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Running head: BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE:  
EXPLORING TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENTS WITHIN THE  
CHORAL ARTS

By

AUBRIELLE JEANETTE HOLLY

Bachelor of Arts, Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, ID, 2014

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in Communication Studies, Organizational Communication

The University of Montana  
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# BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

## ABSTRACT

Holly, Aubrielle, Master of Arts, May 2016

Communication Studies

A Qualitative Analysis of Belonging in Communities of Practice: Exploring Transformative Organizational Elements within the Choral Arts

Chairperson: Dr. Betsy Wackernagel Bach

A qualitative analysis was conducted with a community choir as an exemplar of a community of practice. Semi-structured, collaborative interviews with eighteen of the choir's members and eleven hours of field observation were conducted. The socialization process was briefly examined and discussed as it informed membership experiences in the choir. Four research questions were proposed to examine the ways in which the defining characteristics of communities of practice were communicatively enacted within the choral context. The construct of belonging was examined as an addition to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework. Data analysis followed the grounded theory methodology of Strauss and Corbin (1990).

The choral context was chosen for its particular intersections of art form characteristics with Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework. The communal nature of choral singing required the mutual engagement of a variety of members. Singers negotiated their joint enterprise over the years as membership stabilized and the technical expertise of the group increased. The community's shared repertoire was evident in the musical repertoire, sense of a cohesive group, and the informal discourses which indicated membership. As choir members engaged in the process of choral singing, negotiated its meaning for their particular group, and enacted belonging while drawing from a shared repertoire, they were communicatively constructing a community. Belonging was enacted by members through their mutual recognition of membership and strong emotional connection through artistic expression.

This research is a test of Wenger's (1998) communities of practice theory in a unique organizational setting. Belonging reflected importance as a motivator for new membership and an essential component for sustained membership. Strategic disengagement and select socialization emerged as theoretical implications for socialization and participation in communities of practice. These elements warrant further examination. Implementation of the theoretical characteristics of communities of practice and belonging as it is communicatively enacted can foster healthier organizational environments and membership retention.

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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# BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Literature Review	2
Assimilation and Socialization	3
Stages of Socialization	4
Anticipatory Socialization	4
Encounter	5
Metamorphosis	6
Uncertainty Reduction	6
Voluntary Organizational Membership	7
Communities of Practice	9
Social Learning Theory	10
Defining Characteristics of Communities of Practice	12
Mutual Engagement	13
Negotiation of a Joint Enterprise	14
Shared Repertoire	14
Organizational Context of the Community Choir	15
History of Choral Development	16
An Art Form for the Community	18
The Community Choir as a Community of Practice	20
Belonging in a Community of Practice	23
Chapter 2 Methods	27
Data Collection	27

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

	Interview . . . . .	27
	Observation . . . . .	28
	Participants . . . . .	29
	Interview Structure, Type, and Stance . . . . .	29
	Interview Questions . . . . .	31
	Data Analysis . . . . .	32
	Method and Process . . . . .	32
	Validity and Reliability . . . . .	34
Chapter 3	Results . . . . .	37
	Assimilation and Socialization . . . . .	38
	Anticipatory Socialization and Voluntary Organizational Membership . . . . .	38
	Encounter . . . . .	41
	Metamorphosis . . . . .	42
	Defining the Choir as a Community of Practice . . . . .	44
	Mutual Engagement of a Community Choir . . . . .	44
	Negotiation of the Joint Enterprise of a Community Choir . . . . .	47
	Shared Repertoire of a Community Choir . . . . .	52
	Belonging in a Community Choir . . . . .	55
Chapter 4	Discussion . . . . .	61
	Theoretical Implications for Communities of Practice . . . . .	61
	Test of Communities of Practice Theory . . . . .	62
	Socialization and Participation in Communities of Practice . . . . .	65
	Strategic Disengagement . . . . .	65

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Select Socialization . . . . .	66
Belonging and Voluntary Organizational Membership . . . . .	67
Social Benefits of the Choral Arts . . . . .	69
Building Communities . . . . .	69
Social Engagement . . . . .	71
Limitations . . . . .	71
Researcher Role . . . . .	71
Limited Scope of Examination . . . . .	72
Future Research Directions . . . . .	72
De-Socialization . . . . .	72
Strategic Disengagement . . . . .	73
Select Socialization . . . . .	73
Conclusion . . . . .	74
References . . . . .	79
Appendix A (Guiding Interview Questions) . . . . .	85
Appendix B (Recruitment Script) . . . . .	87
Appendix C (Request for Field Observation). . . . .	88
Appendix D (Subject Information and Informed Consent) . . . . .	89
Appendix E (IRB Proposal and Approval) . . . . .	91

## **Introduction**

Focusing on knowing for this purpose is a useful topic, but this choice should not be interpreted as assuming that knowing is all that communities of practice are about, especially if by 'knowing' one refers to some instrumental kind of expertise.

Communities of practice should not be reduced to purely instrumental purposes. They are about knowing, but also about being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human (Wenger, 1998, p. 134).

With this research I present an examination of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework on communities of practice, as it is applied to the organizational setting of a community choir. A community choir is chosen as an exemplar of a community of practice for its unique intersections of theoretical concepts with art form characteristics. Belonging is also examined as an extended construct of mutual identification within communities of practice and the result of successful organizational socialization. Wenger presents three defining characteristics of communities of practice: mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. I seek to examine the ways in which these characteristics are communicatively enacted within the community choral setting. In order to examine Wenger's theoretical framework and the additional construct of belonging, the following research questions are posed: I hope to investigate the communicative indicators of mutual engagement in communities of practice, how the joint enterprise of a community of practice is communicatively negotiated, the communicative aspects of a choral community's shared repertoire which indicate membership and community identity, and how belonging is communicatively enacted in a choral community of practice. By understanding the reaches of the theoretical framework on communities of practice, I hope to understand the specific implications for non-profit community organizations.



