Article

From Isolation to Belonging: How Community Music Influences Loneliness Among Older Adults in Formal Care Settings

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Abstract: The institutionalisation of older adults is often associated with negative perceptions from the past, influenced by asylums and hospices that were seen as marginalising older people. These views have contributed to a dominant social representation of residential care as undesirable, being associated with the ideas of social death, isolation and confinement. However, changes in family structures and longer life expectancies have increased the need for residential care. It is thus essential to rethink these institutions as integral parts of the community rather than isolating and marginalising them. Bridging the generation gap and integrating care institutions can help to combat negative perceptions, such as ageism, and promote a more inclusive view of elderly care. One way of involving older adults and recognising their rights and contributions is through community initiatives such as choirs. Community choirs can enhance social cohesion and music learning, offering older adults personal fulfilment, community involvement and resilience. These initiatives underscore respect for autonomy and emphasise their continuing value to society. This study explores the potential impact of community music on relieving feelings of loneliness among older adults in formal care settings. The project engaged 216 participants in singing classes held twice a week over six months. Utilising ethnographic observations and collective interviews with the participants, institutional staff, and family members, in this paper, the changes in participants' self-perception of loneliness and perspectives from family members and staff are analysed. The findings indicate positive effects on the participants, especially in the psychological, educational and social dimensions, including increased autonomy, active participation, learning and social integration. The project engendered trust, empathy, mutual support and a sense of belonging and community, suggesting that community music contributes to mitigating loneliness and enhancing overall well-being.

Keywords: formal care settings; loneliness; community music; ethnography

1. Introduction

Population ageing is a defining feature of contemporary society, driven by global advances in medicine, healthcare and socioeconomic development. Declining birth rates, reduced mortality and increased life expectancies triggered a demographic transition in the late 20th century. As a result, the 21st century has been aptly described as the "century of ageing". This demographic shift is particularly pronounced in Portugal, where according to the 2021 Census, 23.4% of the population is 65 or older. The ageing index for 2022 reached 183.5%, meaning there are 183.5 elderly individuals for every 100 young people under 14 years old. This marks a significant change from 1961, when the ageing index was just

27.5%, highlighting a profound transformation in the population structure over the last six decades.

As family dynamics evolve and the role of older adults within households shifts, institutionalisation has emerged as a standard solution, though it remains a complex and often emotionally fraught decision. Families usually resort to institutionalisation to alleviate loneliness caused by the loss of a partner, hoping this will facilitate new relationships and ease the transition through widowhood. However, due to a lack of meaningful family contact and inadequate social connections formed within the institution, feelings of loneliness can appear [1,2].

Many older adults perceive their move to care facilities as a form of familial abandonment, often without consultation [1]. Although formal care settings are intended to provide essential care, they are associated with challenges, including loss of independence, limited social engagement and an increased risk of loneliness. The transition from long-term home residence is a particularly challenging experience, as remaining in one's home is essential for maintaining personal integrity and independence [2].

Loneliness among older adults in formal care settings is not simply a byproduct of ageing but is deeply influenced by the way society structures and perceives elderly care. Historically, institutions such as asylums and hospices have been viewed as spaces of marginalisation, reinforcing negative representations of residential care as undesirable and isolating [3]. However, with demographic changes making formal care settings more prevalent, it is imperative to reframe these settings not as places of exclusion but as integral and active parts of the community. In this study, we use the term "formal care settings" to refer to various types of facilities, including day centres, which serve older adults who still live at home but attend these facilities during the day for social, recreational and supportive activities, and residential care facilities, which provide long-term accommodation and care.

Although loneliness does not always imply complete social isolation—since older adults may still maintain ties with family members—a lack of peer connections can heighten those feelings. Therefore, experiences that encourage friendships and interpersonal relationships are essential [4]. One way to lower the risk of loneliness is through leisure and cultural activities, which help older adults maintain connections with their environment and cultivate a sense of belonging and community [5]. This highlights the importance of tailored interventions that integrate lonely older adults into activities promoting positive social engagement [6].

