceptable roles” (p. 50). Despite the online platform through which the Childless Voices singing sessions were facilitated, many of the singers expressed feeling a sense of community through singing together which, as demonstrated above, impacted their musical, social, and personal identities. According to Delanty (2018), “community can have a transformative role” (p. 55). Through analysis of some of the singers' interviews, wherein they spoke about the act of singing in relation to the formation of community, there emerged the theme of *communitas* as having played a role in shaping their identities through the act of singing together. *Communitas* happens when participants experience (or find themselves in) “a state of alignment” (Turner, 2012, p. 197). It is “an activity” (Turner, 2012, p. 220) that emerges through liminality, the state of being “betwixt and between” (Turner,



2012, p. 4). I perceived the Childless Voices sessions as liminal moments, wherein singers stepped out of their everyday routines to enter the space with open hearts and an eagerness to learn and engage both musically and socially.

Turner (2012) and Trevarthen (2002) discuss musical practice, specifically, as a transformative act. For Trevarthen (2002), this relates to the transformation of identity:

Our identity is our place in a collaborative awareness of the world and what to do in it... We gain this identity and keep it alive by celebrating the actions, feelings and experiences that we can share—and among the most intimate and powerful of things to share are the ritualized patterns of art, and especially the temporal arts, of which music, song and dance can be the most spontaneous and sincere. (p. 34)

According to Turner (2012), *communitas* is “a gift from liminality” (p. 4), and the notion of music as a spontaneous and sincere ritualized pattern of art relates to the “ephemeral” (Turner, 2012, p. 43) and liminal nature of music as optimal grounds for *communitas*.

In addition to the above examples of individual identity transformation, Emma and Lu articulated their perceptions of group identity transformation which emerged through what Trevarthen (2002) and Turner (2012) describe as *communitas*. Emma described this notion as a connection felt between women who share the experience of involuntary childlessness when they sing together:

The connection that I sort of feel singing with people who know about childlessness and what that feels like, it's quite powerful sometimes. Um, and yeah, it can sometimes sort of bring out emotions and things. I guess it's that sort of feeling of togetherness. Um, I think if you were sitting on your own singing a song, um, yeah that's nice, but if you're

sitting together as a group and everyone's singing the same song, it feels like a supportive...togetherness I think, yeah.

Here, Emma described the sense of togetherness as moving, through the communal nature of the act of singing, despite the online format of the singing sessions.

Lu spoke to me about the "special" nature of the experience of singing together on the Zoom sessions, which she acknowledged as different than in-person singing:

It's not the same as being in a room with everybody, but there is a real- I don't know how you can even define it, but there is a real aspect to it, where you still feel the presence of everybody else and you still get a lot of what you get in a choir and maybe other things that you don't get in a choir where you're all in the same room. You're missing hearing everybody but you've got other stuff instead. It's very special I think, and I think it surprised everybody, how valuable it has been for people.

Hillier (2012) describes groups singing as a "social act" that is felt both individually and collectively, as

[t]he singers may sing for themselves, but the experience is always a collective one as well, and the song is experienced as a social act, a shared reenactment of the story – though of course this does not negate the individual reactions and feelings of each singer and listener. (Hillier, 2012, pp. 74-75)

Within the above examples, the act of singing in the online space of the sessions was perceived as both individual and collective.

### **A Different Sort of Knowing in Solidarity**

The "knowing self" (Haraway, 1988) is one who arrives at a place of understanding through varied personal experiences shaped by outside influences unique to each 'knower'. Thus,

what one knows and how one comes to that knowledge can never be claimed as the same for any two individuals. The social and musical interactions that took place during the weekly Childless Voices sessions allowed Helen and the singers to know each other, in many cases quite intimately, through the experience of *communitas*. Within the musical and social space, the women shared aspects of themselves that many had not shared with others previously, particularly regarding their experiences with involuntary childlessness. The complexity of involuntary childlessness is such that, despite similarities perceived within and between the women's circumstances, no two experiences were the same. The women also entered the singing space from varying points in their childless journeys, with some perceiving themselves as grieving and some as having moved through their grief. These two elements of the ways in which they identified with childlessness guaranteed differences of affect towards the experience. Additionally, the knowledge with which each member of the Childless Voices Choir arrived in the space was shaped uniquely, based on their individual perceptions of the interactions and knowledge sharing that took place.

Hemmings (2012) interrogates solidarity as a form of empathetic bonding through her notion of affective solidarity. The author argues that affective solidarity provides the basis for social transformation through "the experience of dissonance" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 150), in relation to affect. As such, Hemmings (2012) states that,

in order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance. (p. 150)

In this way, Hemmings (2012) expands upon Delanty's (2018) notion of solidarity as "a capacity for action" (p. 53) by examining "how we might move from individual experience to collective feminist capacity" (p. 150) through differences of affect towards social issues that knowers have a desire to change.

Through analysis of interviews and singing session observations, there emerged a sense of affective solidarity within the communal bonds that developed as a result of the sharing of knowledge and experience between members of the Childless Voices Choir. In discussion with Catherine, Sam, Sue, Anna, and Stephanie, issues of acknowledgement, pronatalism, the experience of grief, and knowledge sharing were raised as points of departure for thinking about the formation of community bonds within the singing space. Within these discussions, the individual knowledge and experience that these women brought to their community were made evident. Additionally, as I observed and participated in the weekly singing sessions, I witnessed the sharing of these knowledges on multiple occasions.

Catherine reflected upon the ways in which a lack of understanding of the societal structures within which involuntarily childless women function can lead to negative affect, namely, "internalized responses" to the experience. She also explained that, although she perceived herself to have an awareness of the impact of pronatalist discourses on childless women, her knowledge did not make her "feel any better" about her own circumstances. She did, however, feel that her situation and feelings toward it were "acknowledged" when engaging with others who felt "quite strongly about the societal and systemic issues" that impact the lives of involuntarily childless women.

Sam also perceived herself to understand the impact of pronatalism on the CNBC community. She attributed this understanding largely to her own reflective thinking over time,

however, as opposed to her interactions with other members of the Childless Voices Choir. She spoke of the impact of her time spent exploring pronatalist ideologies during her own grief journey as bringing her to “the place where I’ve got more acceptance with how things are and kind of that thing of...reaching for this something that’s always gonna be out of your grasp.” Her perception of the consequence of understanding and knowledge acquisition was that “it feels more sort of empowered and it’s really positive.” Sam discussed, in great detail, the societal messages that she perceived as largely rooted in patriarchal ideologies that promote governmental control of the economy:

It’s all around, this idea that you will be fulfilled when you have this family- which family means children. Um, and you know, this family’s- you’re gonna be complete, you know, you’re gonna love each other even more and everything’s gonna be better and it’s all lovely and, you know...we’re fed this image, I think for various reasons ‘cause...at the minute they want people to have children to contribute to, you know, the tax systems and there’s a lot of money on baby stuff, you know? Not just stuff you have to buy, but all, you know, expensive prams and so, from an economic, uh, thing, even...we’re fed this thing that, you know...you won’t be happy or fulfilled until you have this family. Um, and I just thought, it’s just rubbish, you know? Neither one thing nor the other thing is better than the other. It’s just different, you know? And you are who you are and you are enough as that person and you’re still that person whether that includes with children tagged along or not, you know?

Similar to Sam, Sue did not attribute how she thought about her own experience with involuntary childlessness to her engagement within the Childless Voices environment. She did, however, discuss the impact of learning about the others’ situations on how she viewed the experience of

childlessness on a broader scale. Additionally, she felt that being able to speak with other childless women about the ways in which she had been changed through her experiences, and the perceived outcomes of her childless journey, as positive:

It was quite nice talking to one particular member of the group last week who's literally ten years younger than me, um, and I could very much see myself in what she was talking about, you know, maybe, probably fifteen years ago and, um, it was nice to be able to talk to her about how things changed for me and moving forward and I know she enjoyed that as well, so that was sort of nice, to try and give a picture of, well ok, it doesn't have to be the end of life, um, you know, alright, it's a different life, but that sort of side of it, I think. Um, I dunno, it's hard, isn't it? 'Cause again it's that sort of conscious thing. There was a lot of talk about sort of Plan Bs last weekend [at the Christmas lunch] and that, and again I'm not sure I ever really had a plan B [LAUGHS] and I think one's gradually sort of materialized, but I think it's more by luck than judgement really [LAUGHS]. I'm not sure, um, but then I wonder if that's how it's meant to work out really. Um, you know, I'm not sure you can force a lot of this. It's like any grief process, isn't it? I think it will take its own path and its own time, and I think I already knew that, but I think that sort of very much came home to me last weekend as well.

In reference to sharing knowledge rooted in personal experience, on feelings of solidarity among and between the Childless Voices singers, Anna and Stephanie spoke about the impact of learning from each other as a positive experience. For Anna, engaging with others who understood the experience of childlessness, despite differences of affect, impacted her positively through the sense of belonging that she felt within the singing session space. She attributed this sense of belonging to the act of knowledge sharing, stating that, "we've got a bond and we can

learn from each other as well.” The process of moving from affective dissonance to affective solidarity is described by Hemmings (2012) as seeking to “enhance knowledge and create the conditions for transformation through an engagement with others across difference” (p. 151). Thus, the potential for the transformation of individual and group identity is supported through affective solidarity. Affective solidarity, then, was experienced among the Childless Voices members, working to mitigate feelings of shame that emerged through isolation and silencing as a result of their childless circumstances.

Stephanie’s experiences outside of the CNBC community in relation to her health issues and subsequent childlessness had been traumatic and largely invalidating. However, she felt acknowledged through the support shown by members of the singing group, stating that it “feels really validating that some portion of people think, ‘blimey! That’s all been a bit crap,’ um, ‘Good for you that you’re still vertical,’ sort of thing.” In addition to feeling acknowledged herself, Stephanie also expressed her desire to see the experiences and resilience of the other women in the group acknowledged, having learned about the other group members’ childless journeys:

everybody has sort of gone through hell to get here, um, and somebody’ll be, I don’t know, writing an anthem in praise of us all or something [LAUGHS], but everybody had such an awful time. Um, you only get here by having an awful time, um, and it’s all buried from most people. Um, and that society tucks it all away ‘cause they don’t want to be involved with any of that when, yeah, there should be a film made about us or something [LAUGHS].

Stephanie’s desire to have her own and others’ resilience in the face of their experiences acknowledged relates to Balén’s (2017) notion of personhood as “reciprocally dependent on each

other's acknowledgement of it" (p. 140). The feelings of shame that arise from the stigmatized experience of involuntary childlessness are closely linked with individual and group identity. A lack of acknowledgement of the strength and resilience of those positioned as other through their childlessness works to situate their identities as stigmatized. The forming of community bonds in solidarity among members of the Childless Voices Choir, however, worked to mitigate the shame felt by many of them, as a consequence of their stigmatized identities, through the development of an empowered voice. What follows is a discussion of this development, and the notion of an empowered voice, through the lens of self-empowerment and consciousness-raising.

### **Self-Empowerment as the Catalyst for Moving Forward**

As evidenced in this chapter, participation in the Childless Voices Choir aided in mitigating the isolation, silence, and shame experienced by the singers as a consequence of their childlessness. The musical and social interactions that took place within the online environment were facilitated in such a way that the women felt free to express themselves as they chose. Their choice to speak out, sing out, listen, embrace silence, and/or not participate during the weekly singing sessions worked to engender individual agency. Empowerment is often described in the literature as facilitating the positive personal and social transformation of marginalized and/or oppressed groups and individuals by those in positions of power (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016). While problematic power dynamics are often embedded with 'traditional' choral practices (O'Toole, 2005), the space facilitated by Helen was one in which hierarchies were broken down through acts of vulnerability and reflexive practice. The facilitator/participant relationship was thus perceived by group members not as equal, *per se*, but as reciprocal. Within the space, a sense of empowerment was developed through feelings of solidarity among and between this community of involuntarily childless women. Subsequently, the supportive nature of this



dynamic community gave rise to the development of self-empowerment through knowledge sharing and the recognition, critique, and resistance (Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 2018) of the disempowering pronatalist discourses governing their lives.

Freire (2018) states that in order to liberate oneself from oppressive discourses, one must gain an in-depth understanding of the world through the praxis of critical reflection and engagement with the other. According to Freire (2018), this form of consciousness-raising, or “conscientização” (p. 66), is taken, not given; “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (p. 47, original italics). As a practice, then, the act of consciousness-raising, and the subsequent development of self-empowerment, serve as a significant and continual learning process requiring self-awareness, self-critique, and reflexivity from the individual (Adams, 2008). However, this process, while dependent upon individual reflexive practice, is not achieved alone. As Balén (2017) states, “finding and maintaining voice—a socially empowered voice...needs to take place on an individual as well as a group level” (p. 15).

As discussed here, my analysis showed that the women I worked with in this study developed a sense of affective solidarity through learning about, and reflecting upon, the individual and varied experiences of others in the singing group. Additionally, the development of an empowered voice was made manifest through musical and social interactions that took place during the weekly singing sessions. The result of this growth and development was such that they experienced a transformation of their musical, social, and personal identities, which led to the perception of themselves as being capable of moving forward through their grief. For some, moving forward meant finding hope within their circumstances. For others, it was a realization of the transformation of identity that had already taken place through their childless

journeys. And for many, it was the discovery of a desire to act against the oppressive pronatalist discourses that had governed their lives. I explore these findings below.

***Moving Forward - Reimagining the Self***

Anna and Stephanie, whose experiences with childlessness had greatly affected their mental health, discussed the impact of participating in the Childless Voices Choir as having fostered an awareness of the possibility for moving through their grief. For Anna, the opportunity to meet women who perceived themselves as further along in their childless journeys was deeply impactful to her self-confidence, which she attributed to “seeing that other people have been through this as well and come out the other side.” Stephanie’s sense of hope for her future was also impacted by getting to know the women whose grief had been worked through for a longer period of time:

I think it gives you hope, um, in a future. Um, and that you can have nice things. Um, nice experiences and kind of meaningful things, even if you haven’t got children. And sort of getting to know- ‘cause people are at different stages of where they are with everything. So, you do meet people a bit further down the line to where you are and that’s helpful from that point of view as well.

A sense of growth in self confidence was apparent when speaking with Lu and Sara. In our final interview, when asked what impact participating in the Childless Voices Choir had had on her perception of herself as an involuntarily childless woman, Lu stated that she had believed for a long time that her purpose as a woman was to have children. Through her musical and social engagements in the singing sessions, she stated that she had come to the realization that, “that’s not all I’m here for. That’s not what I’m here for.” Similarly, Sara discussed the impact of

the singing sessions as transforming her perceptions of herself, which was entwined with how she thought about the experience of involuntary childlessness in general:

I think the impact of the classes on the way that I think about being childless, because so many people think being childless is “poor you, poor you,” and I think these classes have really shown me- I don’t know if it’s more internal, or if it’s- but it’s more like it’s shown me that I can be more than childless, if that makes sense...I just feel as though, going forward and the impact of these classes means that I can be, I don’t know, I don’t wanna say proud that I’m childless, but I don’t know another word to describe that feeling. Do you know Laura? I don’t know.

Balén (2017) states that “In every human interaction, we engage in the production and maintenance (or disruption) of the stories that make up who we and those around us are and can be” (p. 51). For Anna, Stephanie, Lu, and Sara, then, the ways in which they thought of themselves, and their potential for growth, were disrupted and reimaged through their interactions within and between the Childless Voices singing sessions.

For Nicola, the opportunity to build community with other involuntarily childless women in the singing sessions aided in raising consciousness of the importance of acknowledging and accepting the emotional impact of her own experience of childlessness, as a means to move forward through her grief. She stated that, “I think the main thing is not feeling alone in this experience. Feeling like it’s okay to feel like this, and there is hope and there is a way forward and it’s gonna be okay.” Emma also spoke of moving forward, and the impact of the singing sessions on her ability to process her grief:

Um, I think, um, I’ve definitely started to move forward with processing everything a little bit more. Processing my grief a little bit more...and being around other women and

sort of seeing and hearing about their lives has helped with that and it's quite- I don't like to use the word inspiring 'cause that sounds a bit- but, um, sort of feel less alone in the situation and there are, like, people do recover? No, that's not the right word, but do- there are other people who are dealing with things as well and that is quite inspiring I think, yeah. Um, and it's helped me to begin, begin to move forward and, um, to sort of process things. Um, the grief and the trauma of going through the IVF and everything. It's a slow, gradual process but, um, yeah, I sort of feel further down the line now than I did when I started with the choir....I definitely feel like I'm moving forward in it all.

Coming from a self-perceived position as further along in her grief journey, Sue discussed the challenge of developing an awareness of oppressive discourses for women whose grief has not yet been worked through. Her perceptions were rooted in her own experience of moving through her grief over the past fifteen years, and where she felt she had arrived as a consequence:

I think a big thing that becomes very obvious is that it's very difficult to see outside of your own arena when you're so deep in grief...it almost feels like a recovery, even though it isn't recovery, but it almost feels like that. And I think, you know, you're put back together differently, aren't you? So, you're put back together- it's like that Japanese thing. What's the Japanese thing with the gold where they put the old pottery back together? I've forgotten what they call it...It's like that... 'cause you do get smashed apart, you know, I very much feel that, and you get put back together, but it's not, it's not quite the same.