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

By highlighting the role of belonging in communities of practice, we might better enable this catalyst for further civic engagement and foster healthier organizational environments.

### **Chapter 1 – Literature Review**

To understand Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, it is important to situate the theoretical framework within the context of organizational literature. A brief background on the organizational assimilation and socialization process will be presented. As individuals seek to join organizations, they are motivated by a variety of factors which will then effect the membership roles that they assume. For example, if an individual joins a community choir primarily for the social aspect, they are not likely to seek a position as section leader, a role which is more likely to be taken on by an organizational member who has a long history of choral performance and seeks to continue singing at an advanced level. Both choir members may find belonging within the group, but the particular aspects of their experiences will be different. This also necessitates a brief examination of voluntary organizational membership, which involves its own unique motivations for joining, nature of tasks and relationships, and nonfinancial rewards. These elements also inform the organizational scene for communities of practice.

I will then present Wenger's (1998) conceptual framework on communities of practice by beginning with its foundations in social learning theory. To understand the unique elements of communities of practice and how they function within the organizational sphere, I present the exemplar of a community choir. Wenger's (1998) defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire will be applied to the choral setting. Through qualitative research methods, I will seek to describe and understand the ways in which

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

choir members experience these elements of meaning, practice, community, and identity (Wenger, 1998) within their organizational setting.

This literature review also includes the theoretical construct of belonging (Iverson, 2011). Within this context, belonging is understood as a result of a successful socialization process and a catalyst for further civic engagement. It is distinguished by mutual identification, which indicates the communal nature of the socialization process: it is not achieved merely by the individuals joining the organization, but it must also be enacted by the established members. This communal construct of belonging fits well within the conversation on communities of practice as they are communal by nature. A community choir is an ideal exemplar for its uniquely communal aspects that are inextricable from the art form, presenting an excellent organizational setting within which to examine belonging in communities of practice.

### **Assimilation and Socialization**

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) define socialization as “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (p. 211). Though the experience is unique for each individual, socialization is a phenomenon observable across organizational contexts. It occurs within the broader context of assimilation, “the process by which individuals join, participate in, and leave organizations” (Kramer, 2010, p. 3). While assimilation refers to the process of organizational participation from encounter to exit, socialization specifically identifies the acquisition of knowledge and skills as an individual prepares to assume a particular role within the organization. Various models and theories have been developed around these concepts as they continue to be studied by organizational communication scholars. Most of the models discuss three common phases: 1) anticipatory socialization, which is the time period prior to joining an organization, 2) encounter, which

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

marks the period of initial participation as a new member, and 3) metamorphosis, the phase during which an individual is an active and established organizational member, participating in role management (Kramer, 2010). Jablin's (2001) model added a fourth phase, an exit period, during which an individual leaves the organization. For the purposes of this study, this fourth and final phase will not be examined.

### **Stages of Socialization**

**Anticipatory socialization.** Anticipatory socialization refers to the time period prior to joining an organization. Individuals are anticipating joining an organization and the roles that they will assume (Kramer, 2010). This initial stage of the socialization process involves two activities: recruitment, which is the organization's effort to provide information to attract potential members, and reconnaissance, which is the potential member's effort to find information about the organization, further informing their decision whether or not to join (Moreland & Levine, 2001). From here individuals move into the pre-entry phase, which is "the time between when an offer to join is accepted and when the person actually joins the organization" (Kramer, 2010, p. 63). This phase is distinguished by the newcomer's efforts to craft a reputation through impression management and established members' efforts to make sense of the newcomer (Jablin, 2001). For the newcomer, the pre-entry phase is about paving the way for their transition into the organization with the goal of being accepted by established members. For the established organizational members, the pre-entry phase is about preparing for the potential changes that the newcomer might bring to the organization. This instigates uncertainty management (Kramer, 2010) for both the newcomer and established organizational members as they move from anticipatory socialization into the encounter phase.

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Within the broader organizational context of the arts community, there is a wide variety of smaller organizations from which individuals may choose to join. Just as voluntary members will choose an organization based upon their own motivations and identification with the organizational values, community members are likely to choose a choir that fulfills their motivations for joining and with which they can easily identify. For example, if a singer has previous experience in a women's choir, she may choose to participate in the same type of ensemble. This decision initiates the pre-entry phase. For some community choirs, an audition will determine whether or not an individual will become an organizational member. For other groups, individuals might simply make the decision to join a choir and thus begins the encounter phase of socialization.

**Encounter.** After choosing an organization, the voluntary member will enter the encounter phase. "The encounter phase begins when an individual becomes an organizational member and assumes some organizational role" (Kramer, 2010, p. 7). The individual will encounter some type of organizational socialization strategy (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), such as an orientation or training on the new member's role. Volunteer organizations tend to constantly need new members and thus have a tendency to focus more effort on recruitment, rather than socialization strategies. During this phase, the organizational member is regarded as a newcomer. Newcomers are learning the ins and outs of organizational membership, such as internal hierarchies and their own role with its accompanying characteristics (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010; Moreland & Levine, 2001).

For a member of a community choir, the hierarchies and established roles they encounter are likely to be primarily informal. These may include socially negotiated processes, such as where specific choir members sit in the absence of an assigned seating chart. This informal

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

socialization of newcomers is generally enacted by established organizational members. An example of a formally established role might be section leader within the choir, a role which is usually assigned by the director.