Loneliness and institutionalisation have been extensively examined in the academic literature, particularly within the domains of gerontology and the sociology of ageing [7]. Studies have highlighted their profound psychological and social implications for older adults, emphasizing the need for effective interventions [8]. Notably, there is growing evidence of research that integrates these issues with artistic approaches, such as music therapy and other creative modalities, which have demonstrated potential in mitigating social isolation and enhancing well-being in formal care settings [9–11].

Among these initiatives, community choirs are particularly effective in promoting social cohesion, engagement and well-being [12]. By singing together, older adults create musical harmony and reinforce social connections, challenging the fragmentation often associated with institutional life [13,14]. Integrating community music into formal care settings can counteract loneliness, restore social balance and affirm the value of older adults in society [12].

This study explores the relationship between participation in community music projects and the perception of loneliness among older adults in formal care settings. Specifically, its aims are to (1) assess the self-perceived loneliness among older adults who par-

ticipate in community music projects and (2) explore the perspectives of family members, teachers and institutional staff regarding the impact of community music on loneliness.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted as part of a community arts intervention project explicitly designed for older adults in formal care settings that utilised singing to promote health and well-being. Based on the premise that group music making develops personal, social and musical skills [15] while enhancing coordination and emotional sharing [16], the project adopted a community music approach that valued lifelong learning. Acknowledging the benefits of cultural and artistic engagement for social and psychological well-being [17], including social inclusion and bonding, participants were divided into groups and attended choir classes twice a week. The intervention culminated in a public showcase, in which the participants had the opportunity to share the music they had learned with their family and friends. The main aim was to use music to evoke positive feelings and enable socialising, combating isolation and loneliness. It is important to highlight that the selection of both the participants and institutions was determined by the artistic coordination of the project, independent of scientific considerations.

The broader study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention's impact. However, for the specific aims of this article, we focused exclusively on the qualitative methodology, employing a combination of ethnographic observation and interviews to capture the research topic's objective and subjective elements. Ethnographic observations were conducted during one of the weekly rehearsals for each group over the six-month duration of the project. The field notes from three of the five groups were selected for analysis, amounting to a total of 65 observation sessions. This method enabled researchers to immerse themselves in the social world under study, facilitating a closer and more nuanced perspective on processes that may otherwise have remained invisible [18]. By adopting this approach, the researcher was able to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, interactions and group dynamics, which could not have been achieved through alternative forms of data collection. The observations were intended to record participants' behaviours and group dynamics, focusing on interactions that may have indicated changes in social cohesion, self-esteem and expressions of loneliness. In this domain, it was essential to reflect on the complexity of human interactions, acknowledging that the observer's position and perspective invariably influenced the observations. In this sense, knowledge was understood as being situated and shaped by the researcher's positionality, which influenced data collection, interpretation, and analysis. As an active instrument of ethnographic inquiry, the researcher's background beliefs and experiences inevitably shaped their engagement with the field and the perspectives they constructed. This underscored the necessity for reflexivity, which demanded that researchers critically examine their influence on the research process, acknowledge potential biases and adopt strategies to enhance transparency and rigour in qualitative inquiry [19].

Beyond ethnographic observation, it was recognised as being essential to identify and discuss specific dimensions that emerged from the field notes. Since loneliness is a subjective feeling and difficult to detect through ethnographic observation, interviews were conducted to complement and expand upon the data already gathered. To this end, intentional conversations and semi-structured interviews were carried out with relevant actors, such as participants, family members and institutional staff, allowing for the triangulation of information and cross-checking perspectives. These interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and the subjective impacts of the project, which would have been challenging to discern through observation alone.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a predefined interview guide, ensuring flexibility to explore emergent themes and personal reflections. This methodological decision allowed the combination of observational insights with the personal narratives of those directly involved in the music project or observing it.