Sue's analogy in relation to the healing process of childless grief was beautifully articulated, as well as poignant, which spoke to the time and effort she had spent reflecting upon her experiences and those of others she had met through the singing sessions.

***Moving Forward – Taking Action***

Freire (2018) states that,

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis. (p. 64)

I bore witness on multiple occasions, during singing session observations as well as interviews, to the ways in which the women I worked with in this study engaged in reflexive praxis. For Adams (2008), Reflexivity involves using the impact of a situation or experience on oneself to help understanding and feed into future activity” (p. 19). Through Freire's (2018) notion of consciousness-raising as reflexive praxis, and Adams's (2008) discussion of self-empowerment, there emerged a sense of self-empowerment within and between the weekly singing sessions that I participated in as both a singer and a researcher. In addition to the examples of reflective thinking explored above, some of the women spoke about ways in which they were moving forward by acting against the oppressive discourses that frame their lives as childless women. It was both exciting and inspiring to hear of the actions these women were taking towards raising consciousness, and offering support, within the CNBC community.

For Sam, building community within the Childless Voices environment, in conjunction with the process of reflective thinking in regard to pronatalist discourses, was perceived as a “springboard” for reaching out to, and becoming more socially active with, other women in the

CNBC community. Nicola also told me that she had reached out to women in the wider CNBC community, by setting up a Facebook group for childless members of the clergy as a way to share knowledge and experiences. Additionally, Tracey reached out to a branch of the national charity, Fertility Network UK, called More to Life (Fertility Network UK, n.d.), which works to support involuntarily childless individuals. She told me that she wished to volunteer her time and efforts as a regional person of contact to arrange in-person social activities for people in the CNBC community. During our final interview, Nicola told me about a baby and toddler group session she had to run at her church one day when the regular facilitator was sick. Helen offered to come and help her that day, which turned out to be the first time they met in person. Nicola described the experience as confidence building, saying that,

my confidence in leading that session, not just the singing but the whole thing, has grown hugely because we've done that together, because I have not felt an outsider in that space...my confidence to make decisions, to be myself, um, and going forward even with her not being there, it only took that one session of doing that, of holding that space together, and it has shifted the dynamic...and having done that in a sisterhood together way, I'm now much better equipped to ask for the help that I need.

Higgins (2012) states that, "The work of community musicians attempts to provoke discourse, stimulate active participation, and enable a sense of "voice," both for individuals and those complicit groups of communities of which they are part" (p. 136). I witnessed Helen facilitating in this way on multiple occasions. One particular interaction, which took place during a Tuesday evening singing session, stood out to me in relation to reflexive praxis. It began with Helen telling us that she had made a series of videos at a large bookstore called Waterstones, in London, and posted them to her Instagram account. She said that she was on an "investigative

hunt” for books about childlessness. After having to walk through the Children’s section of the bookstore to get to the self-help section, she was unable to find any books related to childlessness. During the following Tuesday’s session, Catherine brought up the conversation again, saying that she would also like to take part in an investigation, and that she would do the legwork if Helen would promote it. While Catherine and Helen discussed the potential for a study, Anna logged onto the British Library catalogue and found the Dewey Decimal classification for ‘childlessness; mental aspects of.’ Anna and Helen then agreed that if they were to ask a librarian where to find books on childlessness, they would not know. Catherine said that she spends quite a lot of time in bookshops, and that if she came across a section on childlessness, she would feel “comforted.” She also said she believes that if more people spoke up about this issue and justified the purchase of books to the bookstores, they might make a change.

Through this interaction, I am reminded of Jorgensen’s (1995) words regarding the potential for finding one’s voice through community:

Communities are dynamic, in the process of becoming, alive, responding to and changing the world of which they are a part. That they can undertake corporate actions in a unified way empowers individual participants to accomplish more than they might otherwise be capable of alone. Knowing one's surroundings intimately, possessing self-assurance and confidence in that knowledge, being rooted in and bounded by this place, having one's place in the community, being intimately interconnected with others empowers one to find one's own voice and, by so speaking, act to change not only the community, but the world beyond. (pp. 74-75)

## Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the experiences of the eleven involuntarily childless women who participated in this study: Helen, the Childless Voices Choirs facilitator, and ten singers; Lu, Catherine, Nicola, Sam, Emma, Sue, Tracey, Sara, Anna, and Stephanie. I have discussed my findings from my ethnographic fieldwork through the theoretical lenses of community (Delanty, 2018) and empowerment (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016) and in discussion with music education and community music literature. In chapter four, I explored the ways in which the eleven women I worked with experienced a stigmatized involuntarily childless identity, as emergent through themes of isolation, silence, and shame. In this current chapter, I have discussed the ways in which participation in the Childless Voices Choir aided in mitigating the feelings of isolation, silence, and shame, through social and musical interactions that took place both within and between the weekly online singing sessions.

My analysis of observations and interview transcripts revealed that *communitas* was experienced by the singers, wherein they felt connected to each other during the act of singing through varied affective reactions. In addition to the musical experience of *communitas*, the building of community was made manifest through the sharing of knowledge and experience related to childlessness and singing, during social interactions that took place within the singing sessions. Building on the formation of community as an outcome of social interaction and shared experience, a sense of affective solidarity emerged through the notion of affective dissonance, whereby participants acknowledged and critiqued differences of affect felt toward the experience of involuntary childlessness, and felt a sense of affective solidarity *because* of their differences.

In acknowledging and critiquing the experiences of others, participants also acknowledged their own. As analyzed through Freire's (2018) notion of consciousness-raising,



the acknowledgement, critique, and subsequent resistance of pronatalist discourses that was enacted by the participants through social interactions developed into a sense of self-empowerment for many of the singers. Also contributing to their self-empowerment was the development of their voices through the musical and pedagogical experiences that took place during the online singing sessions. As a consequence of the development of self-empowerment, some of the women expressed a desire to engage in social justice efforts within and among the childless-not-by-choice community. In the following chapter, I expand upon the findings from the first phase of my study by presenting my findings from the second phase of my study, the PAR song writing and recording project.

## CHAPTER VI

### CALM AFTER THE STORM

My research included a song writing and recording project that facilitated a space for Helen and the Childless Voices singers to collaboratively write and record a song that represented their experiences with involuntary childlessness; experiences rooted in difference of social position as well as affect. Vulnerability and risk played a key role in this process (see Merrick and Maguire, 2017), as some of the women who participated in the song writing and recording project had not previously shared their experiences or feelings toward their experience of involuntary childlessness so openly—either within or outside of the CNBC community. This phase of the research was an opportunity for the women (including myself, as research-participant) writing and recording the song to voice our experiences as both individuals and as a community. Given the silencing nature of involuntary childlessness, this project facilitated an opportunity for profound and meaningful expression, as well as identity transformation.

During the songwriting session participation and observations, I took note of social and musical interactions between the singers, myself, and the session facilitator, Helen. This included formal and informal discussions and musically instructional moments, as well as tensions and challenges that arose. I also explored the social and musical identities of the women I was working with, both individually and collectively. As discussed in chapter three, the structure of the PAR project was drastically altered from its original plan due, in part, to the COVID-19 pandemic, but largely to health issues faced by Helen, me, and the originally intended facilitator. These changes had multiple impacts on the overall experience of the project including, but not limited to, the inability of four of the original study participants to participate in this phase, a shortened timeline for the song writing sessions, and a final recording session instead of a live

performance. Each of these issues caused me to question whether or not we should proceed with the PAR project phase of the study, as I was not sure that the reimagined plan would be conducive to a meaningful project for the women involved. My fears, though valid, proved largely unfounded. Although the process was messy and complicated, it reflected the complex nature of the experience of involuntary childlessness in a way that highlighted the resilience of the women who participated, as well as those who could not.

The original purpose of the song writing and recording project was to answer my third research question:

- 3) Does the public sharing of these women's experiences through the performance of collaboratively composed choral music foster community and the development of self-empowerment?
  - c) If so, in what ways do these women experience community and develop self-empowerment through the collaborative composition and performance of choral music?

My analysis of the observations and interviews that took place during this phase of the research revealed, most prominently, the impact of the project on the group's sense of solidarity, as well as, inversely, the impact of a shared sense of affective solidarity on the project itself.

Additionally, for some—though not all—of the women who participated in this phase of the study, a sense of accomplishment aided in building self-confidence and developing self-empowerment. I discuss my findings below, after providing a detailed account of the project in a narrative form that accounts for my immersion in the project as a researcher-participant.

## **Recording Day**

We were scheduled to record at Eastcote Recording Studios on Saturday, January 28<sup>th</sup>, from noon until 6:00pm. I had arrived in London the previous morning, having taken an overnight flight from Toronto. I was staying with Helen at her flat for the weekend. Tracey arrived at Helen's at 10:00am on the recording day and it was really lovely to meet her in person for the first time after having interacted with her for two years previous. The three of us walked the twenty minutes from Helen's flat to the recording studio and we were met there by Sue, Sam, and Catherine, who had all arrived about five minutes before us. We all hugged each other and talked about how excited we were to be there. I will note here that Lu and Stephanie, who participated in the song writing portion of the project, were unable to attend the recording session, as Stephanie had scheduling conflicts and family issues and Lu was too unwell to travel. Their responses to not being able to attend will be discussed later in this chapter.

Sue was really fascinated by the studio setup and spoke about being nervous and excited about being there. Helen introduced us to George, the sound engineer, and we all had a wander through the studio to look around. Sue and I both took lots of pictures of the space. We were intrigued by all of the equipment. George told us about some of the musicians who had recorded in the studio in the past, including The Spice Girls, Mumford and Sons, and Adele. I found this really exciting and interesting. Once we'd had a look around, Helen ran us through the song in full a few times to get our voices warmed up. She told us not to sing the line, "Catch my heart wild and free" because it sits high and she wanted to wait until our voices were warmed up before we sang that line.

Once we were in the studio, my intention was to let Helen really take the reigns on how the session would go, given that she had previous studio recording experience. We recorded us

all singing through the entire song a couple of times. After the first take, George said that we sounded “great.” We were all pleasantly surprised at how well our voices blended, especially since this was the first time we had ever sung together. It was quite an emotionally impactful moment for me to be singing in person with everyone for the first time.

After recording our full sing-throughs of the song, we began recording the song line by line as a group. Each time, we did three or four takes until George told us he had enough good takes to work with. These takes were all of the melody. After recording the melody lines as a group, we then decided to record the first verse using individual voices for each line. Helen had already recorded herself in the recording sessions that she did with the collaborative pianist the week before. We decided to use her voice for the first line. Next, I recorded the second line by myself. It was an interesting experience to be recorded alone, but didn’t take me long to feel comfortable. I sang the line four times before George said he had enough to work with.

Next, Sam went into the booth to record the third line, “I know you’re listening,” which has a rather difficult jump up in the melody. She wasn’t able to do it comfortably, although she tried it a number of times with Helen in the booth with her for support. Sam got a bit frustrated with herself, but then I suggested she try the last line instead, “It’s the loss of so many things,” which worked much better for her voice. In fact, there was a vulnerability in her voice while singing this line that suited it perfectly. George recorded her singing the line four or five times. Before Sam went in to record her last line, Tracey stepped in to sing the third line and she was much more comfortable singing it than Sam. George had her sing the line four or five times until he had what he needed to work with. We also wanted P3 and Sue to record a line on their own, although they were both hesitant to do so. We decided that Catherine would sing “closer ‘round the fire,” to be layered over top of the choir singing that line at the beginning of the second verse.

George manipulated the levels so that you could hear Catherine's voice above the choir and it worked well<sup>10</sup>.

Lastly, Sue went into the booth to record "life is so many things," which comes in at the end of the song. She asked Helen to go into the booth with her, as she was really nervous. It took her some time to get comfortable, but with Helen's presence in the booth, and the rest of us encouraging her from the sound room, she was able to record the line a few times until George said he had enough to work with. I was really proud of Sue for recording this line by herself, as I knew how strongly she felt about herself 'not being a singer.' We decided to layer Sue's voice over top of the choir for her line, to bolster it a bit, and it worked really well.

After recording all of our separate parts, we then went back into the group recording room and worked through the harmonies for each section of the song. Helen directed us as to which lines to harmonize on, and she taught us the harmonies line-by-line as we went. Sam and I sang the high harmonies and Sue, Tracey, and Catherine sang the lower harmonies. We all sang the middle harmonies. We all agreed that our voices were suited to the parts we were given. Again, it didn't take too long to record each of these lines. It was done very efficiently.

George was amazing through the whole four-hour process. He was extremely encouraging and kind to all of us, particularly when he could tell a singer was uncomfortable or not feeling great about their recording. He was very attentive to the suggestions and requests that Helen gave, as well as when choir members spoke up about certain elements. Once we had finished recording all of the elements of the song at 4:00pm, George suggested we head out to a local pub for a drink while he spent 90 minutes putting the song together. We walked to a nearby

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine later asked to have her solo line removed from the final recorded version of the song, which was done immediately upon her request.

pub and had a celebratory drink. Sam's husband met us there and we spoke about the recording process and about how much we'd enjoyed ourselves. It was really lovely to have some social time and we were all feeling excited about how the day had gone.

We walked back to the recording studio at 5:30pm and on the way back, something interesting occurred. One of the singers suggested to Helen that she didn't really like the spoken lines over the "live invisibly" section. She thought they didn't really fit the song and Helen agreed. The singer who had made the observation and suggestion to remove the lines said she felt a bit bad because Lu, who wrote those lines, wasn't able to be at the recording session. Two of the other singers agreed that the spoken lines didn't really fit the song, and I said that I would go with the majority on the decision to remove or keep them. I didn't think the spoken lines were too bad, although I supposed anyone listening to the song that hadn't been a part of the writing process might not fully understand the meaning behind the words, which were "There is nobody like us, but there *is* nobody like us."

We got back to the studio and sat in the mixing room with George while he played the song for us, first with the spoken words and then another time without them. A unanimous decision was made to have George remove the spoken lines from the song. After listening to the song without the spoken words, I agreed that the song flowed better without them, although I did feel bad for Lu, given that she wasn't able to be at the session due to illness and didn't get a say in the process. Helen said she thought Lu would understand and that she wanted to contact her personally to explain the decision to remove the words. We listened to the song a few more times and at one point both Helen and I got visibly emotional while listening. It was Sam's singing of the line "it's the loss of so many things" that moved me to tears because of the vulnerability in her voice, and the underlying sentiment behind the words. We had George tweak a few volume

levels at certain points in the song, as well as adding a strong cymbal to the second “Catch my heart” line, which we all felt made a fabulous impact. Once the tweaking was finished, it was 6:00pm and our time in the studio was over. We thanked George profusely, and Helen and I both let him know how much we appreciated all of his work, given the poignance of the song and how we had all come to be there.

At this point in the evening, Helen, Catherine, Sam, Sam’s husband, and I headed out to the Prince Alfred pub for dinner. Sue had other plans with friends, so had to head home, and Tracey had a long drive home and also had friends coming for a visit that night that she hadn’t seen in a long time. After dinner, Helen, Sam, Sam’s husband and I headed out to another pub to listen to some live music. We were all still buzzing from the day and had a lovely evening together. When Helen and I headed back to her flat, we stayed up listening to the song and talking about the whole project until the wee hours of the morning. What a day!



### Calm After the Storm

**Lyrics and Link to “Calm After the Storm” recording (Our Healing Voice, 2023b):**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z6\\_ITVnygk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z6_ITVnygk)

Closer ‘round the fire	We know we’re listening
Calm after the storm	Calm after the storm
Have a seat at the table	It’s the loss of so many things
Calm after the storm	Calm after the storm
I know you’re listening	
Calm after the storm	Live invisibly, live in visibility
It’s the loss of so many things	Live invisibly, live in visibility
Calm after the storm	Live in visibly, live in visibility
Closer ‘round the fire	Catch our hearts wild and free
We feel the calm after the storm	Brave women our sisters be
Have a seat at the table	A deeper forest beats a drum
Calm after the storm	Our hearts go on and on and on and on
I know you’re listening	
Calm after the storm	Closer ‘round the fire
It’s the loss of so many things	We feel the calm after the storm
Calm after the storm	Have a seat at the table
	Calm after the storm
Catch my heart wild and free	High on a mountaintop
Brave women my sisters be	We feel calm after the storm
A deeper forest beats a drum	Life is so many things
My heart goes on and on and on and on	Calm after the storm
Sisters of light we breathe	Calm after the storm
Calm after the storm	Calm after the storm
Our love empowering	Calm after the storm
Calm after the storm	Calm after the storm

## **The Song Writing Process**

### ***Facilitative Challenges***

I begin discussing my findings with the most personally difficult part for me: exploring the ways in which the PAR project fell short of participant expectations. I choose this point of departure because it speaks to the resilience and dedication of the women who participated, which is important to acknowledge. As stated previously, only seven of the eleven women who consented to participate in the study were able to participate in the PAR project. The scheduling issues that arose, which led to giving short notice to the singers, caused four of them to have to decline participation: Nicola, Emma, Sara, and Anna. These women sited scheduling conflicts as well as work, health, and family issues, as their reasons for not being able to take part in this phase of the study. Regrettably, each of the four women were disappointed to not be able to be a part of the PAR project, as they had been looking forward to it.