**Metamorphosis.** The socialization process is primarily driven by the need to reduce uncertainty (Kramer, 2010). Uncertainty is primarily experienced during the anticipatory phase of socialization, as individuals are imagining what their own experience will include. Organizational members continue to enact uncertainty reducing behaviors through the encounter and metamorphosis phases as they establish new relationships, negotiate roles, and adapt to the organizational culture (Kramer, 2004). This results in uncertainty management being a primary theoretical construct in the examination of organizational membership (Waldeck & Myers, 2008).

**Uncertainty reduction theory.** Originally an interpersonal theory, URT was developed to describe how individuals respond to the uncertainty present in interactions with strangers (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Individuals will seek information in order to reduce uncertainty. As they gain information, uncertainty decreases and personal liking increases. Since the origin of this theory, researchers have continued to develop its principles and application across topic areas. There are different types of uncertainty: descriptive, which involves identifying individuals; predictive, which involves predicting behavior; and explanatory, or the explanation of their behavior (Berger & Bradac, 1982). There are also multiple ways of gaining information, such as passive, which simply involves observation; active, which is the requesting of information from others; and interactive, when an individual asks the target of uncertainty (Berger, 1979). An essential aspect of the socialization process is this seeking of information about various facets of the organization and its established members. Information is sought via

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

formal and informal processes (Kramer, 2010). For a community choir, a formal process might be a group initiation, such as an induction ceremony or choir retreat. An informal process might be inquiring about a typical rehearsal from an established choir member. Regardless of how information is acquired or what conclusions it leads new members to, it decreases uncertainty and allows the new member to continue through the socialization process.

As newcomers gain more information and negotiate roles, they will move into the metamorphosis phase. This phase change is difficult to objectively determine as it refers more to a psychological state, when individuals no longer consider themselves to be newcomers (Kramer, 2010). Schlossberg (1981) argues that this transition occurs when newcomers switch from learning new roles to a sense of comfort and confidence in their organizational membership. It is for this reason that this study uses qualitative research methods in order to examine this phase change. According to Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008), metamorphosis is marked by a meaningful event or action, such as a more recent newcomer seeking information from them or a significant contribution to their organization. Although this is the socialization phase with the greatest longevity, it is by no means stagnant (Kramer, 2010). Socialization is both an outcome and a process: as an organization is constantly changing, so its members are constantly adapting and renegotiating roles (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Feldman, 1976). Within the context of a community choir, this change occurs in a consistent cycle as the group brings in newcomers and loses established members. The change may occur more frequently in growing communities with an influx of newcomers or less frequently in older communities where members are well established.

### **Voluntary Organizational Membership**

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Ellis and Campbell (2005) argue that “to volunteer is to choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one’s basic obligations” (p. 4). Though the specific definition of volunteering is disputed among scholars, its basic principles of action without coercion, receiving no remuneration, and acting for the benefit of others are generally agreed upon. Volunteers have come to be recognized as essential organizational participants, both within and outside of the non-profit sector. In his significant work on voluntary organizational membership, Kramer (2011) recognizes its unique characteristics, “such as the motivations for joining, the nature of their tasks and relationships, and the nonfinancial rewards” (p. 234). It is for these reasons that he argues for the specific examination of socialization for voluntary members.

Motivations for entering the anticipatory socialization phase could affect the socialization process. For an employee who joins an organization under the motivation of financial remuneration, organizational membership may be defined by a paycheck. This could complicate role negotiation and undermine socialization as employees compete for higher paying positions. For volunteers who do not engage in organizational membership for tangible benefits like salaries, the psychological contract is different for volunteers than for employees (Rousseau, 1990). Common motivations include expression of values, the learning or developing of unique skills, career enhancement, and personal development (Kramer, 2011). For individuals who chose to join a non-profit community organization, these motivations may not necessarily be consistent. Many individuals are driven to join community organizations for the particular practice in which the group is engaged. Non-profit community organizations often facilitate activities that do not reflect the broader interests of the community, such as a madrigal choir or a gardening club for aging adults. These are activities of interest to particular groups that may not

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

necessarily reflect community interest. Nonprofit organizations have the ability to support these specific activities, promoting more community engagement as a variety of interests are represented (Smith, 2012). Many individuals are also motivated to join non-profit organizations simply by the desire to connect with a community. Engagement in a social association fosters a sense of community attachment and group identity (Kwak, Shah, & Holbert, 2004). This sense of community attachment and group identity facilitates the experience of belonging, which will later be discussed in further detail.

### **Communities of Practice**

Among the ranks of organizational studies stands Wenger (1998), who has developed the concept of communities of practice. Though not an organizational communication scholar, his work has been examined and implemented within this sphere. Rooted in the literature on social learning theory and group identification, it is a unique lens through which to view the ways in which people learn and grow together. Whether these groups arise within the workplace or out of voluntary organizational membership, they are learning groups organized around a central activity, or practice. They involve the formation of identities as people learn together, bridging the gap between individual and social learning.

Learning has been traditionally conceptualized as a very individual phenomenon, a cognitive process which occurs in specifically designed environments. For this reason, we continue to design universities, build lecture halls, and set up classrooms in much the same way as it has always been done. A student engages in a program of study that is facilitated by school administrators, staff, and instructors that operate on a number of assumptions: 1) Learning begins when the student enters the classroom and ends when they exit, 2) that it is a process best facilitated by a teacher or content expert, and 3) learning is most efficient in separation from the rest of our activities. Due to these assumptions, the educational model remains consistent.