The individual interviews and conversations were conducted at two points during the study: midway through the six-month period and upon its conclusion. Conversely, the collective interviews were conducted after the end of the intervention. They involved participants from each institution, thereby facilitating a collective analysis of the perceptions and experiences of those involved. The interviews conducted with the older adults, family members, and staff at the institutions were valuable in providing insight into the influence of the project on the lives of the participants. This understanding was derived from the self-perception of the older adults and from the perspectives of the staff, who had daily contact with the participants, and the family members, who had a long-term view and could observe changes in the participants' behaviour or way of thinking.

2.1. Participants

The study involved 216 older adults from 15 different formal care settings in northern Portugal, including day centres and residential care facilities. Participants were divided into five groups, with each consisting of approximately 40 individuals from 2–5 different facilities. In general, individuals from the same facility were placed in the same group, except for those with greater autonomy and flexibility in their schedules, who were more likely to be placed in different groups to encourage interaction between participants from various facilities. Group division was not randomised but was based on logistical considerations, including participants' availability, schedule flexibility and the availability of transportation provided by the facilities. Over a period of six months, these groups attended choral rehearsals twice a week at a local music academy.

2.2. Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through field notes and interview transcripts were subjected to an inductive thematic analysis [20]. The coding process necessitated reflective engagement, compelling the researchers to engage in active interpretation and interrogation of their assumptions, while concurrently identifying key themes. The emergence of these themes was not merely a passive response to the data but rather a deliberate construction through iterative analysis, thereby signifying the intersection of data, researcher subjectivity and decision making [21].

The main identified themes were "project characteristics", "musical skills", "personal skills", "social skills" and "pedagogical issues".

In this paper, the focus is specifically on individual competences and social skills concerning loneliness. The individual competences theme encompassed categories such as "attention", "self-esteem", "self-confidence", "memory", "persistence", "references to the past", "emotional responses to music" and "tolerance of error". These subcategories helped emphasise how participation in the music project impacted individuals' self-perception and personal development. The theme of social skills included behaviours and interactions that were observed to influence social cohesion within the group, such as "displays of affection", "mutual support", "participation in group activities", "sense of belonging", "interaction between participants" and "interaction between participants and instructors". These observations provided insights into how communal music making could alleviate social loneliness by fostering interpersonal connections and a sense of community. It is important to note that there is, naturally, additional material from field notes that has not been included in this article.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

Given the nature of the study, significant ethical considerations were considered, particularly concerning the participants' vulnerability. Older adults in formal care facilities are often subject to power imbalances in their relationships with caregivers and staff, which can affect their autonomy and decision-making capacity. Considering this, in the research attempts, efforts were made to establish and maintain horizontal, equitable relationships throughout the study, aiming to minimise hierarchical dynamics between the researchers and participants.

Written informed consent was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences at the University of Porto (FPCEUP) and signed by all participants before their involvement in the study. Consent procedures were adapted to ensure that all participants, including those with mild cognitive impairments, fully understood the nature and purpose of the research, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Family members and institutional staff were consulted when necessary to assist with this process.

The ethnographic method used in this study demanded a reflexive and sensitive approach to observation, particularly given the close and prolonged interactions between researchers and participants. As such, the research team adopted a reflexive ethos to emphasise care, respect and ongoing ethical reflection.

3. Results

The analysis of interviews and field notes revealed key aspects of the participants' experiences, including their personal and social development throughout the project.

3.1. Field Notes

Throughout the field notes, social skills and personal competences emerged as key themes, reflecting the participants' development throughout the project.

3.1.1. Social Skills

Regarding social skills, the field notes indicated a process of closeness between participants and a strengthening of social ties as the project progressed. These interactions were often characterised by small but meaningful gestures of care and support, which were important in promoting a sense of belonging and community within the group:

> Mrs F. noted that Mr A. appeared distressed. She got up and touched his back to make sure everything was OK. He smiled at her and went back to looking at the teachers. Mrs F. then took her seat once more. (Group 1, 18 January)

The field notes emphasise the importance of non-verbal communication and physical reassurance in strengthening interpersonal bonds. Acts of kindness and attentiveness, such as those demonstrated by Mrs. F., contributed to an environment where participants felt seen and supported. As the project advanced, these expressions of empathy became more frequent, indicating a deepening of relationships within the group.