I relinquished much of the control of how the sessions would be structured to Helen, who willingly took over the role of facilitator when the previously selected co-facilitator was unable to take part. Although Helen wished to take on this role, she later stated, in our one-on-one interview, that she had been anxious about facilitating the song writing sessions, to the point of losing sleep and developing headaches in the weeks leading up to the project. She sited multiple reasons for her anxieties, one of which was that, due to the fact that she had never collaboratively written music in this way, she didn't feel she had a "formula": "I know that some people...wanna know exactly what's gonna happen, when it's gonna happen, and how it's gonna be. Well, that's not a creative process. A creative process is about being in the moment". She was also concerned about how her creative process would work on an online platform. While I respect Helen's notion of the creative process, I observed that the process she employed did not

create a space that was as inclusive as I had envisioned for the sessions, in terms of setting up a comfortable and ‘safe’ environment for everyone involved.

Helen also spoke about feeling a sense of responsibility to produce a finished product that was “good”. When asked what that sense of responsibility looked like, she stated,

I think I said to you, and I said to other people as well, I’ve got to make sure this is good. And I didn’t want, by saying that, to put pressure on other people, but I think they all knew that I really wanted it to be good, and I hope that they didn’t interpret that I wanted it to be about me or about, “look at this,” you know? It’s got to be heartfelt. The whole point, being good, means it’s got to incorporate all of that...It’s got to be credible, otherwise it won’t get played...And there’s no reason why it shouldn’t be good because we *are* good, you know? We’re all good. We can all do this, you know? Um, but if I’d been more of an experienced choir teacher or something I probably could have conveyed that a bit better [LAUGHS].

When asked how she felt this sense of responsibility impacted the collaborative intentions of the project, she stated that she was “probably a bit more controlling [LAUGHS]...than I would have liked to have been”.

### ***The Music-Writing Process***

The control that Helen spoke of was largely related to the process of writing the music for the song. Both Catherine and I had hoped that the song writing would be a lot more collaborative musically, wherein we would have more input and control of the melody and accompaniment that were composed. Stephanie and Lu, while happy with their level of contribution during the online sessions, did state that they would enjoy participating in further song writing workshops that incorporate learning more about writing music. As it was, Helen worked with a collaborative

pianist, outside of the song writing sessions, to write and record the majority of the melody and piano accompaniment. This is not to say, however, that there was *no* musical input from the singers. Helen spoke to me about having built upon a melodic idea that Catherine had come up with and sent to Helen and me as a voice recording through WhatsApp after the first of two sessions she was able to attend. Additionally, during the first session, Helen worked with those of us in attendance to decide on an appropriate key for the song based on the mood that we all felt we wanted to convey. Lu and I also worked with Helen on ideas for harmonies during the third session. In this third session, just before we paused the project for the Christmas holidays, Helen played us a rough accompaniment track that she and the collaborative pianist had recorded, and asked for our feedback. There was a powerful emotional response from some of us in attendance at that session (Sue, Lu, and me) that reflected a shared sense of awe in the song that Helen and the collaborative pianist had put together from the lyrics and imagery that we had written and spoken about in the previous sessions.

### ***The Lyric-Writing Process***

While the singers did not have a vast amount of musical input, the lyrics of the song were collaboratively written by everyone involved. During the pre-Christmas writing sessions, Helen guided us through exercises with the purpose of evoking images and feelings that reflected our experiences with involuntary childlessness. Through breath work and musical chanting, Helen asked us to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and write a few things down that reflected our feelings. She then invited us to say what we had written, if we wished to do so. After we had read our thoughts aloud, Helen asked us what we thought made a ‘good’ song. We responded by saying that a ‘good’ song would be easy to sing, simply structured, and memorable. Helen then discussed song structure, including elements of story telling, the inclusion of verses, chorus, and

a bridge, melodies, and harmonies. She said, “Every viewpoint is valid and really nothing makes a bad song, but really a good song is one that stands alone”. Here, she was referring to something that is original and unique.

Following this discussion, Helen asked us to expand on the feelings that we had articulated earlier and turn them into a single line of lyrics. When we had done that, we read them aloud and Helen began singing each line to tunes that she improvised. Next, she asked us to take our lines and associate them with a location or environment. After a short break, Helen asked us who we each wanted to sing this song for: “Are we singing for the childless-not-by-choice-community, or the wider world?” We then played around with our lines and realized that there might be a storyline to them, so we worked on shuffling the lines around, each giving feedback in real time. While performing this exercise, Helen asked us to think about the musical style that we were imaging for the song. We then discussed the mood we were wanting to convey, and Helen again began improvising melodies for each line, which she sang in the key of B minor (she later stated that she did not choose that key deliberately; it was a comfortable key for her to sing in at the time). We all agreed that we enjoyed the sound of that key.

Helen also asked us whether we all agreed that we identified with what had been written and sung so far, and everyone in the session nodded their heads in agreement. It should be mentioned here that two of the participants who nodded their heads in agreement (Catherine and Stephanie) later stated, in their one-on-one interviews, that they did not feel that *all* of the song lyrics were relatable to them personally. This process was repeated in subsequent sessions that included all of the participants but one, Tracey. Tracey was unable to attend any of the online sessions, as she was dealing with stressful family issues at the time. However, she communicated

with Helen via email and sent her lyrics that she had written under Helen's guidance, which Helen subsequently included in the song.

### ***The Final Touches: Learning and Rehearsing***

After breaking for Christmas, Helen scheduled five sessions during which she would teach the song and make any necessary adjustments based on input and feedback provided by us, the singers. These sessions were run on a drop-in basis, whereby we were free to join as many as we wished (I attended all of the sessions). During the first two sessions, we made some minor changes to some of the lyrics, which were based upon rhythmic/syllabic issues that we perceived. Although most suggestions were considered and employed in the song, some were rejected by Helen with specific feedback to the singers explaining the musical reasoning for not incorporating their suggestions. While it could be argued that a sense of gatekeeping detracted from the collaborative participatory nature of the project, Higgins (2012) states that,

Although there is desire to eradicate hierarchy, it is in fact essential that demarcations be in place because without them nothing responsible would happen. Community music relationships are therefore unequal, operating within an asymmetrical structure in which the music facilitator and participant are able to share their world as a gift through intersubjective communication. (p. 165)

The final three sessions were facilitated by Helen as opportunities to learn to sing the song, including both the melody and possible harmonies. Helen had, at this point, gone to the recording studio with the collaborative pianist to record the final version of the accompaniment track, as well as a track with her singing the entire song. She played these tracks for us during the final learning sessions and taught the song in the same way that she had taught us songs in the regular singing sessions that I observed in Phase One of this study, modelling the lines and also

speaking about elements of vocal expression. During these learning sessions, Helen also loosely described the recording process so that we might know what to expect, and feel somewhat prepared, when we entered the space on Saturday, January 28<sup>th</sup>.

### **The PAR Project Experience: In Their Own Words**

Despite the adverse circumstances surrounding setting up and executing the online song writing sessions, Helen succeeded in guiding us through the process in a way that felt meaningful and impactful to most of the singers. While, optimally, this process would have been perceived as a success to all participants, I feel that the messy and complicated nature of this PAR project reflects the unique and complex personalities and experiences of Helen, the singers, and myself. Having described the individual processes above, I now turn to the singers' own perceptions of the project as a whole, as discussed during our one-on-one interviews. The interviews included an exploration of the singers' perceptions of the impact of the project on their experiences with childlessness, their connection to the other group members, and their sense of achievement and self-confidence.

Analysis of participant responses revealed a sense of solidarity (Delanty, 2018) felt among and between all of the women who participated. Solidarity emerged through the processes of song writing and recording, wherein the collaborative intentions of the song writing process impacted the singers' perceptions of the experience of involuntary childlessness largely in relation to each other. Additionally, the singers and Helen discussed feeling a sense of intention and meaning regarding the importance of completing this phase of the research study, as a consequence of the experiences we had had during the eighteen months that we had worked together on this research project. For many, a growth in desire to make an impact on the CNBC community also brought the women together with intention and a sense of self-empowerment

derived from the notion that they were a part of something bigger than themselves. Inversely, there emerged evidence, through a sense of affective solidarity, that the song writing and recording project itself was shaped by all those who took part. According to Stein (1997), the cyclical nature of empowerment takes place bidirectionally in relation to participation, wherein “individuals may be more likely to participate in organizations, and participation promotes empowerment” (p. 63). A sense of empowerment was made evident through the resilience and determination of the women who participated in the project, particularly in relation to the messy and complex process of the song writing sessions, as well as feelings of vulnerability experienced on the recording day.

### ***Collaborative Song Writing as Reflexive Praxis***

As a process, collaborative song writing creates a space within which individual identities are asserted with creative intention to produce a musical work that reflects the experiences of each contributor, while attending to the collective intentions of the group (Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012). The intentions of the PAR project facilitated as part of this research study were to write and record a song that reflected women’s experiences of involuntary childlessness. The collaborative nature of the song writing sessions was felt by many of the women as an enlightening process that fostered reflexive praxis, wherein their creative intentions, and the song itself, were shaped by the acknowledgement and critique of the group’s differences of identities and experiences. This reflects Adams’s (2008) notion that “reflexivity involves using the impact of a situation or experience on oneself to help understanding and feed into future action” (p. 19). As the process unfolded, under Helen’s guidance, it became clear that there were, for many of the women involved, vast differences in the ways in which childlessness was both experienced and perceived. As explored in chapters four and five, each of the women who participated in this



study had arrived at their childless positions through varying circumstances and lived experiences. Additionally, they were at differing points in their journeys through grief, whereby some considered themselves to have ‘come out the other side’ and others felt a sense of continued grieving. Subsequently, the lyrics they wrote for the collaborative song, titled “Calm After the Storm,” were understood subjectively, wherein some lyrics—and the ideas behind them—resonated more than others with the singers who participated in the song writing sessions.

**Experiencing Collaboration.** Stephanie discussed the song writing process as “interesting,” in terms of the drop-in nature of the sessions—as there were different women at each of the three sessions. She perceived the outcome of the collective efforts of talking about the images, ideas, and lyric lines that emerged during the writing exercises, as well as the opportunities for musical input, as having been “knitted into a jumper...blended into a thing from different strands.” Lu, who had written songs herself in the past, was intrigued by the collaborative song writing process. She stated that her own process involved writing a melody first, followed by lyrics, and that it was “interesting to do it completely the other way around.” Although for Lu, coming up with lyrics for a song had always been the most difficult element of song writing, she felt that Helen’s approach of using prompts to elicit images and words made the lyric writing process “natural” and “easy.” Despite Lu’s lyric line not being included in the final song, she still felt a sense of inclusion in the process, which she spoke with me about:

So, I know that, um, afterwards Helen felt very bad that a line that I came up with wasn’t included. But that really didn’t bother me in the slightest because it felt like, just by being there, being part of the atmosphere on the day, I was part of the creation of the song, so it didn’t matter to me whether my specific lines were included or not. The feeling of all of us was included. So, I think it was just that it always brings home to me that you’re not

alone ‘cause other people- there’s other people all over the country, and it makes you feel less alien, less, um, wrong, other, all these kinds of things. Makes you feel more, uh, like you’re stronger together.

Sue also discussed her perceptions of the process that Helen facilitated, stating that, “just asking for a particular word and a particular feeling and then just sort of building from there I thought was, um, the perfect way of doing it really.” During the third writing session, Helen played us a recording of the song that she had made that morning with the collaborative pianist, so that we could hear how she was progressing with putting it together and get feedback from us. Sue spoke to me about the emotional impact of hearing this rough first draft of the track:

the emotional side of it really came to me when Helen very first, um, put together everything we did, so the sort of raw first draft, if you like, um, and I just remember being- that was, it still makes me quite emotional now just thinking about that now, ‘cause it’s the sort of culmination of so much work really, um, and I suppose so much bonding from the start.

Analysis of Stephanie, Lu, and Sue’s perceptions of the collaborative song writing experience revealed a sense of community and solidarity through the process of linking together ideas, images, and words reflective of their individual experiences. Subsequently, through this collaborative process, a sense of affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) emerged as the women shared their individual perceptions of the experience of involuntary childlessness through the song lyrics they wrote. According to Hemmings (2012),

in order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised

impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance. (p. 150)

The singers spoke to me about the impact of exploring the experience of involuntary childlessness from their varied positionalities in relation to the ways in which they resonated with their own and others' lyrics. Through this process, they were able to critically examine their experience of affective dissonance and/or resonance with the lyrics, which I discuss below.

**Connection to Lyrics – Self.** When asked in our interview whether there were any particular lines from the song that resonated with them, Stephanie and Catherine spoke about the line, “it’s the loss of so many things.” This line was written by Stephanie, whose experience of childlessness included the physical loss of her reproductive organs due to ovarian cancer, and the subsequent loss of a potential motherhood identity. She stated in our interview that, “the loss is a thing that’s quite a big feature, obviously, for all of us...so I think it just sort of reinforced that.” Catherine, who participated in recording the song, as well as the collaborative writing process, spoke of Lu’s line as “very powerful.” She also said that she found it powerful to hear Sam sing it at the recording studio: “The way that...Sam...sang it was very moving, almost kind of, I think she was feeling nervous but it came across as being almost on the brink of tears, which is...a very powerful line, I think, the way it’s sung.” Here, a sense of empathy emerged as having developed through the affective impact of Sam’s singing performance.

Sam also spoke to me about this particular line when I asked her to describe how it felt to sing it on her own in the recording studio:

it’s funny because I was just so focused on actually singing it and being able to get it right and to be able to use the line, that even though the words- in it at the time of singing, I kind of didn’t put anything with that. It was just the words, but actually when I

listen to it and the way I did sing it, and the way, yeah...you can sort of really hear and sort of feel that loss, uh, that feeling of loss of many things, which of course it is.

Tracey described how the line, “high on a mountaintop” resonated with her when she heard the rough track recording during our last writing session. She spoke about the line resonating with her experience during the pandemic, when she began walking a lot by herself as a form of healing from both her childlessness and her divorce:

Helen shared the song with us and I know that some of the lines really touched me because, I know the one, ‘high on a mountain top’ did...and it was during lockdown as well that I started doing lots of walking again and I think that had a healing- I think for me that was quite healing, to be able to go up in the mountains again and walk and just be on my own. Be on my own but, you know, it was healing for me...To be able to go up on the mountains and just think, “I’m free” and see all these beautiful views and all the nature and everything, you know, I just felt at peace on that mountain.

As mentioned earlier, Tracey was not able to participate in the online song writing sessions, due to family issues. However, she communicated with Helen via email and sent her suggestions for lyrics, which Helen made sure to include in the song:

I asked her to put in the lines about ‘sisters of light we be’ and also ‘empowering.’ I wanted the word empowering, that being part of the community has really empowered- well, I feel that it’s empowered me. I’m sure it’s probably empowered all the other ladies as well.

Sue also spoke about one particular line in the song that resonated with her, which was a line that Helen herself wrote, “live invisibly, live in visibility.” She felt that this line was not only reflective of her own feelings and experience, but also those of the CNBC community at large,

stating that it “was something that for our community was really valid actually. And I thought those were the two best lines in the song.” In relation to elements of the song that would resonate with the CNBC community as a whole, Sam spoke about the imagery that she visualized during the song writing sessions that led to the line, “a deeper forest beats a drum.” She feels a deep connection to nature and feels comforted by being outdoors and taking care of living creatures, which she attributed to the desire to nurture. She discussed this desire as something she perceives as prevalent within the CNBC community, as well as in her own life:

I mean, just being outdoors in that space, um, surrounded by nature is, gosh, it’s such a massive comfort...yeah, gosh, it’s hard to explain ‘cause I get so much from it. Um, whether it’s kind of the sounds of nature, the changing seasons, um, you know, the water, the sort of looking- I guess this as well has gone into- I was really desperate to get a bird feeder again, um, and now we’ve got one in the garden and I think that’s a massive part of doing the nurture thing, you know, taking care of things, so I guess that kind of goes in with the nature thing but, I feed lots of different things...and I thought I saw a hedgehog the other night, so I put some cat biscuits out, and I leave nuts out for the squirrel and [LAUGHS] so, I think it’s, yeah...helping nature...survive and thrive, yeah. And that thing of, you know, taking care of something and kind of doing your bit, I think that’s, do you know, um, I think we all need to nurture something. I mean, ourselves, but something else as well.