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Wenger (1998) challenges traditional conceptualizations of learning with his work on communities of practice. He poses the following questions:

What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it? And what if, in addition, we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? What kind of understanding would such a perspective yield on how learning takes place and on what is required to support it? (p. 3).

Thus, he begins with the foundations of social learning theory.

**Social learning theory.** Wenger's (1998) discussion of social learning theory is anchored by its four basic assumptions: First, we are essentially social beings. This social nature influences every aspect of our lives, from behavioral motivations to learning processes. Second, knowledge is determined by competence with regard to valued enterprises, such as writing a book or making scientific discoveries. Third, knowing is a matter of pursuing such enterprises by active engagement. Fourth, learning ultimately aims to produce meaning, which is our understanding of the world and ability to engage in it.

These assumptions culminate in the primary focus of “learning as social participation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). We make discoveries about the world around us and reach an understanding of who we are in it by engaging in communicative processes, such as the instigation and maintenance of relationships. Even within a traditional classroom setting, students learn by proxy: examining the behavioral actions of their peers, engaging in discussion about course content, and often working together to accomplish educational tasks, such as group projects and presentations. Wenger (1998) immediately draws the connection between

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

participation in social learning and identification through the achievement of belonging. He gives the example of something as seemingly trivial as a playground clique as “both a kind of action and a form of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do, but who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). He argues that participation refers not only to the engagement in specific activities within specific communities, but the broader concept of “being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to those communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4).

In order to apply the characteristics of social participation to the process of learning and knowing, social learning theory integrates the following concepts: First, meaning articulates learning as experience. According to Wenger (1998), meaning is “a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful” (p. 5). The second concept is practice, which is defined by learning as doing. Wenger (1998) defines practice as “a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action” (p. 5). Third is the concept of community, which defines learning as belonging. According to Wenger (1998), this is “a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence” (p. 5). The fourth and final aspect of social learning theory is identity, which is articulated by learning as becoming. Wenger (1998) defines identity as “a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (p. 5). It is the interconnectivity of these concepts which so appropriately lays a foundation for the concept of communities of practice. Each is mutually defining and influential.

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Wenger's (1998) text on communities of practice is framed by two distinct concepts: practice and identity. These two concepts intersect to create his theoretical framework. As theoretical concepts themselves, practice and identity are not new contributions to the communication field. However, it is their redefinition and their use within this proposed context that creates the framework for understanding communities of practice as a unique organizational concept. "Articulating a familiar phenomenon is a chance to push our intuitions: to deepen and expand them, to examine and rethink them. The perspective that results is not foreign, yet it can shed new light on our world. In this sense, the concept of community of practice is neither new nor old. It has both the eye-opening character of novelty and the forgotten familiarity of obviousness – but perhaps that is the mark of our most useful insights" (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). In order to grasp the scope of Wenger's framework, we must understand the defining characteristics of each component.

### **Defining Characteristics of Communities of Practice**

Practice is essentially the engagement in a given activity. However, it is not just doing the activity in and of itself. Practice is embedded in historical and social contexts that give meaning to the activity (Wenger, 1998). It is the engagement in these historical and social contexts that sustain the activity over a period of time and through the changeover in community members. Through this engagement, members of a community that participate in a given practice negotiate meaning. They redefine the historical and social contexts that mutually define the activity. "The negotiation of meaning is a productive process, but negotiating meaning is not constructing it from scratch. Meaning is not pre-existing, but neither is it simply made up. Negotiated meaning is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique" (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). Wenger (1998) argues that this negotiation of meaning takes place through the processes of participation

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

and reification. As members of a community participate in a practice, it brings meaning to their own learning experience. Conversely, as these members participate, they are also bringing new meaning to the practice itself from their previous learning experiences. Reification refers to the process of “giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness.’ In so doing we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized” (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). These are the artifacts that are produced by the engagement in any practice, such as journal entries, lesson plans, or historical records.

Reification is the intersection of human experience and practice (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are distinguished by three distinct characteristics: mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

**Mutual engagement.** The central aspect of Wenger’s (1998) discussion on the dynamics of practice is practice as “the source of coherence of a community” (p. 49). Practice exists in the engagement in actions whose meanings are negotiated by a group of people. It involves a number of artifacts, but in essence is the primary defining characteristic of a community of practice. The mark of membership in a community of practice is this mutual engagement. By engaging in the practice around which a social community is organized, people establish membership in communities of practice. For example, members of a quilting club are considered members of that community of practice not as they meet to socialize, but as they meet to engage in the chosen activity: quilting. If group members meet only to socialize, then they are a social community, rather than a quilting club. It is this mutual engagement which indicates membership in a community of practice. “Mutual engagement involves not only our competence, but also the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don’t do and what we don’t know – that is, to the contributions

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

and knowledge of others” (Wenger, 1998, p. 76). As members of a quilting club meet and work together, each is bringing his or her own knowledge, experience, and skill set. A sewing novice is no less a member than one who has been sewing for many years. These community members join together to share knowledge and experience as they mutually engage in the practice of quilting.

**Negotiation of a joint enterprise.** Practice as community is also distinguished by a joint enterprise. Not only is mutual engagement in a particular practice necessary, but it must be a joint enterprise. For example, if a group of people mutually engaged in a social community meet to discuss a piece of literature they have all read, then they are recognized as members of a book club. Even if all the members of this social group read on a regular basis, but do not meet to specifically discuss a book they’ve all read, they are not engaging in a joint enterprise. They are certainly learning, participating in an activity defined by its historical and social contexts, and mutually engaging in a community. However, without this element of joint enterprise, they are not considered members of a community of practice. Joint enterprise also implies the negotiation of meaning within the community of practice: “it is only as negotiated by the community that conditions, resources, and demands shape the practice. The enterprise is never fully determined by an outside mandate, by a prescription, or by any individual participant...Because members produce a practice to deal with what they understand to be their enterprise, their practice as it unfolds belongs to their community in a fundamental sense” (Wenger, 1998, p. 80).