The relationship between participants from different institutions and with the teachers was also characterised by a high degree of proximity, particularly during the final rehearsals. Moments of casual conversation and shared humour facilitated the development of trust and camaraderie among the participants, further reinforcing the social cohesion within the group:

> Mr A. asked if the teacher was OK; she said she always was. He mentioned that on Tuesday she was a little upset and she laughed. They spoke intimately and closely. (Group 1, 25 January)

> Mr F. came in and said his usual "good afternoon" out loud. He said, "Here's my friend", referring to Mr S from another institution, and they hugged. (Group 3, 16 January)

These interactions not only reveal the manifestation of a profound concern for the well-being of others, thereby suggesting that the project facilitated the development of an environment that encourages the cultivation of emotional bonds, but also underscore the consolidation of friendships that, in the absence of the inclusive atmosphere promoted by the project, would not have materialised.

Furthermore, mutual assistance and empathy were also observed, with these behaviours becoming increasingly prevalent over time and the intensification of the group's cohesion. Small acts of kindness were particularly evident in moments of need, reinforcing collaboration and support as fundamental aspects of the group's dynamic:

> A technician offered Mr J a piece of cake, which he found challenging to consume. Mrs F assisted him by placing small pieces of cake in his mouth. (Group 1, 7 November)

The field notes emphasise the importance of mutual help, displays of affection, and interactions between participants and teachers. These supportive behaviours promoted a sense of solidarity, demonstrating the participants' increasing willingness to look out for each other's well-being:

> They left chatting, helping each other put on their coats and walking to the van. (Group 2, 24 January)

> Mrs P. sat down. Mrs MJ. sat next to her, took her hand and said "I thought you weren't coming". They both smiled. (Group 2, 22 September)

Moreover, the rehearsal setting afforded the participants autonomy, with classes often tailored to their proposals or requests. This illustrates the collaborative involvement of the participants in the rehearsals. By allowing them to influence the structure and content of the sessions, the project nurtured a sense of ownership and engagement:

> Mrs N. then stood up and began to dance around the room. The teacher joined her, and they proceeded to sing together. (Group 1, 1 February)

Other dimensions in the field notes concern the level of participation and the participants' sense of belonging. Through active engagement, the participants enhanced their creative expression and cultivated a greater understanding of self-assurance in sharing their talents with the group:

> Mr. F wanted to say something to everyone. He said a funny made-up poem, and everyone enjoyed it. When he finished, the technician said that a few months ago, when the project started, he wasn't like that. (Group 3, 14 December)

In summary, the social skills observed appeared to significantly impact the enhancement of various aspects of the project, including the promotion of affection, support, and a sense of belonging and inclusion. Furthermore, the project appeared to have a beneficial effect on deepening interpersonal relationships, promoting group cohesion, and emphasising the value of shared experiences.

3.1.2. Personal Competences

Regarding the personal competences exhibited in the field notes, it was observed that as the project advanced, the participants demonstrated an increased capacity for autonomy, error tolerance, self-assurance, and resilience in completing tasks:

The participants were comfortable with the space; they felt free to make jokes, comments and tell stories and anecdotes. (Group 2, 15 November)

Mrs E got some parts wrong, and the teachers and the rest of the participants laughed. She said it was the wine she drank. (Group 2, 22 November)

The ability to laugh at mistakes and persist despite challenges was a significant development in personal competences. This newfound resilience allowed participants to engage more freely and confidently with the activities, increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy:

Also, there was a notable advancement in terms of persistence and self-confidence.