As evidenced above, many of the lines composed for “Calm After the Storm” resonated with the singers who participated in the collaborative song writing process. There were some lines, however, that singers were unable to feel a connection to, due to differences of circumstance and

experience. For example, Stephanie felt that the line, “high on a mountaintop,” was difficult to connect with:

Um, I think that one stood out for me because it didn’t feel, um, something that I’d kind of experienced, whereas sort of most of the other lines do, sort of thing. Like, the kind of being together and kind of us being a family sort of thing. That kind of sensation was something that resonated with me. It was just that one that I thought, “oh! [LAUGHS] have I got being on a mountain to come?” [LAUGHS]. But it’s a thing that’s different for all of us, however similar it is for all of us as well.

Here, Stephanie acknowledges the affective dissonance she felt with this particular lyric line, while also acknowledging difference of affect toward involuntary childlessness that is often experienced by the CNBC community.

**Connection to Lyrics – The Other.** In addition to speaking about the lyrics for “Calm After the Storm” resonating—or not—on a personal level, the women I worked with also discussed the ways in which the lyrics resonated—or not—with the other women in the group. Some found it enlightening to witness the other women’s reactions to the ideas, images, and lyrics that emerged from the writing exercises that Helen facilitated, as it helped them to acknowledge and reflect upon the experiences of others. As a consequence of this acknowledgement and reflection, some of the women perceived the experiences and reactions of others as affirming. Others felt a sense of connection within and between the group, while others acknowledged a sense of affective solidarity due to differences in perceptions of the experience of involuntary childlessness.

Stephanie was surprised by the prominent role that her line, “it’s the loss of so many things” played in the final composition of the song, stating that it was “quite affirming, um, of

how you feel, that it strikes a chord with other people.” The sense of affirmation that Stephanie spoke of was reflective of the notion of solidarity, wherein feelings of shared experience often inspire bonds between individuals who function within marginalized and stigmatized social frameworks (Goffman, 1963). In reference to the title line of the song, “Calm After the Storm,” Lu discussed the possibility of song lyrics being “cliché,” but that this particular line, and all of the others as well, did not present this way, as they “were straight out of the mouths of the women there, so it didn’t feel trite...it just felt real.” The perception of the words written by the group as ‘real’ speaks to the bonds already formed between the group members, as Lu had gained knowledge of the other women’s experiences and feelings towards those experiences prior to the PAR project, through the weekly Childless Voices singing sessions she had attended. Tracey spoke to this when she stated that, “from the song you could sort of tell which person actually thought of that line because we knew each other so well through the singing sessions with Helen.”

While some of the women felt their social bonds affirmed through recognition of the experiences and feelings of others, Sue discussed the ways in which witnessing the process and outcome of the other women’s lyric writing “brought home” the differences of affect toward the experience of involuntary childlessness that permeated the community. She spoke about the collaborative writing experience as “interesting” based upon the varied reactions some of the women had to the writing process itself. She stated,

I thought what was interesting when we started doing the process...how it was, I suppose, impacting different participants in a different way. Um, and I think, you know, the sort of phrasing people were coming up with and sort of, um, emotions that people were bringing to their song writing, um, was quite different, I think... I think it brought home

to me that quite a lot of people in the study, um, are very much in the middle of that, you know?...Some people were visibly upset by the actual process. Um, and I didn't- I don't remember feeling upset with the process of writing.

While Sue did not feel she had an emotional reaction to the song writing process, she did speak about, as previously discussed, having an overwhelming emotional reaction to listening to the song in its raw form. Her reaction prompted her to acknowledge that she may not be entirely through her grieving process in relation to her childlessness, despite what she had thought previous to participating in the song writing sessions:

You know, from my point of view I think it brought home to me that, um, you know, I'm not over the childlessness. You don't get over it as such, but you just move in a different, you know, go back together in a different way, don't you? But, um, I think, you know, the sort of phrasing and the sort of wording I was coming up with was very much to do with it being a positive outcome and, you know, moving forward, um, after, um, the sort of concept of childlessness really.

Reflecting on her experience during the song writing sessions, Sue said that it had made her more mindful of how she approaches women in the CNBC community, particularly in relation to encouraging and developing new relationships. She spoke about perceiving herself as coming across to people as not having been "damaged in any way by childlessness," and it being a "detriment" to her ability to bond with others in the CNBC community. Sue's ability to critically reflect on her perceptions of, and reactions to, the song writing process during our interview spoke to a transformation of her identity that emerged through the PAR project, which will be explored later in this chapter.



Similar to Sue's thoughts on the song writing sessions as revealing differences of affect toward the experience of involuntary childlessness, Catherine felt that the process "reinforced...[her]...understanding that people are at very different...points in their response to not being able to have children." She noted that the images, ideas, and lyrics that emerged through the song writing process revealed others' feelings of surprise that their grief continued to reassert itself intermittently and after long periods of time. Additionally, she perceived some of the women in the group as feeling "isolated...and very cut off from the world" due to their childlessness. Overall, Catherine felt that she had gained a more nuanced understanding of differences of affect in relation to the experience of childlessness, stating, "I think there was a kind of, yeah, just different people at kind of different stages and feelings, so it's a big world out there and people have different ways of feeling about it."

Lu, as well, found it interesting to witness and acknowledge differences of affect within and between the women participating in the song writing sessions, particularly in relation to specific emotional responses to the experience of childlessness. She reflected upon her own feelings towards her experience in comparison to those of the other women:

it's interesting because you see how...emotions you feel as part of your grief might not be something that another person feels at all. So, I feel a lot of anger to do with mine, a lot of resentment, and I suppose a lot of jealousy, whereas other people were saying things that were very much to do with feeling very, very distraught, very distressed, or feeling a kind of a peace as well, um, as part of where they feel they are most of the time...So, that was interesting to hear how other people felt...it was just quite interesting to see that things that make me feel angry might make someone else feel very, very sad, and so I think that was quite interesting, how different people feel in the same situation.

McLaughlin (2016) discusses consciousness-raising as founded on “a belief in the ability of grassroots solidarity and struggle as a vehicle for development of the subject” (p. 127).

Through my discussions with the women who participated in the collaborative song writing and recording phase of this study, and my analysis of their interview transcripts, there emerged a strong sense of solidarity that developed through the women’s critical reflection on their—and others’—lyrical representations of their experiences with childlessness. I was witnessing, through empathetic bonding that took place among and between the women, the development of critical consciousness.

**Potential Impact on the CNBC Community.** In addition to reflecting upon the ways in which the women who collaborated on the song were impacted by each other’s images, ideas, and lyrics, participants also discussed the impact they envisioned the song might have on the CNBC community as a whole. Some felt that the public sharing of the song would help to raise awareness of the experience of involuntary childlessness, which they felt would be important for the community. For others, the possibility of the song resonating with members of the CNBC community was a powerful element of the PAR project. Additionally, the prospect of the song becoming widely known outside of the CNBC community was discussed as an opportunity for the development of public empathy that could potentially lead to a positive shift in pronatalist ideology.

For Helen, in order to reach people in a meaningful way, it was important that the song be one that communicated,

an air of confidence and achievement and overcoming. We didn’t wanna be pitied in this song. We wanted to be admired and respected...It’s about, you know, creating something

that's art out of people's rawest feelings...The main thing, I think, is to get the feel right and the message right so that everyone feels they're represented.

She felt that if the song had a strong musical impact, in that it was "sensitive" and "beautiful," it would reach more people and, therefore, raise awareness of the CNBC community more easily.

Tracey stated that she was excited for the song to be publicly released, as she thought it would "really raise awareness" of involuntary childlessness, and of the large population who experience it. Unlike Tracey, Stephanie was sceptical about the impact the song might have on those outside of the CNBC community. She felt that "if they don't want to engage with us talking, I'm not sure they want to engage with us singing." She did, however, feel that it was "important" to share the song *within* the CNBC community, given that it was written from personal experience with childlessness and may, therefore, resonate with them.

Lu spoke to the notion of resonating with other childless individuals from the perspective of the women who wrote the song "speaking for everybody." She also discussed Helen's approach to composing the song without mentioning childlessness specifically. By keeping the lyrics vague, she felt that listeners might be able to empathize with it more easily:

Helen was very clever because we didn't mention being childless in the song, and I know she thought about that a lot before and kind of broached it with us, but I could see she'd thought about it a lot. And what she said at the end [of one of the song writing sessions]...when we all listened to it, was how powerful it was gonna be for people for different reasons and that it could be a song that would speak to people for many, many things, you know? And, so that's really important, I think...that if it means something else to other people then it also says how we feel, or how a lot of people writing the song

feel, and if other people can feel their own situation in that, then they can understand how the situation makes you feel if you're childless.

The idea that “Calm After the Storm” might resonate with people beyond the CNBC community was one that excited Sam. She discussed the importance of raising awareness of the experience of involuntary childlessness, given the stigma that surrounds the topic:

Raising awareness of it I think is massive. Yeah, because...I think the topic and the subject is so not in the sphere at all. It's not kind of out there. I think it is in little bits. I don't mean to say not at all...but definitely even awareness of it being a thing...is a massive start, you know?...I think that would be kind of the game changer really, for that awareness outside of our community to kind of be...much more than what it is at the minute, yeah.

The notion of awareness-raising, and their desire to engage with it, was brought up by the Helen and the singers multiple times during our interviews in this phase of the study. Analysis of their interview transcripts through the lenses of empowerment (McLaughlin, 2016) and self-empowerment (Adams, 2008), however, demonstrated a critical reflective practice more akin to consciousness-raising (Freire, 2018). I am drawn here to McLaughlin's (2016) warnings regarding the impact (or lack thereof) of awareness-raising campaigns:

A clear line is drawn, and constantly highlighted, between the expert knowledge of the “aware” and the ignorance of the ranks of the “unaware”. In this respect, far from being political in orientation, the current obsession with raising awareness actually represents the negation of grass roots political action, a retreat from activists engaging with people on the ground, on their own terms, and its replacement with a form of top-down moralising. (p. 71)

What I am proposing then is that the notion of awareness-raising that Helen and the singers spoke of was, in fact, demonstrated in their critical reflexive practice as consciousness-raising.

***The Recording Day: Singing in Solidarity***

As previously discussed, regrettably, not all of the women who attended the song writing sessions were able to come to Eastcote Recording Studios in London to record “Calm After the Storm,” namely, Lu and Stephanie. Most of those who did participate that day, however, felt multiple positive impacts from both personal and social perspectives. For Tracey, the journey to London was a challenging and rewarding step personally, because it was the first time she had been back to the city since her divorce. She told me that she had been fearful of running into her ex-husband, despite knowing that the chances of that happening were next to none. Although she had avoided attending other in-person events organized by Helen in London, she felt that it was important to be at the recording session:

I thought, well, I need to go down to the recording because it’s like, the final stage of the study, and I’ve taken part in the study, and I just thought I need to do this for myself...I’m glad I did it.

Tracey also spoke in our interview about how much she enjoyed multiple aspects of the day, including meeting all of us in person for the first time, learning about the recording process, and singing together in person. She described being in a state of disbelief both before and after the event:

I remember on the day thinking, “am I really doing this?” [LAUGHS] I just felt I sort of, like I was in a bubble really on that day, and then going into a recording studio and...Helen was saying, “oh, Adele’s recorded here and such and such has recorded here” and I was just thinking, “I can’t believe this,” you know? And on the evening, you

know, when we all departed, because the song was just so in my head, I was singing all the way home [LAUGHS] and I think the next day I was like, oh my goodness, did I really go to a recording studio yesterday and record a song with all those brave women? [LAUGHS]

Hearing Tracey call all of us brave was incredibly moving. She had not only survived her experiences with fertility treatments, an abusive marriage and difficult divorce, as well as her childlessness, but had subsequently thrived.

Although she doesn't self-identify as a singer, Sue has a very rich and strong musical identity. She is an avid concertgoer and active music listener, and much of her identity is entwined with music. Therefore, she perceived having the opportunity to spend time in a professional recording studio, actively participate in recording a song, and learn about the process of recording and engineering, as the "highlight" of her year. During our interview, Sue's excitement was palpable as she spoke about the recording experience and what it meant to her. She used words such as "fascinating," "phenomenal," "joyous," and "fulfilling" as she talked through the events of that day, saying, "I was absolutely buzzing when I finished that day. I think everybody was."

Sam, too, described the recording day as a positive experience that she had never imagined herself having before participating in this research study. She stated that although she didn't consider herself to be somebody who has a 'bucket list,' this experience would fit into that category. The experience of being in the "unique space" of the recording studio, in person, with women she had been singing with for more than two years, gave Sam a sense of connection to the group that she said she hoped to continue engaging with. Additionally, she was pleased to have had the opportunity to participate in both phases of the study, but when asked what her

favourite part of the second phase had been, she said, “it’s got to be the recording, um, yeah [LAUGHS].” One of the most meaningful aspects of the day for Sam was to have a tangible record of it through the song:

[to] have this song at the end of it that we’d all participated in and been part of and, you know, this song that was, you know, that was us, you know, and others, but I guess we were there actually singing.

Like Tracey, Sue, and Sam, Catherine also enjoyed the recording session. Although she found the experience of singing to be “quite nerve wracking,” she stated that, “I did absolutely love every second of the recording day, I really did.” She had never been in a professional recording studio before, and found the experience “exciting,” and “very glamorous.” She also found it interesting to learn about the recording and sound engineering processes. During our interview, Catherine also reflected on the fact that Lu and Stephanie were unable to be with us to record *Calm After the Storm*, stating that,

I think there’s something quite powerful about, well, very sad that they were so unwell that they weren’t able to attend that session...so I think that kind of highlights for me how lucky I am that I don’t have that experience of pain.

Lu had contacted me previous to the recording day to let me know that she would not be able to be there, due to her health issues. I had responded to her, saying that I wished she was able to make it, but that of course I understood, and she would be missed. Despite her inability to attend the recording session, she was still very much an integral part of this phase of the study, and had offered meaningful and thoughtful feedback on the song during the writing sessions, as well as encouragement to both Helen and I for this final stage of the study. She spoke to me about her social and personal experience in this second phase, quite touchingly, in our interview:

Yeah, based on the childlessness then, plus the singing, plus doing the study, it's all an extra layer of bond, I think...And having this interview today has made me feel like I'm still very much part of it, even though I didn't go [to the recording session], so that I feel has been managed really, really well, and I'm grateful for that because I would have felt it hadn't ended properly if I'd just not gone and then everything had just carried on and, you know, I wasn't part of it anymore. So that, I really appreciate, so thank you for that.

Lu's decision to not attend the recording session was not an easy one, particularly as she felt she might be letting Helen, me, and the other singers down by not being there. Despite having to miss out on the experience, however, she stated that she still felt a bond with all of the other women who participated in this phase of the study, through the online song writing sessions that she took part in.

Helen's experience of the recording day, from the perspective of facilitator, was one of pleasure in witnessing the excitement and joy of all of the singers who were able to be there. She described the day as an "exciting dream" and said she felt it was "nice to meet the women properly and spend time with them." As someone who has extensive experience with professional recording, Helen was excited to share that experience with the women she had been working with since she first began facilitating the Childless Voices singing sessions in 2020:

I just really wanted them to have a good time. More than anything, I wanted them to have a good time and just to have that experience of being in a studio and stepping out of their comfort zone and going into a world that they never normally go into, um, in a capacity that is truly their, kind of, their right, do you know what I mean?

She spoke about how meaningful it was to her that the women enjoyed professionally recording a song that they had collaboratively written from their experiences of childlessness:



everyone felt good. And it's about time we all felt good, isn't it? As childless women, you know, it's about time we go and do something and it's like, wow, this really is something out of our childlessness, out of our pain, has come happiness. This day.

My analysis of observations and interviews in relation to the recording day, as well as my own experience of participating in it, demonstrated the liminal (Delanty, 2018; Turner, 1969; Turner, 2012) nature of the event. According to Delanty (2018), "liminality refers to those 'between' moments...in which normality is suspended" (p. 49). As evidenced through the words of those who attended the recording day, this event was one that, for everyone but Helen, had never before been experienced. Delanty (2018) states that liminality is "often connected with those moments of symbolic renewal when a society or group asserts its collective identity" (p. 49). The recording day experience was one during which the group's collective identity was not only asserted, but transformed, through a sense of community and solidarity made manifest through the notion of *communitas* during the act of singing.

**Singing Together: *Communitas*.** In addition to the excitement of being in a professional studio, there was a shared sense of togetherness for most of the women who sang at the recording session that day, made most evident during the act of singing together. Turner (2012) discusses collective music making as "synonymous with *communitas*," due to its ephemeral nature; "it has its living existence in its performance" (p. 43). The author speaks of "co-alignment" between singers as the "overwhelming" (p. 206) outcome of collective musical engagement, a theme that emerged through my analysis of participant reactions to their experience of singing together. Tracey described her experience that day as "touching," in relation to the act of singing together. She spoke of this affective reaction as having emerged through feeling "like part of the community, singing together." She also attributed feeling touched that day to what she perceived

as empathy among the singers as they each recorded their solo lines, “because you knew how each other felt” when some of them struggled.