**Shared repertoire.** The third defining characteristic of a community of practice is a shared repertoire. This includes “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). These are the

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

artifacts which facilitate the practice itself and indicate the existence of a cohesive community.

Wenger (1998) discusses shared repertoire as the combination of reification and participation. As members of a community of practice engage in the shared repertoire, they are reifying its central role to the community while renegotiating its particular meaning for a given group of members. “It includes the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world as well as the styles by which they express their forms of memberships and their identities as members” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). For example, a community theatre group uses the shared repertoire of a play’s script, set, and costumes. They are unified by the repertoire, but not necessarily defined by it. Though they may be putting together a production of a play that has been performed by the theatre company before, or is being performed by another theatre group, the current group of members engage in the discussion of the play’s meaning for themselves. The same characters are portrayed and the same words are spoken, but the play’s director and cast will bring new meaning to the production from their own experiences and understanding. This process demonstrates the reificative and participative aspects of shared repertoire.

Wenger (1998) continues his discussion on communities of practice by identifying other specific aspects of practice that distinguish it as a unique organizational concept. For the purposes of this research, these three aspects of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire will be used to identify and define a community of practice. These are the specific characteristics that Wenger uses to combine the two concepts of practice and community. Thus, mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire are the defining characteristics of a community of practice.

### **Organizational Context of the Community Choir**

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

To understand the effects and application of Wenger's (1998) framework, it must be examined in context. The organizational setting of a community choir was chosen for its unique intersections of theoretical concepts with art form characteristics. To lay the foundation for this organizational setting, the literature review includes a brief overview of the history of choral development and examples of the art form in community format. After the foundation of the organizational setting is established, I will seek to define the community choir as a community of practice by Wenger's (1998) conceptual elements of meaning, practice, community, and identity. Particular focus will be applied to the three defining characteristics of communities of practice: mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Examination of the ways in which these characteristics are communicatively enacted informs the research questions that are being presented. The theoretical construct of belonging (Iverson, 2011; Iverson, 2013) is also examined as it is well suited for the context of a community choir and is an important element of the membership experience in communities of practice.

**History of choral development.** Choral music has a long and illustrious history, with its origins dating back to the medieval era when music was first being written down and shared with others (Grout, Burkholder, & Palisca, 2010). It began out of the traditions of Gregorian chant which were utilized in the medieval Catholic Church. Scriptures and liturgical texts were sung in a chanting rhythm with all voices on a singular melodic line, creating an impression of one voice through unified sound (Garretson, 1993). This form developed into polyphonic writing, meaning multiple voice, as composers began writing in the Ars Antiqua style. The Latin term for "antique art" or "old art", Ars Antiqua was distinguished by the addition of harmony to melodic lines and sophisticated counterpoint, which is the simultaneous playing of two or more melodies. Ars Nova, or "new art," developed as another prevalent musical tradition of the late Middle Ages. It

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

was characterized by the development of modern notation and the increase in popularity of the motet, a type of polyphonic vocal music which uses rhythm patterns. Both the Ars Antiqua and Ars Nova styles used only two or three voices simultaneously. It was not until the Renaissance that the more traditionally conceptualized four-part writing of choral music began. This artistic development was facilitated by the invention of the printing press, enabling easier duplication and distribution of musical scores (Grout et al., 2010). It was during the Renaissance that choral music began to venture outside of the sacred context. Composers began to view choral music as more of an expressive art and sought to expand its influence and study. However, choral music would continue to exist predominantly within the church until the Romantic era.

Since its emergence from the sacred setting, choral music has continued to grow in popularity and is now an integral part of higher education and community involvement. “Choral music is one of the oldest, most enduring programs in music in American higher education. The idea that an educated citizen should have some competence in singing and experience in a choral ensemble predates the Declaration of Independence by at least 140 years” (White & Heller, 1983, p. 10). It is very common for an individual to graduate from an institution of higher learning with at least some music experience. For many of these individuals, these experiences during their college years were very positive, which can encourage involvement in choral ensembles into their adult years. “The power of such experience is so great and its satisfactions so deep that those who have shared it are likely to be changed fundamentally in their relation to music. For such people music inevitably becomes a source of some of life’s deepest rewards. This is no small matter, given the universal need for such satisfaction and its rarity in human life” (Reimer, 1970, p. 131). The most common opportunity for this continued involvement is facilitated by the community choir.



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

**An art form for the community.** “Music is one of the great common denominators in civic life, and those responsible for its furtherance should see to it that the latent forces and untapped sources of musical talent are utilized; that singing groups and individuals, old and young, who have in various fields developed an interest in singing, are mobilized and organized to sing some of the great masterpieces of choral literature” (Patton, 1932, p. 14). This quotation comes from a newspaper article that was published on the formation and organization of a community choir. The choral association sprang out of the gathering of community choral forces for a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. Patton was a member of the local newspaper and sponsored the organizing of this project in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Choral groups were gathered together and more than four hundred singers participated throughout the project, who “at the end voted unanimously to make the organization a permanent one” (Patton, 1932, p. 16). The project was made to be self-supporting by an admission charge. Two performances of *Messiah* were given and the house sold out both evenings. This is merely one example of the importance of and need for musical involvement in communities. Patton (1932) writes:

First, those who participate never fail to continue to appreciate more keenly the finest of music, and find keen satisfaction and an emotional outlet in the making of music. Second, the production of a masterpiece by a great chorus of trained singers always produces a thrill in the lives of those in the audience, you in turn become more appreciative of music because it is produced by persons of their acquaintance. Third, continued working in rehearsal on these master compositions simply for the joy of singing with others and producing great music, without thought of compensation, creates an atmosphere in the community that is of inestimable value (p. 14).