We could see an improvement in Mr J. from week to week, in his attention and persistence in the exercises, even though he couldn't get up and often couldn't do some exercises. (Group 1, 26 October)

Mrs B. said that her self-esteem and confidence in singing had improved a lot throughout the project. (Group 1, 11 January)

They danced a lot, showed they were comfortable and didn't feel embarrassed dancing in front of everyone, in the centre of the circle. (Group 1, 25 January)

Furthermore, the field notes indicated that self-esteem significantly affected the participants' overall growth. The opportunity to showcase their creations, express themselves, and receive positive reinforcement played a key role in strengthening their confidence:

Mrs H., next to me, showed me her instrument, which she had made from corks and pipes from the bathroom. She showed me the sound it made. She showed it to everyone, proud that she had made it. (Group 1, 7 November)

The observations presented here illustrate how the project fostered an environment of acceptance, wherein participants felt encouraged to build their confidence, be comfortable with making mistakes and develop meaningful connections with others.

3.2. Interviews

Concerning the interviews, when questioned about the project's potential impact on the participants' feelings of loneliness, the technicians from the institutions emphasised the importance of social interaction and the enhanced self-esteem derived from involvement in the project and the final showcase. They noted that beyond the musical aspect, the real value lay in the participants' renewed sense of self-worth and the recognition they received from their loved ones:

More than the musical part, of course, the self-esteem part is fundamental. Feeling valued, feeling that you have your worth and that you're showing those you care about the most, who are your family, your children, your grandchildren, that you still have worth, that it's not just the past, but that in the present you have your worth and that it's significant. And I think that's the most important thing of all. That's what it's all about, feeling, in each person's eyes, that expression that they're here for me, and I'm transmitting and demonstrating that I can do something, and I can do it well. It's fantastic. (Interview with technician 3)

The emotional impact on family members was also notable. They expressed gratitude for the project, which allowed them to reconnect with their loved ones in ways that were otherwise difficult due to ageing and neurodegenerative conditions. Despite not attending the choir rehearsals, family members observed significant changes during their visits, directly witnessing the positive effects of their loved ones' participation:

My father has Alzheimer's, and here he is my father; here, I can recognise my father when he is in the project. When he's not here, I can't; he's not here. So, I

> thank you so much, and I hope it continues, I hope it continues because it gives them life (...), it's marvellous. (Interview with a family member 1)

Participants also provided personal insights into how the project influenced their emotional and social well-being. Their testimonials illustrate how engaging in structured social activities can alleviate loneliness, provide emotional healing and foster a sense of belonging:

> I used to move away from people in the institution. I'd sit in the corner, away from everyone, and I'd just sit there, crying, crying, crying; it doesn't mean I don't cry today, but it's not the same, and so it's helped me to socialise. (Post-test 1)

> The project contributed a lot to my well-being. I was going through a process; the grief was leading me to sadness and a bit of depression, but I managed to turn it around because I had something important of my own to give, you know? (Post-test 2)

In a collective interview, participants were asked to identify the most critical aspects of the project. Socialising, establishing and reinforcing friendships, distraction from routine activities and the opportunity to engage in new experiences were identified as key benefits:

> The project is good for us to live a little more and socialise (...) And to forget certain anxieties about ourselves, don't we? When we go there, at least we forget everything, we socialise with each other there, and that's very good. There could be other things that could bring older people together from time to time, things that are different. (Collective interview 3)

> We feel that, despite our age, there are still opportunities beyond our years. That we can do a lot. (Collective interview 3)

Moreover, participants underscored the inclusive nature of the project. Regardless of individual skill levels, they felt a sense of unity and purpose, contributing to their personal growth and development:

> No matter if they sing, listen better or worse, or have ability, the fact that they're there is essential for their personal growth and development because they don't feel left out. We were all part of a group, and those who may have had more difficulty are just as alive as we are. I'm sure that after all this time, they've achieved something they never thought they could. (Collective interview 3)

The overarching sentiment expressed across the interviews was the importance of promoting social engagement among older adults:

> A little project for us to socialise a bit more; we're very lonely here. (Collective interview 1)

The interviews revealed the critical role of social engagement in enhancing the well-being of older adults. The project functioned to fortify social connections and mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness. The participants emphasised the importance of such initiatives in encouraging a sense of belonging and purpose and revitalising vitality in their daily lives.