Sue spoke about the recording of solo vocal lines as the act of opening up and being vulnerable, which she thought was “brave.” In relation to performing as a group, in unison and in harmony, she described the sensation she felt as we sang together:

Oh, God, yeah, I just thought it was a really joyous experience. That’s how I felt actually...it was fulfilling, it was joyous...it felt very much like we were joined in terms of the shared- it wasn’t necessarily the same shared emotion but, you know, I think everybody was quite heightened in terms of how we were feeling.

Here, the joy that Sue experienced through the act of singing together resonates with Turner’s (2012) thoughts on music and *communitas*. The author states that, “We can find a key to the nature of *communitas* through the flow of music, one of the greatest endowments that gives joy” (Turner, 2012, p. 43). Sue also spoke about the impact of Helen’s musical direction as we sang, calling her “an absolute powerhouse” in relation to how she guided us through the process of running the song first as a whole, to warm up at the beginning of the session, then line by line and, finally, working us through the harmonies. Sue also felt an incredible amount of support from Helen while she recorded her solo line, which she was very nervous about.

Sam said that she enjoyed the entire process of recording the song. She thought it was “great” that we each had an opportunity to record a separate vocal line for the song, despite having struggled initially with the line she was assigned. She said she had become frustrated with herself and, thus, was pleased she was able to record a different line successfully. She spoke about feeling as though she wouldn’t have been as successful if it wasn’t for the support she felt from the other singers and Helen:

I couldn't have without, you know, the rest of the group being so, you know, warm and encouraging and, you know, just totally one hundred percent supporting each other. You know, I was really super frustrated but that frustration was me with myself. Um, nobody else was like that. Everybody else was caring and supporting and wanting me to sort of get there with it, which I did!

In relation to the support that Sam felt from everybody, she stated that one of the most important aspects of the recording day "was in the actual singing of it, which was where the shared experience, the actual, um, getting together to actually sing this song and actually produce something that spoke for all of us, yeah."

The support that the singers felt from each other was also experienced by Helen as she facilitated the recording process and directed us as we sang, which she said contributed to a feeling of being able to "let go" a little and give the singers space to sing freely. She described the support she felt through our enthusiasm and positive energy throughout the session as helping to boost her confidence as she was guiding us during the recording of the harmony tracks. She stated that "I felt like we were really in it together at that point." Helen expanded on this point, saying that when she could tell the singers were together and focused,

I knew at that point that we'd surpassed something. So, because we're all coming from this very emotional place, I felt like they had elevated beyond the emotion and that is really significant because that is what singing can do for you emotionally. It can take you out of yourself. Here we are singing a song that we've written about our childlessness, the most painful thing in all of our lives, and here we are not being emotional yet doing the job, creating that feeling.

The act of transcending one's emotional limitations that Helen alluded to here leads me to Turner (2012), who states that, "In *communitas* there is a loss of ego. One's pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In the group, all are in unity" (p. 3). Turner's (2012) words resonate with me on a deeply personal level, from the perspective of my own ego, particularly in relation to my position as researcher. My intention for this project, which I had conceptualized long before proposing my dissertation research in 2020, was to facilitate what I perceived as an opportunity for women to feel 'empowered' through the act of composing and performing music related to, and influenced by, their experiences with involuntary childlessness. I pride myself on my advocacy efforts within and for the CNBC community. This sense of pride, however, clouded my ability to account for the possibility that not all participants would feel empowered by their participation in the project. Thus, it would be remiss of me to report my findings while leaving out the following details in regard to Catherine's experience of the song writing and recording project.

Ackelsberg (1988) and Delanty (2018) discuss community as both an inclusive and exclusive concept, whereby "feelings of group identity most always imply that some are considered in, others, out" (Ackelsberg, 1988, p. 306). The symbolic and liminal nature of the group's collective identity during the song writing sessions and recording day, while facilitating opportunities for *communitas* among and between the project participants, also facilitated opportunities for tensions between individual identities and affect, in particular those of Helen and Catherine.

As discussed earlier, Catherine had hoped for a more collaborative musical experience than she had during the song writing session that she attended. She explained to me that she struggled to connect with the song as a whole, and the sense of exclusion she felt because of this:

Um, well I suppose I just felt excluded really, you know, because it feels like lots of people are at a different stage to me and I don't really feel a lot of the things that are mentioned in the song. I mean, I think there were a few lines that made sense to me but the idea of it all being something that's okay and 'calm after the storm' is not something that I relate to.

Additionally, while almost all of us felt a sense of togetherness as we sang together in the recording studio, Catherine struggled to feel the same that day. As stated earlier, she enjoyed the day overall, but her nervousness about singing, as well as not having received a detailed explanation of the structure of the recording process in advance, caused Catherine to feel a sense of disassociation from the group while singing. She spoke to me about not feeling comfortable singing out, causing her to sing quietly so that her voice wouldn't stand out. When we listened to the finished recording at the end of the evening, Catherine thought that it sounded "very good," but stated that, "personally, it didn't feel particularly like it was something I was a part of, no." I view Catherine's perceived sense of exclusion from the experience of collective song writing and singing as an issue of affective dissonance within the group context, rooted in her identity as an involuntarily childless singer. As such, I am deeply moved by Catherine's willingness to take part in the recording day, despite her discomfort with the lack of connection she felt to the song, and I feel that this speaks to Wilde's (2013) notion of solidarity, wherein the author states that,

Although it is unreasonable to suppose that people will feel a solidarity with all the interests of other individuals or groups, particularly inasmuch as some of these conflict with their own, nonetheless a sort of human solidarity is certainly possible and necessary, where this suggests an empathic understanding of the common needs and interests of others and a standing with them in view of these. (pp. 101-102)

Catherine participated in the recording day in solidarity with Helen, the singers, and me, despite a difference of affect towards the song.

***Impact of the Project: A Sense of Achievement***

Having completed the song writing and recording phase of this research study, Helen and the singers reflected back upon the impact it had on them during our final interview. They discussed these impacts from musical, social, and personal perspectives. Within these discussions, the theme of achievement emerged, for Sue, Sam, Lu, Stephanie, and Helen, as relating to a sense of solidarity and self-empowerment.

For Sue, her self-identification as a non-singer was challenged, in a positive way, throughout the processes of collaborative song writing and recording:

[LAUGHS] Yeah, I don't think I'll ever be described as a singer/song writer but it was, um, it felt really good to be able to contribute...Um, and yeah, as I said, that was more out of my comfort zone than any of the other things I've done, so you know, from that point of view, it did feel like a real achievement for me.

Sam described feeling proud to have been a part of the whole process, particularly in relation to the ways in which her participation might play a role in helping other involuntarily childless women:

Yeah, really proud, really proud to have been a part of it, yeah. And, gosh...it might help others, you know, inspire others, you know, if they know our story, you know, that this was kind of a random group of women who kind of came together and, you know, look what we've achieved. Yeah, I'm just really proud to have been part of it, yeah, that's the main thing.

She stated that “it’s quite something” to have collaboratively written and recorded a song, and to acknowledge the efforts that went into the process.

For Lu, a sense of achievement emerged through her discussion of the importance of having tangible evidence of the collaborative efforts of the women who participated in the second phase of the study. Having the completed song to share with others was something Lu considered more special than having only memories of an experience. Similarly, the completion of the project was made more “satisfying” for Stephanie, by knowing that the recording of *Calm After the Storm* had “come to fruition, despite everything.”

Helen described feeling a sense of pride in having facilitated what felt to the participants, and me, like a successful song writing and recording project. Given that this was her first time facilitating this kind of project, her sense of pride in herself was palpable:

I’ve never done anything like this before so [LAUGHS]...I was quite proud of, once I kind of realized, God, we’ve actually done it, thank God, and it sounds- I wasn’t expecting it to be so lovely, and I was really pleased and I thought, oh my God, I really feel like there’s heart in this. And I really feel like it represented our hearts, and I felt quite proud of that. That, to me, now that to me is an achievement.

The sense of achievement that emerged through Helen’s final interview was made manifest through not just her perceptions of the successful facilitation of the song writing and recording sessions, however. Helen spoke at length about how proud she was of the women who participated in the project, and the respect she had for everyone involved:

I had a lot of respect for them for coming and doing that. Yeah, it really made me feel like, whoa, they really wanna- I mean, of course, as well, they wanna be part of something like that. It’s exciting. It’s a double-edged thing, isn’t it? There’s the

excitement of going, but equally so, doing something like this, they all know how big that is, and how big it could be, and how important it is, you know? They know how important it is. And that's a responsibility and they just took that on board, you know? We all carried that together and it was great... We worked hard that day and that... really did it for me as well. I was really proud of everyone.

***Impact of the Project: Self-Confidence***

In addition to a sense of achievement discussed by Helen and some of the singers, there emerged in our interviews evidence of growth in self-confidence. Tracey spoke very animatedly about feeling as though her confidence in herself had grown as a consequence of participating in the song writing and recording project. She attributed this, in large part, to her experience singing and recording her solo line in “Calm After the Storm.” Through the support that she felt from Helen in particular, who held Tracey’s hand while she sang, she felt encouraged to face her fear, despite the vulnerability she felt singing the line by herself. Her successful execution of her solo was praised by everyone when we all listened back to the recording, which helped Tracey to feel “a bit more confident” as the day progressed. When asked how the experience impacted her experience with involuntary childlessness, Tracey stated,

I feel quite empowered. And today my mum actually said to me, ‘cause I said, “Oh, I’m having my interview today,” and she said, “Oh, Tracey, you’ve come such a long way”... That was brilliant... I think now I’ve come to accept it. I’ve come to accept childlessness.

Sue is a woman who thrives on pushing herself out of her comfort zone, particularly when it comes to physical challenges. As a self-identified ‘non-singer,’ however, her confidence in her ability to make a meaningful contribution to the song writing and recording project was



low to begin with. She stated that the project, “was *way* out of my comfort zone. Probably more than anything that I’ve done, and I don’t know if that was why I enjoyed it so much.” When I asked her in what ways participating in the second phase of this study had impacted her perception of herself as a singer, she stated that,

I guess in that perspective it’s changed me. Um, you know, and if I pursued something else I don’t think I’d be quite so fearful of it really. Um, you know, actually it’s not even fearful is it? It’s that sort of mindset that I can’t do something, um, so I think that layer of, um, well, lack of self-belief, isn’t it? That I can’t do something rather than self-belief, I suppose. So, I guess it’s impacted in that way.

In relation to the transformation of identity that Sue experienced through rising to the challenge of singing, Balén (2017) discusses the potential of collective singing “to hold performers...in new identities” (p. 143). Having sung with the Childless Voices Choir for almost three years, and participating in this research project, Sue stated that she felt as though she no longer discounted herself as somebody who might join an in-person singing group.

Sam discussed the improvement of her self-confidence as related to having formed bonds with the women in the Childless Voices Choir, women who were all unique individuals sharing the common thread of childlessness. She said that she felt inspired by the women she had been singing with each week, and who she collaborated with on the song writing and recording project:

you know, you see all these amazing women that do all these amazing things, you know, they’ve got these, you know, great lives where they’re busy doing this or they’re busy doing that...yeah, it’s very inspiring I think, you know? It’s very inspiring to feel that.

She described the bond she felt with everyone as “finding somewhere that feels like a good fit for you.” This statement, through which she associates herself as an equal within the community, speaks to Sam’s confidence in herself as also being an inspiring woman.

### ***Moving Forward - Activism***

Empowerment, for Adams (2008), is defined as, the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. (p. 17)

As evidenced above, for some of the women who participated in the song writing and recording project, self-empowerment was developed through the social and musical acts that took place in solidarity with one another. These acts provided opportunities for critical reflection on, and interrogation of, the women’s musical, social, and personal identities in relation to their childlessness, as well as the experiences of others. When confidence in the self is established, as well as consciousness of the self in relation to others, it allows one to model self-empowered behaviours, providing hope and acting as a catalyst for activism. Adams (2008) states that self-empowerment “is based on the assumption that people themselves can make a decisive contribution to the self-set goal of realizing their own potential and making the most of relationships with other people” (p. 90). The development of self-empowerment helped to reinforce Sue, Sam, and Helen’s desire to actively engage with the CNBC community through awareness and consciousness-raising endeavours.

Sue spoke with me about her desire to “get involved” in advocacy work with the CNBC community. She expressed that she would prefer to not “get bogged down in internal politics,”

but to instead take “a gentler approach” to advocacy work. She perceived internal politics as being an issue between some online CNBC social platforms and the individuals who advertise their services through them, and did not wish to become involved with it. She talked about the possibility of combining physical activity with social support through in-person meetups that include informal walks as a medium for talking with people about their experiences with childlessness; a “walk and talk.” She chose this medium of advocacy work based on her perception of a need for visibility of the CNBC community:

I think it is something for our community that we do have to make sure we are visible, um, and the only way that’s going to happen is by people communicating their circumstances really. Um, you know, doing things like- I mean, there does seem to be a lot more going on now, projects and, you know, more people are doing podcasts and apps and all sorts of stuff...the more the voices get heard, and the more things are put in place to help us when we get older, uh, which is something I would quite like to be involved in actually, um, thinking about it now, you know, I think that creating those things for us as an aging group, um, is very important as well.

Sam, too, said that she would prefer to engage quietly in the effort to raise awareness of involuntary childlessness. For Sam, an important element of her vision of advocacy work was the public acknowledgement of her own status as “childless/childfree” by affiliation with groups and activities related to the CNBC community. She didn’t see herself ever becoming a “spearhead” for advocacy and awareness-raising work but was, instead, happy to participate in a quieter capacity by making herself visible within, and outside of, the CNBC community.

Helen, whose journey with infertility and subsequent childlessness has lasted over thirty years, also expressed the need for visibility of the CNBC community, and her desire to help

facilitate that through music. She stated that she felt “relieved” to have seen this research study, particularly the PAR phase, come to fruition because of how important she perceived the project to be for childless women. She hoped that the song we created would bring comfort to women in the CNBC community through the knowledge that it was a group of childless women who came together to write and record it. Helen described this research project as having been helpful to her musical journey, in the way that it opened her eyes to possibilities for future advocacy work. She also spoke about feeling “lucky” to have had the opportunity to advocate for the CNBC community over the last few years, through facilitations of the online singing and chanting sessions:

I think, my God, how lucky am I?! It’s like, my pain has provided a purpose and then, what I did before, singing, has also supported that. It’s like my worlds have come together, you know? It’s given me a kind of an identity, I suppose...So, I kind of feel like everything is kind of coming in and meeting at one point, and let’s just see where that goes. Let’s just see where that goes, you know? I can’t do it by myself, you know? We’re all doing it together. It’s not just me doing this.

Ackelsberg (1988) states that, “Through working with others, confronting institutions, many women have come to a better understanding of the power relations that affect their lives and of their own abilities—together with others—to have some influence on them” (p. 304). Helen alluded multiple times to the need for group effort in relation to raising awareness and advocating for the CNBC community. She also acknowledged that social justice movements take “time and exposure” to make an impact, particularly when action includes pushing back against dominant discourses (i.e., pronatalism). Overall, she felt that the PAR project was an important

step in raising visibility for the CNBC community and she hoped to continue to make a further impact.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented my findings from the song writing and recording PAR project that took place from November 2022 to January 2023. Similar to the first phase of this study (see chapter five), I have discussed my findings from the analysis of observation and interview data, which I undertook through theories of community (Delanty, 2018) and empowerment (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016), in conversation with music education and community music literature. The themes that arose in chapter four, in relation to participants' experiences of involuntary childlessness—*isolation, silence, and shame*—were further explored in this current chapter with respect to the impact that the PAR project had on the mitigation of *isolation, silence, and shame*.

As discussed above, the PAR project proved messy and complicated, which reflected the complex nature of the experience of involuntary childlessness. Overall, the project had a profound positive impact on most—though not all—of the participants. The less positive aspects of the project, however, signalled what emerged through analysis as *affective dissonance* (Hemmings, 2012), in relation to the process and outcome of the song writing and recording experience. A sense of solidarity (Delanty, 2018) developed among and between the participants through the collaborative song writing experience, relative to the ways in which each woman explored and expressed their experiences of involuntary childlessness through the act of song lyric composition. For many of the women, a sense of intention and meaning was felt regarding the perceived importance of the project for themselves as individuals, but also for the CNBC community as a whole, which worked to develop a sense of self-empowerment. Many of the

women perceived the project, and their song, “Calm After the Storm,” as something bigger than themselves.

The reflexive nature of both the song writing and recording aspects of the project was experienced by the women who took part in the project as enlightening, as they acknowledged and critiqued the differing identities and experiences of those within the group. The sense of affective solidarity that emerged through this process, in turn, shaped the project itself. Overall, through the resilience and determination of the women involved in the project, to see it through despite its complicated messiness, a sense of empowerment was made evident.