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Much of the focus on community choirs, from a research standpoint, has been the examination of the specific health benefits of the participatory arts for older adults. Though community choir members can be of any age or experience level, it is common for large portions of these groups to be comprised of older adults. This particular age group is usually identified by individuals who are retired and thus commit more time to non-professional pursuits, such as hobbies or new varieties of learning activities. Remedial use of the arts has a long history but only in recent years have studies on enhancing healthy aging been conducted. Participatory arts refer to art making, rather than art observing. For example, singing in a choir is a participatory art; going to an art gallery is not participatory. In one landmark study, Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, and Simmens (2006) studied 166 demographically similar older adults. 90 joined a chorale and the remaining 76 continued with their usual activities, functioning as a control group. They were tested individually with both standard measures and a self-report questionnaire. After a twelve-month period, the chorale groups showed positive results on the standard measures for health and wellness. The self-reports reflected a decreased number of doctors' visits, number of falls, and use of over-the-counter medication. They reflected increases of overall health ratings and number of activities performed. In 2012, Clift, Skingley, Coulton, and Rodriguez conducted a study with random assignment of 265 participants to either a choral performance or control condition. After twelve weeks, the singers reflected significant decreases in depression and anxiety, as well as increases in overall quality of life. These advantages persisted at six months. The research on choral performance generally reflects significant improvements in emotional well-being, physical health, social life, and self-confidence, leading to improvements in quality of life for older adults. "Although not all studies produced significant results, the more rigorous ones presented strong objective evidence for the effectiveness of

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

musical participation” (Noice, Noice, & Kramer, 2014). Such research adds to the empirical evidence for the various benefits of participatory arts, specifically choral performance. This provides further support for the importance of and need for the community choir.

### **The Community Choir as a Community of Practice**

As noted previously, the three defining characteristics of a community of practice are mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). The application of this framework to the choral setting is intended to reveal these defining elements, thus defining the community choir as a community of practice. The first characteristic is mutual engagement, which involves the competence of community members and their ability to meaningfully connect to the contributions and knowledge of others (Wenger, 1998). As a voluntary organizational membership opportunity, the community choir is made up of members from many differing backgrounds and musical experiences. Though it is common for those who voluntarily engage in community choir to have at least some background in music, this experience is often quite varied. For example, some members may be young post-grads who wish to further their positive experiences from collegiate choirs. Other members may be older adults who have no previous music experience, but are motivated by the desire to engage in the social aspect of communities of practice. A community choir may also boast members with higher level degrees in music, careers in choral performance, or as music educators. Per mutual engagement, the community is able to glean the wisdom of its more experienced members while being revitalized by the new perspectives of its younger members. It is this diversity of experience that makes the process of mutual engagement such an enriching aspect of the choral community of practice.

Intrinsic to the music experience is this social component of mutual engagement: “Music has many different functions in human life, nearly all of which are essentially social”

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

(Hargreaves & North, 1997, p. 1). Members of a choral community meet together for the purpose of learning and rehearsing music. However, as they meet for rehearsals, they will experience social connections apart from the music. As choir members rehearse, they are mutually engaging in the learning process. As music is produced, they are mutually engaging in emotional exploration and artistic expression (Durrant & Himonides, 1998). As the choir performs what was rehearsed, live audience members are also mutually engaging in the culturally expressive experience of music. As Storr (1991) writes in his article on the therapeutic effects of music, “Music seems to have the effect of intensifying or underlining the emotion which a particular event in the external world calls forth, as well as coordinating the emotions of a group of people...It can make all the people feel the same thing at the same time, and transmute what might be a trivial occasion into something which appears highly significant” (p. 7). This identification and discussion of mutual engagement leads to the following research question:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the communicative indicators of mutual engagement within the choral setting of a community of practice?

The second defining characteristic of a community of practice is negotiation of a joint enterprise, which is the engagement in an activity defined by its historical and social contexts as its meaning is negotiated by a particular group (Wenger, 1998). This takes a step beyond the mutual engagement of a community and centers it on a particular practice. Though there are a number of activities within the practice of a community choir that might be defined as a joint enterprise, the primary focus is the learning and performing of choral music. This is the joint enterprise around which the community choir is organized. The choral community of practice presents a unique setting within which to examine this characteristic of joint enterprise. As an artistic medium, choral music is, in essence, communal; the artistic form does not exist apart

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

from the community. It is the combination of voices, or joint enterprise of singing that creates the artistic form. As Cox (in Glenn, 1991) describes: “One of the great things that happens in choral groups is that people of all kinds and stations and abilities can get a very real sense of togetherness, and common concern, and accomplishment. In a choral context this might go beyond what they might be likely to do otherwise...It gives people a chance to work together for a common goal” (p. 234). A joint enterprise also involves the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). In their work on knowledge management in communities of practice, Iverson and McPhee (2002) draw this distinction: “negotiation of a joint enterprise gives a sense of coherence and purpose to the CoP [community of practice]. Members interact to define significance, shape practices, and react to a larger context” (p. 261). While community members are engaging in the practice of choral music, they are negotiating its particular meaning for that particular group, as informed by the practice’s historical and social contexts. For example, a community choir may choose to engage in the art form’s historically religious roots in preparation for the holiday season. A performance of Handel’s *Messiah* is an appropriate choice for community choirs close to Christmas and remains consistent across Western cultural contexts. This discussion of the characteristic of a joint enterprise in the choral community of practice and members’ participation in the negotiation of its meaning leads to the following research question:

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How is the joint enterprise of a community of practice communicatively negotiated within the choral setting?