4. Discussion

Participation in the project demonstrated clear benefits for the participants on a personal and social level. The findings suggest that involvement in community music projects can promote individual development and social cohesion, reinforcing that these initiatives play an important role in improving the well-being of older adults. It underscores the importance of transforming communities into spaces for citizenship, civic engagement

and political action [4]. The project's structure reflected this by creating an environment of inclusivity, where participants were not merely passive recipients but active contributors. This collaborative, egalitarian approach—with shared knowledge and power—facilitated participants' autonomy, empowerment and active engagement. As a result, it challenged the perception of older adults as passive or incapable of meaningful participation in community life.

The relationships established between the participants and the institutional staff are aligned with the insights regarding the process of institutionalisation, which often leads to the stereotyping of older adults as dependent and incapable of managing their own lives [2]. Formal care settings have a natural tendency to prioritise safety over autonomy, often resulting in paternalistic relationships that limit the independence of older adults. In contrast, this project disrupted those traditional dynamics, promoting a more horizontal relationship between participants and music teachers. By recognising each participant's dignity, individuality and autonomy, the project promoted a more respectful and inclusive environment. This shift not only improved personal well-being but also served to counteract the negative psychosocial impacts of institutionalisation and supported the broader discourse of positive ageing, which emphasises agency, resilience and active participation in society.

Moreover, the collective nature of choral singing highlighted the importance of solidarity and mutual respect. Choral singing demands a balance between individual expression and collective responsibility, fostering social bonds and a sense of belonging [12]. This dynamic was evident in the participants' ability to acknowledge and embrace their own mistakes and those of others, an essential aspect of the project that promoted a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. The communal effort required in choral practice encouraged participants to value their contributions and those of their peers, facilitating both personal growth and community integration.

The project's impact on mental and physical health was another key finding. Martins et al. observed that participation in group music activities can enhance feelings of pleasure, self-realisation and overall well-being [4]. For the older adults in this study, these positive emotional outcomes were reflected in their heightened self-esteem and confidence and improved physical engagement during rehearsals. This reinforces the growing body of evidence supporting the role of creative and social activities in promoting the holistic health of older adults. Additionally, these insights allow us to argue for the necessity of interdisciplinary studies in psychology, education and the arts that explore how artistic activities can promote well-being among older adults in formal care settings. Such findings also strengthen the argument that we need a scientific and social perspective that actively rejects ageist frameworks.

Interestingly, this study also corroborates the view that loneliness is not synonymous with social isolation [22]. Loneliness often stems from a lack of meaningful connections with individuals of similar age or interests rather than social isolation. The project addressed this by facilitating new social bonds among participants from different institutions and strengthening preexisting friendships. The result was an improvement in relationships with music teachers and a noticeable shift towards empathy, mutual assistance and affection among the participants. This collective experience cultivated a sense of trust and civic competence, echoing that group activities can enhance interpersonal trust and promote social responsibility.

When participants were asked to reflect on the most valuable aspects of the project, social interaction and the formation of new friendships emerged as the most frequently cited benefits. This finding invigorates the potential for community projects, particularly those focused on the arts, to mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation. Additionally,

the public showcase at the end of the project offered participants a unique opportunity to demonstrate their achievements in front of family and friends, instilling a sense of pride, accomplishment, and self-confidence [23]. This moment of public recognition further validated their efforts and strengthened their social ties, reinforcing the broader social and personal benefits of participating in community music projects.

The present study also encompasses some limitations. Due to its methodological characteristics, the relational dimension assumes a central role, requiring researchers to adopt strategies to avoid bias. Considering that the participants are in vulnerable situations, some interactions (with institutional technicians and other project participants) result in misconceptions about their fragility and abilities, perceptions often overlooked, normalised, and perpetuated in society. Therefore, careful observation strategies were adopted to ensure reflexivity around these assumptions. Concurrently, the researcher's role in this dynamic must be examined. Despite the perception of reciprocity, there is an inherent power imbalance between researchers and participants. Researchers control participant selection, data usage and knowledge dissemination [24].