### **A Final Conversation**

To conclude this chapter, and before I move to a discussion regarding the impact I perceive this research having on the fields of music education and community music, I want to share a conversation that I had with Lu at the end of our final interview of the second phase of the research. In this conversation, Lu speaks about the impact that being a part of this research study had on her personally. I was incredibly moved by her words, which brought to light for me the importance of what we had all accomplished on an individual level, from the perspective of one of the amazing women who contributed so much to this research:

Lu: Well, I felt really proud to be part of the study. *Really* proud to be part of the study, and it's meant a lot to me that this is the first one that's been done. It's meant a lot to me to get to know you, 'cause I think you're great...And doing the interviews I found really powerful...it felt important what we were doing, and it felt important to be a cog in that, and that what we said was gonna matter, and we didn't know how much or what impact or anything might come from your research but that it's, there always has to be a first of something, and something always has to break ground, and so to me it just felt incredibly

powerful and I felt really proud to be part of that...I feel like if there's something I can do that's like, a gentle act- I feel like this has been a gentle activism. I mean, not for you, you're doing all the work, but for everyone else it's been a gentle activism because we are contributing to the landscape of it. And the hope is, obviously, that with every generation it gets easier...And having this interview today has made me feel like I'm still very much part of it, even though I didn't go [to the recording session], so that I feel has been managed really, really well, and I'm grateful for that because I would have felt it hadn't ended properly if I'd just not gone [to the recording session] and then everything had just carried on and, you know, I wasn't part of it anymore. So that, I really appreciate, so thank you for that.

Laura: You're very welcome [I'm quite emotional at this point and holding back tears as Lu speaks]

Lu: It felt like a really important thing to do, um, 'cause I've been part of different research things but nothing like this. Nothing where it's like, where you input so much and where it's like, over the course of a year, nothing like that, and so, I mean, you know, normally you participate in a small bit and then that's it. You never know what happens with the research and you never know anything else that happens, but this felt so unique, I mean I'll probably never be part of anything else like this again. It felt so unique, the whole thing, and I think because we know how important it was to you, um, because, you know, you're gonna be Doctor Curtis after this, and so, I don't know, we all wanted to do our best for you as well because we knew how important it was. And we're all so grateful that you're doing it on this. Now, of course, you are one of us, so therefore it makes sense that you're doing it on this, but still, we're very grateful because you're breaking ground

on this and you're doing something where you're having to put yourself out there. You know we're all with you when you give the conferences, but you are essentially on your own, standing there, exposing your life to people, and I think it's exceptionally brave. And so, I'm not surprised that in amongst having to deliver all the research and the facts and everything, that when it comes down to thinking about the people that represent all that, that you are one of, that you cry. I'm not surprised. I would as well, 'cause you're moving things forward by laying yourself bare, and that always takes a huge amount of bravery.

Laura: Thank you

Lu: It's so important for those who are brave enough to do it. It makes such a difference to the whole community. But it's bloody brave, and I take my hat off to you. I think it's incredible

Laura: Thank you. And I feel the same in terms of the vulnerability and, um, just the exposing nature of this research, the vulnerability in the sharing of so much of yourselves through the interview process. Also, through allowing me to, um, observe during the singing sessions, and now also this notion of exposure through the lyrics of the song itself. You know, I think that's-

Lu: Yeah

Laura: I think that is something that I really hold onto, which is why I get so emotional when I speak about my feelings towards all of you women that have participated in this research because, in the same way that it's vulnerable for me, I may be the one standing up there, but a lot of the time it's your words that I'm speaking, right?

Lu: Yeah, I see what you mean, yeah



Laura: Yeah, so there is a- just the nature of sharing. The amount of things that have been shared with me, and yeah, I'm super grateful to all of you as well for that. So yeah, thank *you* as well.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Introduction**

In this final chapter, I provide an overview of the study, wherein I discuss the purpose of the research and the questions I sought to answer. I discuss my methodological choices and the impact of those choices on the outcomes of the research. I then explore the central themes that arose through the observations and interviews I conducted during my fieldwork. Relating to these themes, I then provide a summary of my findings. Following this, I provide a discussion on the implications my findings have for the fields of music education and community music, as well as for the childless-not-by-choice community. Next, I discuss the limitations of the study and the impact these had on the research. Lastly, I think through directions for future research as I see them moving forward.

#### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether, and in what ways, involuntarily childless women build community and develop self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir. I chose to work with the Childless Voices Choir, specifically, as the concept of a singing group for involuntarily childless women resonated closely with my research interests, which are deeply rooted in my personal experiences with involuntary childlessness, singing, and pedagogy. At the time of planning for the study, the Childless Voices Choir was the only group of its kind of which I was aware. It provided a unique and ideal environment through which to explore the impact of group singing on a stigmatized childless identity.

Through the lens of community (Delanty, 2018) and empowerment theories (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016), I considered how the themes of isolation, silence, and shame, as

relating to the stigmatized experience of involuntary childlessness (Gold, 2012; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017) were mitigated through group singing and collaborative song writing. I explored the lived experiences of the Childless Voices facilitator and singers from both musical and social perspectives, accounting for the pedagogical and social environment within which the research took place.

The sensitive nature of the topic of involuntary childlessness, as well as my personal connection to it, necessitated a feminist approach to the research that centralized reflexive praxis (Carroll, 2012; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Foley, 2002). The importance I placed on my approach to this research from a feminist standpoint was rooted in the knowledge that my positionality as an involuntarily childless singer and choir director would have a profound impact on the study. As Skye (2016) states, “No! I’m not a disinterested neutral researcher. This topic resonates with, and relates to me as deeply as it does to the potential participants” (p. 621). I did not shy away from the role that my positionality played in this research. In fact, I celebrated it as benefitting the research processes, as well as the impact of the work that the participants and I have done.

The ethnographic methodology that I employed in this study emerged as most conducive to exploring my research questions in the most meaningful way possible (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hammersley, 2006, 2018; Hine, 2017; Krueger, 2014; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Stauffer & Robbins, 2009). My immersion in—and observations of—the Childless Voices singing environment, as well as the interviews I conducted, supported a rich and nuanced understanding of the experiences of the women with whom I worked. The virtual environment of the singing sessions, while not the originally intended facilitation platform for the group, proved beneficial in that it allowed women from all over the UK, as well as me, to

participate. This was important in relation to inconsistent and variable physical distancing restrictions sanctioned by the British government during the COVID-19 pandemic, as related to both the facilitation of the singing sessions themselves and my research process. The online platform of the sessions was also beneficial given the complex nature of involuntary childlessness, whereby some childless women suffer from health issues that impact their ability to engage in in-person activities. The flexible scheduling of two weekly sessions (on Saturday mornings and Tuesday evenings) also facilitated a choice for members to participate at a time of day that was conducive to their schedules, as well as their physical limitations. From a pedagogical standpoint, the online platform of the singing sessions was often both challenging and problematic, although the facilitator, Helen, was mindful in her approach to teaching the songs each week. From a social perspective, however, the challenges were less prevalent and the singers perceived their social interactions as largely positive.

Within the ethnographic framework of this study, I included a participatory action research (PAR) song writing and recording project as a way to explore, in a creative and musical way, participants' perceptions of their lived experience with involuntary childlessness. This project facilitated further thinking about the ways in which the artistically expressive nature of a song writing and recording project differed from—and complimented—the interactive and reflective nature of the weekly singing sessions. The outcome of the song writing and recording project was the collaborative composition and recorded production of the song titled, “Calm After the Storm.” This song reflects the experience of involuntary childlessness, as well as representing the affective impact of the experience on the identities and lives of the women who wrote it.

## Central Themes

The emergent central themes from the analysis of collected data included the notion of affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012) in relation to the experience of involuntary childlessness; the impact of which was felt through a sense of affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) among and between the participants. In turn, affective solidarity played a significant role in the development of self-empowerment (Adams, 2008; McLaughlin, 2016) for many of the women with whom I worked. The development of self-empowerment through a sense of affective solidarity was made manifest through Freire's (2018) notion of consciousness-raising, whereby participants acknowledged and critiqued their experiences with—and the affective impact of—childlessness. Subsequent resistance of the oppressive pronatalist discourses that framed the lives of these women motivated a desire for—and movement towards—social justice action by some participants (Balén, 2017). Additionally, Turner's (1969) notion of *communitas* emerged as critical to the communal bonds (Delanty, 2018; Higgins, 2012) that formed during and between the two phases of my study, in relation to musical engagements that took place within the liminal (Turner, 2012) space of the weekly singing sessions, song writing sessions, and recording day. Through these interactions, too, a transformation of musical, social, and/or personal identities (Trevarthen, 2002) was made manifest, which also emerged, in many cases, through the development of self-empowerment.

### *Affective Solidarity*

As evidenced in this study, participation in the Childless Voices Choir facilitated a space for involuntarily childless women to develop a sense of affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012). According to Hemmings (2012), the nature of affective solidarity is rooted in the experience of affective dissonance, whereby individuals who share common personal experiences and/or social

circumstances feel a difference of affect towards those experiences and circumstances and stand together in solidarity in view of these differences. As evidenced in chapters five and six, affective dissonance emerged through both musical and social interactions that took place during the weekly online singing sessions, as well as through the song writing and recording PAR project.

These findings relate to my first and third research questions, whereby I asked whether, and in what ways, participation in the weekly singing sessions, as well as the performance of collaboratively composed music, would foster community building and the development of self-empowerment. Conversations related to both the musical and social experiences and circumstances of the women who took part in this study acted as a medium for sharing knowledge and feelings related to the experience of involuntary childlessness. These conversations took place largely during the weekly online Childless Voices singing sessions. The images and thoughts shared with and between participants during the song writing sessions were reflected upon largely internally, as well as during our final interviews.

In addition to the emergence of affective dissonance through conversation and song writing, this theme also arose through the singing experiences that took place on the recording day. Each of the singers, and Helen, experienced this day differently, in relation to the act of singing together, in unison and in harmony, as well as on their own. However, they felt a sense of affective solidarity with each other through their musical experiences. Ultimately, they came together to record the song, “Calm After the Storm,” which many of them felt would have a positive impact on the childless-not-by-choice community; Some of the women used the word “empowering” to describe this perceived impact.

### *Self-Empowerment*

In chapters one and two, I argued that the notion of empowerment is not sufficiently critiqued within music education and community music literature. This study has provided me with the opportunity to grapple with what it means to be ‘empowered.’ Based on my findings, I posit that an ‘empowering’ collective musical experience cannot be achieved for stigmatized individuals without practicing consciousness-raising as a means to developing self-empowerment. The distinction I make between empowerment and self-empowerment has emerged through my interaction with the work of Adams (2008) and McLaughlin (2016). Herein, the authors examine the concept of empowerment as related to power, raising the question of whether empowerment is something given or something taken. Thus, I understand the process of consciousness-raising, which I argue is necessary for the development of self-empowerment, as an act of the self, but one that takes place more meaningfully between individuals who experience a sense of affective solidarity.

The findings related to self-empowerment speak directly to my second and third research questions, wherein I ask whether participation in the Childless Voice Choir, as well as the song writing and recording project, fosters the development of self-empowerment. Analysis of many of the women’s perceptions of the experience of affective dissonance, through Freire’s (2018) notion of consciousness-raising, revealed a sense of self-empowerment that engendered a desire for social justice activism, as related to the experience of involuntary childlessness. Herein, through the acknowledgement, critique, and resistance of pronatalist discourses that framed the lives of these women, and the differences of affect experienced towards these discourses, some of the women expressed their desire to speak out against oppressive pronatalist discourses both within and outside of the CNBC community. For many, this desire was evidence of a

transformed identity (Trevarthen, 2002) in that, prior to engaging socially and musically in the Childless Voices Choir, they felt silenced by their childless identities.

### ***Transformation of Identity***

Trevarthen (2002) discusses the transformation of identity as taking place through collaborative awareness and subsequent action. The author states that the “ritualized patterns” (p. 34) of temporal arts (i.e., singing) are well suited to the transformation of identity. For individuals and groups whose identities are stigmatized, then, the act of group singing facilitates profound opportunities for collaborative awareness and action in relation to the oppressive dominant discourses that frame their identities and their way of being in the world. As relating to involuntary childlessness, specifically, analysis of my findings from this study showed that, through participation in the Childless Voices group singing environment, opportunities for identity transformation were prolific.

***Communitas.*** In addition to opportunities for consciousness-raising, the group singing environment of the Childless Voices Choir facilitated the experience of *communitas*, which in turn provided the singers with opportunities to develop their communal bonds. Turner (2012) describes the experience of *communitas* as one that emerges predominantly through collective work that takes place during liminal moments. Delanty (2018) discusses liminality as “often connected with those moments of symbolic renewal when a society or group asserts its collective identity” (p. 49). I have argued that the online singing sessions that I observed and participated in, as well as the recording day, were representative of such liminal moments. My argument is based upon the notion of music as ephemeral—as existing only in so long as it can be heard (Turner, 2012)—as well as the singing sessions and recording day as experiences that took place outside of participants’ regular daily structure. Returning to Trevarthen’s (2002) notion of



identity transformation as taking place through collaborative awareness and action, then, I argue that the communal bonds that formed through the experience of *communitas* with the Childless Voices Choir facilitated opportunities for the transformation of participants' identities.

Based on the emergence of these central themes, I have argued that the social and musical environment facilitated within the Childless Voices Choir online singing sessions, as well as the song writing and recording project, promoted the building of community and the development of self-empowerment for the women who participated in this study. The social and musical interactions that took place among and between the women who participated in this study helped to address all three of my research questions. The dialogic engagements that took place among and between the facilitator and singers fostered a sense of solidarity through affective dissonance that was largely influenced by a feeling of community relating to the women's childless status and their interest in singing. The musical interactions that took place from a pedagogic perspective aided in building the singers' confidence in their vocal abilities, which I argue contributed to the development of a self-empowered figurative voice—their desire and ability to speak out about the subject of involuntary childlessness broadly and, for some, their own lived experience. Through the development of the voice, then, the women I worked with experienced a transformation of their stigmatized identities.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study has both theoretical and practical implications for the fields of music education and community music, particularly as relating to working with stigmatized individuals and groups. I explore these implications below as related to group singing facilitation and pedagogy.

### *Reconceptualising 'Choir'*

While not explicitly discussed previously in this thesis, Helen expressed to me, during her interviews, her hesitancy to include the word 'choir' in the group's name, Childless Voices Choir. She grappled with the notion that the word 'choir' is linked to traditional ideologies and practices that pose constraints on singers' musical, social, and personal identities. Helen's concerns resonated with my own, in relation to my position as both a choral director and advocate for inclusive choral practices. The choral arts have traditional associations with the performance of Western classical music repertoire, which can be problematic among socially stigmatized individuals, in relation to their ability to identify with the meaning of the music. Additionally, inherent expectations of vocal expression, as reflected by the aims and practices of the choral director, can pose constraints upon singers' voices that are often limiting to the transformational possibilities for singers' musical identities. Lastly, specific pedagogical practices enacted through hierarchical notions of what it means to be an "experienced choir teacher" may reduce possibilities for an empowering group singing experience. The Childless Voices Choir defied these traditions in all ways, and yet the profound benefits of this defiance are evidenced in the findings as I have presented them. In the following, I discuss ways in which music educators and community music facilitators might reconceptualize the notion of 'choir,' particularly as it relates to facilitating inclusive, transformational, and empowering experiences for singers whose personal circumstances situate them as socially stigmatized.

**Responsible Repertoire Selection.** As discussed in chapter four, one of Helen's foundational goals for the Childless Voices Choir was to facilitate the learning of a song every week so that singers could feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of every session. She chose songs from western popular music repertoire that she considered appropriate for their

‘empowering’ nature, purposefully selecting them through careful analysis of the lyrics that worked to ensure the text and meaning would not be triggering in relation to childlessness. Additionally, the songs were taught using pre-recorded backing tracks found on YouTube, so that each singing session felt akin, in some ways, to performing karaoke. For Nicola, learning the songs in a more informal way, without sheet music, was a particularly important element of the singing sessions. Although she is able to read music, she stated that, “it was quite a relief and liberation not to need to do that.”

Helen’s sense of responsibility and attention to the lyrical aspect of the singing experience was appreciated by the singers, particularly those who had prior choral singing experience through which they felt uncomfortable and/or ‘othered.’ Anna spoke of this in her third interview:

I think she feels a sense of responsibility towards us that she checks the lyrics to all the songs to make sure there’s gonna be nothing triggering and that’s, that’s brilliant, as far as I’m concerned. Um, I mean there are inevitably songs that bring back bad memories and, you know, you can’t, you know, she can’t know what songs are gonna trigger other things in us and so it’s up to us to either say “I don’t wanna sing that song” and, you know, she’s brilliant in that she doesn’t say “why, why do you not want to sing that?”

because she knows herself that sometimes there are just songs that you don’t wanna sing. Here, the freedom for singers to choose not to sing a particular song without judgement, granted by flexible facilitation methods, emerges as both liberating and empowering, as a sense of agency is developed. This relates back to the notion of ‘covering’ (Goffman, 1963) that is often enacted as an empowering practice by stigmatized individuals.