The third and final defining characteristic of a community of practice is shared repertoire. These are the artifacts which accompany and facilitate any given practice. For the community choir, the basic element of shared repertoire is quite literally the choir’s repertoire, or musical score. Within this context, the choir’s director undertakes the unique task of choosing the group’s

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

repertoire, as well as a leadership role in negotiating its meaning. This characteristic of shared repertoire also involves the less obvious aspect of the discourses by which members express their forms of memberships and identities as community members (Wenger, 1998). These discourses can be as formally established as an organizational mission statement, or as informal as the conversations between choir members that occur during unstructured time in rehearsal. This element of membership discourse leads to the following research question:

RQ<sub>3</sub>: What are the communicative aspects of a choral community's shared repertoire which indicate membership and community identity?

### **Belonging in a Community of Practice**

A newer theoretical construct that is being examined in research on voluntary organizational membership is belonging. In his work on knowledge management in communities of practice, Iverson (2011) explains:

Belonging is not a discrete set of actions separate from enacting knowledge. Rather, while engaging, sharing, and negotiating, CoP [community of practice] members are also enacting the community, which has meaning that is not simply tied to knowledge; it is an inextricable part of the process. The formation of a CoP as a community is not simply an entity, but also a source of identity that is enacted in the process of knowing (p. 43-44).

This construct is well suited for the context of a community choir. Though the purpose of a choir is the learning and performing of music, the social group component is essential to the process and often a primary motivator in the decision to join a choir. As choir members meet on a regular basis for rehearsals and performances, they are creating and establishing a distinct community. This sense of community is inextricably tied to the process of learning and performing music; it may also be an indicator of metamorphosis within this organizational context. Iverson (2013)

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

emphasizes belonging as a means for fostering expert volunteers by enhancing learning and self-management. Iverson's (2011; 2013) work explores the enactment of belonging through the training of volunteers within non-profit organizations. Belonging is enacted by the group and thus may be observed through a number of communicative behaviors.

As belonging is experienced by members of a community of practice, they draw on the community as a source of identity that is enacted through engagement in the practice (Iverson, 2013). If a member of a community choir has successfully navigated the socialization process and established a place of belonging within the group, they may be more likely to identify as a member of that choir, rather than as a choral singer or by their particular vocal part (i.e. soprano, tenor, etc.). Within the choral setting, music itself can serve as a source of identity: "like language (and attributes of language such as accent and dialect), it is one of those aspects of culture which can...most readily serve this purpose. Its effectiveness may be twofold; not only does it act as a ready means for the identification of different ethnic or social groups, but it has potent emotional connotations and can be used to assert and negotiate identity in a particularly powerful manner" (Stokes, 1994, p. 48). Identity, though not central to Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework on communities of practice, remains an important aspect of this discussion:

Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities. The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other. It avoids a simplistic individual-social dichotomy without doing away with the distinction. The resulting perspective is neither individualistic or abstractly institutional or societal. It

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

does justice to the lived experience of identity while recognizing its social character – it is the social, the cultural, the historical with a human face (p. 145).

It is this concept of identity which exists within the framework on communities of practice that facilitates and can serve as an indicator of belonging. Like socialization, identification is also a process and a product (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). According to Bullis and Bach (1989), identification is “an ongoing process related to the mystery and division inherent in organization” (p. 275). This pivot between the social and the individual is necessary for group members to experience belonging. “Individuals identify with collectives...to the extent that they feel similar to other members, they feel a sense of belonging, and they consider themselves to be members...Therefore, while identification may be treated as an outcome or product, researchers should remember that individuals’ perceptions and feelings of identification may be expected to change over time” (Bullis & Bach, 1989, p. 275). This is a process of development for both newcomers and established members as they form relational connections with each other and negotiate membership roles within the organization.

While a group member may identify with a community of practice, if the group does not mutually recognize that identification, that group member will not experience a sense of belonging. “Belonging is strongly connected to identification, but remains a somewhat distinct construct. While both are communicatively enacted, belonging requires group or organizational interaction to enact the connected relationship. The basic distinction is individuals can identify with a group, but groups must enact belonging” (Iverson, 2013, p. 47). Thus, belonging is the communicative enactment of mutual identification. These suppositions lead to the development of the following research question:

RQ4: How is belonging communicatively enacted in a choral community of practice?



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The preceding research questions are posed in order to further understand Wenger's definition of communities of practice and the reaches of this particular theoretical framework, as well as the theoretical implications for the construct of belonging.

## Chapter 2 – Methods

In this chapter, the qualitative methodology for research on the application of Wenger's (1998) framework in the organizational context of a community choir and belonging in communities of practice is outlined. Qualitative research methods of interview and observation were chosen for this study. An open coding approach was taken for iterative data analysis, supplemented by second-cycle axial coding. These principles of grounded theory facilitate the application of an existing theoretical framework to the chosen organizational setting. I also discuss the particular steps taken to ensure validity and reliability of the data.