Additionally, researchers may be seen as outsiders or someone whose authority reinforces hierarchical relationships, hampering the establishment of genuinely equitable interactions. Therefore, it was vital to recognise all parties' interests, communicate the relevance of the knowledge produced and ensure that it benefitted both participants and similar communities. In the specific context of this study, the knowledge produced was used to enhance visibility and to promote activities for this often-overlooked group.

Another limitation and significant concern was the sustainability of the project. While the intervention created meaningful interactions and generated valuable knowledge, ensuring its long-term impact and continuity beyond the research phase remains a significant challenge. To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of projects of this nature, particularly those targeting populations in vulnerable situations, it is essential to adopt a bottom-up, community-centred approach. This approach acknowledges participants' specific needs and aspirations, enabling initiatives to create meaningful, tangible impacts. However, it is essential to emphasise that true sustainability goes beyond prolonging a single project; instead, it requires promoting systemic change that challenges the conditions that render the target group vulnerable in the first place. This necessitates the promotion of policy modifications, the enhancement of the target group's visibility within broader societal discourse and the active dissemination of knowledge produced, ensuring its contribution to ongoing improvements in practice instead of mere archiving within academic discourse.

Additionally, one of this study's limitations concerns the levels of participation among older adults, particularly their prior experience (or lack thereof) with music. This variation in musical background might have influenced the nature and depth of engagement within the project. Some participants may have had previous exposure to musical activities, while others may have been encountering music as part of the project for the first time. This disparity in experience could have affected the overall dynamics of participation and the project's outcomes. Addressing these differences in prior musical experience is important to fully understand the impact of the intervention and the varying ways in which older adults engage with art- and music-based activities.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate the multifaceted impact of community music initiatives on the well-being of older adults. The project facilitated the development of personal competencies, including increased self-esteem, confidence, and autonomy. It also strengthened social bonds and countered institutionalised perceptions of ageing.

The project demonstrated that older adults can proactively engage in creative and social endeavours by fostering an environment of inclusivity, active participation and horizontal relationships between participants and facilitators. This contributes to challenging ageist assumptions and reinforces their role as valuable community members. Furthermore, the project highlighted the importance of community music in mitigating feelings of loneliness, reinforcing feelings of solidarity and promoting well-being.

Community music initiatives represent a promising avenue for fostering inclusion and mitigating social exclusion. These initiatives recognise the dignity and individuality of participants, value their autonomy and establish more horizontal relationships. They facilitate engagement with reality and enhance the sense of belonging among elderly community members. Group singing allows older adults to become socially involved and connect with others, reinforcing a sense of unity and collectivity.

Lastly, the value of these artistic and educational efforts, which seek to promote inclusion, health and well-being, must be integrated into political agendas. There is a pressing need for public policies and interventions that address the various forms of exclusion, marginalisation and isolation faced by vulnerable groups. Adopting a holistic approach can address these challenges more effectively, contributing to more inclusive and equitable communities.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of such projects on well-being, particularly whether the improvements in self-esteem and social connections persist beyond the duration of the project. Additionally, further studies could investigate the application of similar community-based creative interventions with other vulnerable groups, such as individuals with disabilities or younger people facing social isolation. The qualitative approach, particularly ethnography, has been demonstrated to be an adequate methodology for the study of this population, as it fosters a close relationship between the researcher and participants and enables access to data that would otherwise be unavailable. This deep engagement has been shown to provide an in-depth understanding of the reality in question, capturing nuanced insights into participants' experiences and social dynamics. However, from an ethical standpoint, it is imperative to underscore that the affective involvement, which fosters this closeness and facilitates the collection of more in-depth data, also necessitates a substantial degree of critical vigilance during the analysis of the data, as well as the management of these affections upon departure from the field.

Lastly, we consider that this study provides significant contributions to the geriatric field and the role of care institutions for older adults, advocating for a more comprehensive approach. By adopting an ecological perspective [25], this study highlights the importance of considering the contexts in which older adults live and move and how these contexts play a meaningful role in promoting and ensuring their well-being. Moreover, these findings underscore the importance of a policy strategy that prioritises the well-being of older adults within social protection systems, ensuring their rights, dignity and active participation in society.

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