Much of the traditional, and contemporary, choral repertoire that is learned and performed in western classical choral traditions might be considered difficult for involuntarily childless women to learn and to sing (ex, songs that present dominant gendered notions of motherhood). This can be attributed, in part, to having difficulty connecting with the overall meaning of the song. The use of popular music that many of the singers were often familiar with, as well as the use of the backing tracks, facilitated an informal learning environment that some of the singers described as “liberating and “empowering.” Additionally, a sense of connection was developed between many of the singers through their shared knowledge and enjoyment of the songs that were selected. The notion of thoughtful and responsible repertoire selection, in relation to topics that may be sensitive and triggering to stigmatized individuals, is one which this research shows should be considered carefully by music educators and community music practitioners.

**The Expressive Voice: Transformation of Identity.** In chapter two, I considered the notion of vulnerability as central to understanding the musical and social engagements that take place within musical spaces facilitated with and for stigmatized individuals and groups. According to Welch (2005), singing is a vulnerable act that provides opportunities for personal growth. In consideration of the notion of vulnerability, I have argued that group singing practice promotes the transformation of musical, social, and personal identities. Dibben (2002) emphasises the relationship between these identities which, according to Trevarthen (2002), are open to transformation through the act of singing together.

A foundational aim in facilitating the Childless Voices Choir was to teach the women to explore songs in a way that allowed them to use their voices authentically, freely, and healthily, wherein they did not feel constrained by singing songs in a way that emulated the original

singer's—or Helen's—voice. Through the practice of modelling, in conjunction with reflective discussion, an environment was facilitated which held space for the exploration of each singer's voice and, thus, the potential transformation of identity. Traditional choral practices classify voices by 'type' (i.e., soprano, alto, tenor, bass). Embedded within these classifications are inherent notions of how each voice type 'should' sound. While in many cases, this is conducive to generating a particular quality of sound that attains the goals of the choral director, it may not match the aims of the singers, particularly those who feel constrained by the traditional system of voice classification. As evidenced in this study, for individuals whose identities are stigmatized—and made vulnerable—by the silencing nature of their personal and social circumstances, freedom of vocal expression plays a key role in the positive transformation of their identities.

***Communitas as Transformative and Empowering.*** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, choral directors struggled to facilitate meaningful musical engagements online that adhered to traditional choral practices (Daffern et al., 2021). The non-traditional facilitation method employed during the Childless Voices singing sessions proved both meaningful and liberating to the singers, for a variety of reasons. Areas for consideration related to the practice of online group singing facilitation include the notion of *communitas* as experienced through singing together while apart, the impact of power imbalance (i.e., 'gatekeeping') on singers' experience, and pedagogical issues as relating to the development of healthy vocal technique.

***Silent Communitas.*** The necessity for the mute function on virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, when facilitating a group singing experience, acts as a largely impenetrable barrier to collective sound. For many singers participating in online group singing, this may impede the experience of *communitas* (Turner, 1969; Turner, 2012) that is often desired—and

felt—through the act of singing together. As evidenced in this study, however, through the perceptions of the women I worked with, a feeling of collective joy *can* be experienced, despite not being able to hear the voices of other singers. Interviews with some of the singers revealed a sense of *communitas* felt not by being able to hear each other singing, but through the knowledge that they were singing together. Most of the time, when singers had their cameras turned on, it was visually evident that collective singing was taking place. Sometimes, as I observed Sara and Catherine doing on two separate occasions, women were also moved to dance while singing, without being prompted. As mentioned in chapter five, Stephanie likened the experience of collective singing during the sessions to the experience of singing familiar songs with old friends. She related this feeling, in part, to the songs that Helen chose to teach, as they were often popular songs that she was familiar with. Trevarthen (2002) states that, “Social alienation can diminish a sense of self-worth and undermine spontaneous expression of feelings” (pp. 32-34). Based on my findings, it is important to consider that the emergence of *communitas*—wherein collective joy is spontaneously experienced—can be made possible during virtual group singing engagements.

***Reciprocity: Navigating Problematic Power Imbalance.*** O’Toole (2005) states that problematic power imbalances are often embedded within ‘traditional’ choral practices. The findings from this study show that problematic power dynamics between facilitators and the singers may be navigated through acts of vulnerability and reflexive praxis. Many of the Childless Voices singers perceived engagements between themselves and Helen as reciprocal, in that the flexible and thoughtful facilitation methods employed within the Childless Voices singing sessions created a space in which they felt “comfortable” and “safe” to express

themselves both musically and socially, and to develop a sense of solidarity through these expressive moments.

Based on my findings, reciprocal musical and social engagements facilitate opportunities for experiencing a sense of solidarity among and between members of the group. Further, a sense of affective solidarity may be made manifest within groups of stigmatized individuals through reflexive praxis that leads to consciousness-raising. Herein, the cyclical nature of reflexivity creates space for individuals to acknowledge, critique, and resist oppressive musical and social practices experienced within the group singing environment, and take action accordingly. Thus, the act of consciousness-raising leads to a sense of self-empowerment.

*Empowering the Voice Through Online Vocal Pedagogy.* In relation to guiding the development of healthy vocal technique, the challenges posed to facilitators/educators include not being able to hear whether singers are in any way practicing unhealthy vocal technique, as well as not being able to see singers' bodies closely and/or in full, while engaging virtually. These challenges are particularly prevalent when working with a large group of individuals.

The model that emerged through the Childless Voices singing sessions worked to navigate these issues through the one-on-one Zoom meetings that Helen hosted with individual singers before and, sometimes, between the weekly online singing sessions. Additionally, by inviting singers to unmute themselves and speak about their physical experience of singing during the sessions, as well as occasionally demonstrating how they were singing a particular musical phrase or section, Helen was able to work with the singers individually on technical and/or expressive issues. Emma discussed the impact of these pedagogical methods on her experience with singing:

Um, yeah, I think I've learnt to listen...differently to music when you're gonna sing along to it than when you're just listening to it. Um, you're looking for, like, cues of when to start singing. Things like, um, expression and words to emphasize. Um, normally before singing with Helen I would just sing along in the shower or whatever, but it's great that Helen breaks everything down into separate sections and sort of focus on each little section. And also, she focuses on the meaning of it as well, which I think helps when you're singing the song.

The pedagogical practices employed during the online singing sessions, while perhaps not considered 'traditional,' worked to provide singers with high-quality voice teaching that attended to their individual needs. In so doing, the growth and strengthening of each singer's physical voice was enabled, which, for many of the women who participated in this study, led to the development of an empowered sense of 'voice' (Ellsworth, 1989; Higgins, 2012).

The silencing nature of involuntary childlessness is such that many women experiencing this phenomenon feel unable or, at best, limited, in their desire and/or ability to sing out and/or speak out. By rethinking and reimagining traditional pedagogical practices, I perceive many possibilities for music educators and community music facilitators who work in online environments to help singers achieve a sense of collective joy and 'voice,' particularly as pertaining to individuals and groups whose identities are stigmatized.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most impactful limitation to this study was related to the PAR project. As described in detail in chapter three, health issues that Helen and I faced in the spring and summer of 2022, when the project was originally planned to be implemented, necessitated a drastic change to the original timeline and processes. Had these changes not occurred, the project would have looked



very different and may, therefore, have produced different findings than the ones presented here. As such, there were disappointments in relation to who was able to participate in the project, the length and depth of the song writing sessions, and the overall feeling of collaboration from some—though not all—participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst for the online facilitation of the Childless Voices singing sessions, which proved beneficial in many ways, particularly in a social capacity. There were elements of the online group singing environment that placed limitations on the study, however, from a pedagogical perspective, which should be considered in future research. The notion of ‘gatekeeping’ and issues of power imbalance and accessibility inherent within virtual meeting spaces such as Zoom, for example, would be a fruitful focus of research in the fields of music education and community music.

Additionally, this study took place in England, a country that has deep historical roots in western classical choral music traditions. As such, the informal pedagogical practices employed within the Childless Voices Choir challenged traditional definitions of what it means to be a ‘choir.’ There is also, however, a thriving community music tradition in the UK, related to social justice, music education, and health and wellbeing. The foundational aims of the Childless Voices Choir align perfectly with these research and practice traditions. As such, it would be beneficial to work with this—or similar—groups in future, although practice and research with the under-researched population and phenomenon of involuntarily childless individuals might not take place in the same way as this current study.

### **Future Directions for Research**

This study focused specifically on the experiences of involuntarily childless women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir. While it adds meaningfully to music education and

community music literature, there is a need for further research in these fields with this population. As this study focused on a cis-gendered female population, however, it would also be useful for future research to examine the perceived experiences of collective singing with involuntarily childless men, non-binary, and transgendered individuals.

Additionally, as the Childless Voices Choir singing sessions took place online, an exploration of group singing that takes place in person would provide a different perspective on the ways in which individuals build community and develop self-empowerment. I have argued that a critical engagement with theories of empowerment is lacking in music education and community music literature. It would be beneficial to both of these fields for researchers to explore these theories, particularly as relating to the group singing experience.

Given the positive impact of the song writing and recording project phase of this study, as perceived by the participants, further research that employs a PAR methodology would benefit this population. In particular, theoretical engagement with the concept of liminality as pertaining to the experience of song writing and recording would prove a fascinating area of research.

The geographical context of this study was the UK, wherein awareness-raising work within the CNBC community has been taking place for the last ten years. I suggest that it would be beneficial to the global involuntarily childless population to conduct group singing-related research with childless individuals in a variety of geographical contexts. In this way, the impact of variations in pronatalist discourses, in addition to differing group singing traditions, might be acknowledged and critiqued.

Lastly, there is a dearth of literature that examines the social interactions between women who identify as *childless* and those who identify as *childfree*. I have witnessed, through social media in particular, a great deal of animosity between these two groups of women. Some of the

participants in this study also experienced a lack of empathy among friends who did not have children, including those who identify as *childfree* and those who identify as *childless*. These experiences have given me cause to reflect upon and critique assumptions that I previously held regarding empathy among childless/*childfree* friends, and I perceive this as a potentially important area for further research.

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## APPENDIX A – EMAIL SCRIPT FOR RECRUITMENT

**Email Script for Recruitment****Singing our stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir****Subject Line: Invitation to participate in research**

Dear Singers,

Laura Curtis, a graduate student at Western University, has contacted our choir asking me to make you aware of a study she is conducting on community building and the development of self-empowerment within the Childless Voices Choir. This research is part of her Doctoral degree at Western University.

You are being invited to participate in a two-phase study that Laura Curtis and Dr. Patrick Schmidt are conducting. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the Childless Voices Choir supports the development of community building and self-empowerment among involuntarily childless women.

Briefly, the first phase of the study, taking place from September to December 2021, involves three 1-hour, one-on-one interviews and one 90-minute focus group interview. You will be compensated with a £50 Visa gift card for your participation in Phase 1 of this study.

The second phase of the study, taking place from May to June 2022, involves an 8-week musical composition and recording project, one 90-minute focus group interview, and one 1-hour, one-on-one interview. You will be compensated with a £50 Visa gift card for your participation in Phase 2 of this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to take part or not take part in this study will not affect your status or participation in our choir. Laura has also explained that you can withdraw from the study at any time.

If you would like to participate in this study, please read the attached letter of information. She has asked me to attach a copy of her letter of information to this email. That letter gives you full details about her study. If you then agree to participate in this study, please contact Laura directly by email [REDACTED] or telephone ([REDACTED]).



If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant or about the way in which the study is being conducted, you may contact:

The Office of Human Research Ethics

Western University

Telephone: +1 (519) 661-3036

Email: [wrem@uwo.ca](mailto:wrem@uwo.ca)

Sincerely,

**APPENDIX B – LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT****LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT****Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir**

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Patrick Schmidt

Don Wright Faculty of Music, Western University

Telephone: [REDACTED]

E-mail: [REDACTED]

Student Researcher:

Laura Curtis

Don Wright Faculty of Music, Western University

Telephone: [REDACTED]

E-mail: [REDACTED]

Dear Choral Member,

You are being invited to participate in a research study about community building and self-empowerment in the choral environment because you are involved with singing in the Childless Voices Choir.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the Childless Voices Choir supports the development of community building and the development of self-empowerment among involuntarily childless women.

The researcher is conducting this research in the hope that her findings may fuel future academic research on the impact of choral singing on the lives of involuntarily childless women. The researcher hopes to use her findings throughout her graduate studies at Western University and beyond, by way of publications and conference presentations.

The study will take place within a ten-month period, but your participation will only be required from September 2021 to December 2021 (Phase 1) and again from May 2022 to June 2022 (Phase 2). During these two phases of the study, observations, individual interviews, and focus group interviews will take place.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in three 1-hour, one-on-one interviews, and one 90-minute focus group interview in Phase 1 and one 1-hour, one-on-one interview and

one 90-minute focus group interview in Phase 2. All interviews will be conducted by Laura Curtis. The one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews will take place within the choir rehearsal space but outside of rehearsal hours. Should Covid-19 restrictions prevent in-person interaction during the proposed time-period of this study, interviews will take place online, via Zoom. With your consent, the one-on-one interviews will be audio-recorded and will be guided by questions that are intended to explore the impact of choral singing on your personal, social, and musical life. The interview questions will focus on biographical information such as your musical background and your experiences with involuntary childlessness, as well as your experience singing in the Childless Voices Choir. Audio recording of these interviews is optional. If you choose not to allow audio recording of the interviews, the researcher will hand-type your responses and reactions on her encrypted personal computer.

The focus group interviews, which will be audio-recorded with your consent, will be guided by questions which are intended to encourage collective dialogue on the impact of singing in the Childless Voices Choir on the personal, social, and musical lives of involuntarily childless women. Audio recording of these interviews is optional. If you choose not to allow audio recording of the interviews, the researcher will hand-type your responses and reactions on her encrypted personal computer. Additionally, if more than one participant does not agree to be audio-recorded during the focus group interviews, a separate focus group will be conducted for those who do not wish to be audio-recorded. Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

In addition to conducting one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews, the researcher will also be observing the Childless Voices Choir rehearsals (Phase 1) and the composition project (Phase 2), as an active singing participant, and recording her observations by taking notes after each rehearsal. Only observations made that include members of the Childless Voices Choir who have consented to participate in this study will be recorded by the researcher. Observations made which include any member of the Childless Voices Choir who does not wish to take part in this study will not be recorded by the researcher. Should Covid-19 restrictions prevent in-person interaction during the proposed time-period of this study, choir rehearsals (Phase 1) will take place online, via Zoom.

Phase 2 of this study involves a composition and recording project that is meant to offer a creative and expressive musical outlet for you, the singer, to explore your experience of involuntary childlessness. Composition and recording sessions are planned to begin in May 2022 and be completed by the end of June 2022. There will be one session per week, for a total of eight weeks. Sessions will be held outside of regular Childless Voices Choir rehearsal times, at a location to be determined and will be co-facilitated by Helen Louise Jones and one other childless female, to be determined. The total time commitment for this phase of the study is approximately 20 hours. In the event that Phase 2 of this study takes place online, due to COVID-19 restrictions, all sessions will take place on Zoom and will be video-recorded, with

your consent. If you do not wish to be recorded, you have the option to participate with your video camera off and your microphone muted. You may use the chat box to communicate.

During an introductory session, the researcher, co-facilitators, and research participants will discuss the purpose and structure of the composition and recording project. Additionally, this introductory session will include a focus group interview, during which you will be encouraged to discuss the anonymized findings from Phase 1 of the research study, as a starting point from which to begin the composition and recording project.

Five compositional sessions will follow the introductory session. These sessions will offer multiple opportunities to individually, and collaboratively, compose music and lyrics for songs and musical chants based on themes drawn from the experience of involuntary childlessness, as discussed in the focus group interview in the introductory session.

Following the five composition sessions, two recording sessions will take place. The first recording session, which will take place in the same location as the first six sessions, will involve rehearsal and demo track recording of the songs composed during the five compositional sessions. The second recording session will offer the opportunity to professionally record the songs and chants composed during the five composition sessions. Upon completion of the project, you will have the option to share (or not) your musical recordings with other participants and/or the wider childless not by choice community and/or the public. With your consent, your compositions, and the recordings of your compositions, will be used for research purposes.

The researcher is fully aware of the sensitive nature of this study and wishes to stress that you may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interviews. Each interview will be transcribed, and the transcription will be sent to you for review and feedback within four months of the date of the interview.

If you have any questions regarding this research study, please feel free to contact me at the e-mail address listed above.

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal, although you may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by answering some of the interview questions. If at any time, during or after your participation in this research study, you feel emotionally upset, it may be advisable to stop and take a break, speak to a friend or a counsellor, or stop participating in the study altogether.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable, and you may stop the interviews at any time. The following links may be useful to you if seeking emotional support during this study:

World Childless Week - <https://Worldchildlessweek.net/support-groups>

Gateway Women – <http://gateway-women.com>

The Daisy Network – <http://daisynetwork.org.uk>

More to Life – [http://infertilitynetworkuk.com/more\\_to\\_life](http://infertilitynetworkuk.com/more_to_life)

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole. These benefits include opening communication between involuntarily childless women, music educators, community music specialists, and academics in these fields, as well as furthering knowledge and understanding of the impact of choral singing on involuntarily childless women.

You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know. In the event you choose to withdraw from the focus group during or after the session, we cannot guarantee that comments made in the focus group session will be removed from researchers' notes as it is an active discussion and we will be unable to reliably track who said each comment

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. While we will do our best to protect your information, there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project that may be required to be reported by law, we have a duty to report.

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. We will be taking the following steps to ensure this privacy:

- Participation in this research is confidential and anonymized. A pseudonym will be used in place of any identifying information that you provide.
- The researcher will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified, unless you consent to the researcher using your first name
- Any communication between you and the researcher will be conducted via e-mail on the Western University server
- The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 7 years. A Master List linking your study number and pseudonym with your name and contact information will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file.
- Data collected from the interviews will be used for the researcher's Doctoral dissertation, and ongoing research on this topic may be part of future publications
- You may indicate whether you allow the researcher to quote you, unidentifiably, in the dissemination of the research
- You may indicate whether you allow the researcher to quote you, identifiably (First name only), in the dissemination of the research
- If the results of the study are published, you will not be personally identified unless you give consent to the use of your first name

You will receive a £50 gift card for participating in the first phase of the study (December 2021). You will receive another £50 gift card for participating in the second phase of the study (July 2022).

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even

if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time, with no risks involved. We will give you any new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form

If you have questions about this research study, please contact:

Dr. Patrick Schmidt, Music Education, Western University, [REDACTED]

E-mail: [REDACTED]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics

(519) 661-3036, toll-free 1-844-720-9816, email: [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca).

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference**

As an alternative to filling out the written consent form on the pages below, please follow the link below to access and complete the online consent form through Qualtrics.

You will be prompted to download a Pdf version of your completed consent form at the end of the form.

Link to Online Consent Form: [https://uwo.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_dcdUJAISJunlylw](https://uwo.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_dcdUJAISJunlylw)

**Written Consent**

**Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir**

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Patrick Schmidt  
Don Wright Faculty of Music  
Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada

**Student Investigator:**

Laura Curtis  
Don Wright Faculty of Music  
Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to be audio recorded during one-on-one interviews

YES  NO

I agree to be audio recorded during focus group interviews

YES  NO

I agree to be video recorded during Phase 2 of the study if Phase 2

should take place on Zoom, due to COVID-19 restrictions.

YES  NO

I consent to the use of unidentifiable quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

YES  NO

I consent to the use of identifiable quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research (Identifiable by first name only)

YES  NO

I agree to have my first name only used in the dissemination of this research

YES  NO

I consent to the use of my compositions and composition recordings for research purposes

YES  NO

---

Print Name of Participant

---

Signature

---

*Date (DD-MMM-  
YYYY)*

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

---

Print Name of Person

obtaining consent

---

Signature

---

*Date (DD-MMM-  
YYYY)*



## APPENDIX C – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### PHASE 1 - CHOIR DIRECTOR



### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – CHOIR DIRECTOR

#### **Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir**

#### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #1**

##### **Semi-Structured Interview - Introduction**

Through this introductory semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the choir director's experiences with involuntary childlessness. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

##### **Questions:**

1. To begin, could you tell me about yourself and your experience with involuntary childlessness?
2. In what ways has involuntary childlessness impacted your personal/social relationships?
3. What does the word community mean to you?
4. Could you tell me about your experiences engaging with the Childless Not by Choice (CNBC) community? How have these experiences impacted your life as an involuntarily childless woman?
5. In what ways has the CNBC community been distinct from other communities you engage with?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience with involuntary childlessness?

#### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #2**

##### **Semi-Structured Interview #2 - Introduction**

Through this second semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the choir director's history of musical experiences. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

##### **Questions:**

1. To begin, could you tell me about your experience as a singer?
2. Could you tell me about your experience as a singing teacher?
3. Could you tell me about your experience as a choral director?

4. Are there any other musical experiences you've had that you feel are significant to the work you do with the Childless Voices Choir?
5. In what ways has your experience with involuntary childlessness impacted your musical life?
6. In what ways has singing impacted your experience with involuntary childlessness?

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #3**

#### **Semi-Structured Interview #3 - Introduction**

Through this third semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the choir director's involvement with the Childless Voices Choir. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

#### **Questions:**

1. To begin, could you tell me a little bit about how your experience as a singer informed your decision to start the Childless Voices Choir?
2. In what ways did your experience as an involuntarily childless woman inform your decision to start the Childless Voices Choir?
3. What were your original goals and intentions for facilitating and directing the Childless Voices Choir?
4. How have these goals and intentions changed—if at all—since you first began facilitating and directing the Childless Voices Choir?
5. Could you describe the usual process of the Childless Voices Choir rehearsals?
6. Could you tell me your perceptions about how participants' engagement with the musical content usually happens in rehearsals?
7. How do you perceive participants' social interactions in the Childless Voices Choir rehearsals?
7. What strategies do you use to foster participants' interactions and engagement in the rehearsals?
8. In what ways does your position as an involuntarily childless woman inform the ways in which you facilitate the Childless Voices Choir?
9. What were your main concerns moving the choir from face-to-face rehearsals to an online Model during the Covid-19 pandemic?
10. What skills or tools (personal/ pedagogical/technological) do you possess that you believe are critical/essential in facilitating online rehearsals of the Childless Voices Choir?

## APPENDIX D – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### PHASE 1 - SINGERS



### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – SINGERS

#### **Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voice Choir**

#### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #1**

##### **Semi-Structured Interview #1 - Introduction**

Through this introductory semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the singer's experiences with involuntary childlessness. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

##### **Questions:**

1. To begin, could you tell me about yourself and your experience with involuntary childlessness?
2. In what ways has involuntary childlessness impacted your personal/social relationships?
3. What does the word community mean to you?
4. Could you tell me about your experiences engaging with the Childless Not by Choice (CNBC) community? How have these experiences impacted your life as an involuntarily childless woman?
5. In what ways has engaging with the CNBC community been distinct from other communities you engage with?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience with involuntary childlessness?

#### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #2**

##### **Semi-Structured Interview #2 - Introduction**

Through this second semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the participant's musical life experiences. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

##### **Questions:**

1. To begin, could you tell me about your experience, past and present, as a singer?

2. Are there any other musical experiences you've had in the past that you feel are significant to your participation in the Childless Voices Choir?
3. In what ways, if any, has your experience with involuntary childlessness impacted your musical life?
4. In what ways, if any, has music and/or musical participation impacted your personal life?
5. In what ways, if any, has music and/or musical participation impacted your experience with involuntary childlessness?
6. In what ways, if any, has music and/or musical participation impacted your social life?
7. Are there any other ways in which music and/or musical participation has impacted your life?

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #3**

#### **Semi-Structured Interview #3 - Introduction**

Through this third semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the singer's experiences singing in the Childless Voices Choir. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

#### **Questions:**

1. To begin, could you tell me what informed your decision to join the Childless Voices Choir?
2. In what ways did your experience as an involuntarily childless woman inform your decision to join the Childless Voices Choir?
3. What were your original goals and intentions for joining the Childless Voices Choir?
4. How have these goals and intentions changed—if at all—since you first began singing in the Childless Voices Choir?
5. What do you like most about singing in the Childless Voices Choir?
6. What do you like the least about singing in the Childless Voices Choir?
7. How do you feel about your social interactions in the Childless Voices Choir rehearsals?
8. In what ways, if any, has singing in the Childless Voices Choir impacted your experience as an involuntarily childless woman?
9. Are there any other ways in which singing in the Childless Voices Choir has impacted your life?

**APPENDIX E – FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – PHASE 1**



**FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – PHASE 1**

**Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir**

The goal of this focus group interview is to engage participants in conversation regarding their experiences singing in the Childless Voices Choir. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

<b>Activity/Questions</b>	<b>Reflective Notes</b>
Question 1:  In what ways has singing in the Childless Voices Choir impacted your social life?	
Question 2:  In what ways has singing in the Childless Voices Choir impacted your experience as an involuntarily childless woman?	
Question 3:  In what ways has singing in the Childless Voices Choir impacted your perceptions of yourself as a singer?	

<p>Question 4:</p> <p>In what ways has singing in the Childless Voices Choir impacted your emotional wellbeing?</p>	
<p>Question 5:</p> <p>If you could change anything about the Childless Voices Choir experience, what would it be?</p>	

**Additional Observations:**

**APPENDIX F – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL****PHASE 2 – FACILITATOR****SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – PHASE 2 –  
FACILITATOR****Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the  
Childless Voices Choir****Semi-Structured Interview - Introduction**

Through this semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the facilitator's experience with the composition project. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

**Questions:**

1. In what ways, if any, did facilitating the composition project impact your perceptions of involuntary childlessness?
2. In what ways, if any, did facilitating the composition project impact your social life?
3. In what ways, if any, did facilitating the composition project impact your personal life?
4. In what ways, if any, did the composition project impact you as a musician?
5. In what ways, if any, did facilitating this composition project impact your perceptions of singing and song writing?
6. Are there any other ways in which facilitating this composition project has impacted you?
7. What was your favourite part of the composition project, and why?
8. What was your least favourite part of the composition project, and why?
9. If you were to facilitate this kind of project again, what would you do differently?

## APPENDIX G – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### PHASE 2 – PARTICIPANTS



### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – PHASE 2 - PARTICIPANTS

#### **Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir**

##### **Semi-Structured Interview - Introduction**

Through this semi-structured interview, the researcher will explore topics relating to the participants' experiences with the composition project. Thus, these are only guiding questions to encourage conversation. The order in which they are asked, as well as how many of them are asked, will depend on the way the conversation progresses.

##### **Questions:**

1. To begin, in what ways, if any, did the composition project impact your perceptions of involuntary childlessness?
2. In what ways, if any, did the composition project impact your perceptions of singing and song writing?
3. In what ways, if any, did participating in the composition project impact your perception of yourself as a singer/songwriter?
4. In what ways, if any, did participating in the composition project impact your social life?
5. In what ways, if any, did participating in the composition project impact your personal life?
6. Are there any other ways in which participating in the composition project has impacted you?
7. What was your favourite part of the composition project, and why?
8. What was your least favourite part of the composition project, and why?
9. If you were to participate in another composition project, what would you like to do differently?



**APPENDIX H – LIST OF SUPPORT SERVICES OFFERED TO PARTICIPANTS****SUPPORT SERVICES****Singing Our Stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir**

World Childless Week - <https://Worldchildlessweek.net/support-groups>

Gateway Women – <http://gateway-women.com>

The Daisy Network – <http://daisynetwork.org.uk>

More to Life – [http://infertilitynetworkuk.com/more\\_to\\_life](http://infertilitynetworkuk.com/more_to_life)

**Laura Curtis**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

**EDUCATION**

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 2018 – 2023 | <b>PhD, Music Education</b><br>Western University<br>London, Ontario, Canada  |
| 2016 – 2018 | <b>MA, Music Education</b><br>Western University<br>London, Ontario, Canada<br>Thesis: The effects of infertility on female vocalist identity |
| 2013-2016   | <b>BMus (Honours)</b><br>McMaster University<br>Hamilton, Ontario, Canada   |
| 2001 – 2004 | <b>Diploma of Applied Arts, Music Performance (Vocal)</b><br>Cambrian College of Applied Arts<br>Sudbury, Ontario, Canada                     |

**RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE**

**Teaching Assistantships**

- Music Education in Community, Western University, Winter 2023
- Music Education in Community, Western University, Fall 2022
- Music Education in Elementary Grades, Western University, Winter 2022
- Music Education in Community, Western University, Fall 2021
- Kodály-Based Musicianship, Western University, Fall 2020 – Winter 2021
- Kodály-Based Musicianship, Western University, Fall 2019 – Winter 2020
- History of Musical Theatre, Western University, Winter 2019
- Philosophy of Music Education, Western University, Fall 2018
- Post WWII Popular Music History, Western University, Winter 2018
- Post WWII Popular Music History, Western University, Fall 2017
- Post WWII Popular Music History, Western University, Fall 2016
- Student Concert Organizer, McMaster University, Fall 2015 – Winter 2016

**Other Work Experience**

- Private Music Instructor – Self-employed, September 2004 - Present
- Music Director, Addison Women’s Choir, September 2019 – Present

## **HONOURS AND AWARDS**

- **Canada Graduate Scholarship - Doctoral (CGS-D)**, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council – 2020 - 2023
- **Michael Smith Foreign Studies Supplement**, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council – 2021
- **Canada Graduate Scholarship - Masters (CGS-M)**, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council – 2017 - 2018
- **Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS)** – 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020
- **Graduate Entrance Scholarship**, Western University – 2018
- **Undergraduate Student Research Award** (*The effects of fertility treatments on the voice*), McMaster University – 2016

## **RESEARCH ACTIVITIES: ASSISTANTSHIPS, PUBLICATIONS, PRESENTATIONS**

### **Research Assistantships**

- El Sistema Leadership Program, for Dr. Betty Anne Younker, Western University, November 2018 – April 2021

### **Peer-Reviewed Publications**

- Curtis, L. (2023). The 'power' of music: A critical engagement with theories of community and empowerment in group singing. *Anacrusis*, 41(1), 10-14.
- Curtis, L. (2022). Singing my story too: Navigating positionality from the 'inside'. *Transform: New Voices in Community Music*, 1(4), 92-105.
- Curtis, L. (2018). The gendering of music education. *Canadian Music Educator*, 59(1), 5-9.

### **Non-Refereed Journal Articles**

- Curtis, L. (2017). Sex hormones and the singing voice: The adverse effects of fertility treatments. *Anacrusis*, 36(1), 17-22.

### **Papers Presented at Refereed Academic Conferences**

- Curtis, L. (2022, September). *Singing our stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment through group singing*. Paper presented at the World Choral Expo - Exchange!, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Benedict, C., Curtis, L., Younker, B. A. (2022, July). *De-constructing leadership with El Sistema Youth: Growth through reflexivity*. Paper presented at the 35th Bi-Annual International Society for Music Education Conference (ISME), Online event, Brisbane, Australia.
- Curtis, L. (2022, July). *Singing OUR stories: Researcher as 'insider'*. Paper presented at Feminist Theory & Music 16, Guelph, ON.

- Curtis, L. (2022, May). *Singing our stories: Building community and developing self-empowerment in the Childless Voices Choir*. Paper presented at Choral Canada's Podium Choral Conference and Festival, Toronto, ON.
- Curtis, L. (2021, December). *Singing my story too: Navigating positionality from the 'inside'*. Paper presented at the 6th Annual International Centre for Community Music Student Research Symposium, York, UK.
- Curtis, L. (2020, May). *The impact of infertility on female vocalist identity*. Paper to be presented at Choral Canada's Podium Choral Conference and Festival, Montreal, QC. (Conference cancelled)
- Curtis, L. (2018, June). *The impact of infertility on female singer identity*. Paper presented at The Singing Network Symposium, St. John's, Nfld.

### Research Posters Presented at Refereed Academic Conferences

- Curtis, L. (2022, July). *Silenced voices: Navigating the pedagogical implications of online group singing*. Poster presented at the International Society for Music Education (ISME) Commission for Community Music Activity, online.
- Curtis, L. (2019, April). *The impact of infertility on female vocalist identity*. Poster presented at the Research in Music Education (RiME) Conference, Bath, UK.
- Curtis, L. (2019, March). *The impact of infertility on female vocalist identity*. Poster presented at the FIMULAW Interdisciplinary Graduate Research Day, Western University, London, ON.
- Curtis, L. (2018, June). *Sex hormones and the female singing voice*. Poster presented at Choral Canada's Podium Conference, St. John's, Nfld.
- Curtis, L. (2018, April). *Sex hormones and the singing voice*. Poster presented at the FIMULAW Interdisciplinary Graduate Research Day, Western University, London, ON.
- Curtis, L. (2016, November). *The effects of fertility treatments on vocal health*. Poster presented at the Undergraduate Student Research Awards Poster Session. McMaster University, Hamilton, ON.

### Other Presentations

- Curtis, L. (2020, July). *Singing our stories: Empowering involuntarily childless women through choral participation*. Pecha Kucha presented at the International Society for Music Education (ISME) Commission for Community Music Activity, online.
- Curtis, L. (2018, April). *The impact of infertility on female singer identity*. Lightning talk presented at the FIMULAW Interdisciplinary Research Day, Western University, London, ON.