### Data Collection

**Interview.** To discover how individuals experience belonging in a community choir, the qualitative methodology of interview research was selected. "The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Since a substantial foundation has been built for organizational socialization, I sought to examine the extended theoretical constructs of Wenger's communities of practice and the corresponding role of belonging. To gain more thorough understanding of the effects of these theoretical constructs within various organizational contexts, the experiences of members were explored. Moreover, to understand membership of a community of practice, the individual members' experiences were examined and their perspectives privileged.

Within various organizational contexts, there are unique cultures, each with their own respective artifacts, assumptions, and values (Schein, 1999). To understand these cultures from within their contexts, the organizational members must be allowed to express their own experiences using the associated terminology, or jargon. The qualitative research interview

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

facilitates the space for such expression, informed by theoretical constructs and the researcher's contextual understanding. According to Tracy (2013), "qualitative interviews provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive, and oftentimes energizing" (p. 132). As this research is conducted in an effort to glean experiential data, the qualitative interview seemed the most appropriate methodological choice.

**Observation.** To understand members' perspectives within the organizational context and to examine the constructs of communities of practice as they are communicatively enacted, the methodological approach of field research was also used. The researcher took the role of complete observer (Gold, 1958), indicating the lack of organizational participation: "rather than participating in the scene, complete observers stand at the periphery, merely watching the scene unfold in front of them" (Tracy, 2013, p. 113). Benefits of complete observation include ease of access and the ability to observe aspects of participants' experiences in context. As argued by Brinkmann and Kvale (2014), "if you want to study people's behavior and their interaction with their environment, the observations and informal conversations of field studies will usually give more valid knowledge than asking subjects about their behavior" (p. 128). To understand the ways in which the theoretical constructs of communities of practice and belonging are enacted, it is necessary to spend a significant amount of the research effort in field observation. Informed by my own extensive experience within the organizational context of choir, I observed the season's initial registration process and five consecutive rehearsals. This totaled eleven hours of field observation, the majority of which was conducted prior to the majority of qualitative research interviews that were conducted within the six-week period of data collection.

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

**Participants.** Participants were members of a non-profit, community choral organization in a mid-sized Northwestern city who were involved in the community choir as a current participant, either newcomer or established member. This was a theoretical-construct sample, as participants meet the particular theoretical characteristics or conceptual frameworks that are being examined (Tracy, 2013). Participants were observed within the context of choir rehearsals and individually interviewed. Access to the group was obtained through its gatekeeper, the choir's manager, at the permission of the director (see Appendix C). This provided not only the opportunity for population access, but also established a connection by which research results might be shared for the benefit of organizational members. Throughout field observation, choir members were aware of my purpose in attending rehearsals and the project's primary themes. By a personal introduction and a basic understanding of my research purposes, choir members were put better at ease with my presence in rehearsals. This also served to pique the interest of potential interview participants.

Participants were recruited for interview in person during a rehearsal. A recruitment script (see Appendix B) was prepared in order to offer sufficient information about the study without sensitizing participants to the specific research concepts. Interview participants were provided with a consent form (see Appendix D) that outlined the purpose and procedures for research, the terms of participation, and contact information. Before entering the field or conducting interviews, a proposal was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix E).

**Interview structure, type, and stance.** Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to reach an emic understanding of both the defining characteristics of communities of practice and the experience of belonging for choir members, meaning that "behavior is described

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

from the actor's point of view and is context-specific (Tracy, 2013, p. 21). Again, in order to more thoroughly understand the ways in which the aspects of communities of practice and belonging are communicatively enacted, they were examined in context as they are experienced. The semi-structured interview was chosen in an effort to achieve more organic data. As Kvale (1996) argues, "the more spontaneous the interview procedure, the more likely one is to obtain spontaneous, lively, and unexpected answers from the interviewees" (p. 129). The data were gathered in respondent interviews which "take place among social actors who all hold similar subject positions and have appropriate experiences, which attend to the research goals" (Tracy, 2013, p. 141). This was achieved by only interviewing participants who were either newcomers or established members of the community choir, rather than organizational members who held supportive roles. According to Tracy (2013), respondent interviews are "particularly worthwhile when attempting to understand similarities and differences within a certain cultural group" (p. 141). This is especially useful when examining the similarities and differences experienced by individual choir members.

A collaborative/interactive interviewing stance was taken in this research (Ellis & Berger, 2003). This reflects a detached model of control as interviews are "jointly created, so that the researcher and participant are on an even plane and can ask questions of each other" (Tracy, 2013, p. 142). This stance was chosen due to the researcher's extensive experience within the choral context, in an effort to create a more relaxed interview environment and facilitate self-reflexivity, "the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers' past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene" (Tracy, 2013, p. 2). This also allows for a co-construction of meaning in understanding participants' experiences within the community of practice, as these data seek to

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

fulfill the proposed research goals while also benefitting its participants. Both Tracy's (2013) text on qualitative research methods and Brinkmann and Kvale's (2014) guide to research interviewing were used to craft an interview guide that reflects the aspects of each member's experience within the community of practice while maintaining the chosen interview structure, type, and stance.

**Interview questions.** In an effort to maintain a semi-structured, collaborative interview approach, an interview guide (see Appendix A) was crafted. As noted by Tracy (2013), "this less structured interview guide is meant to stimulate discussion rather than dictate it" (p. 139).

Having extensive experience within the organizational context, I approached this part of data collection as a conversation to facilitate both self-reflexivity, to ensure that my own experiences and assumptions would not skew the data, but also a co-construction of meaning, to understand the personal experiences of the choir members and possibly offer some analytic insight. I also hoped that this approach would yield more organic and richer data, to explore the communicative enactment of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework within the context of a community choir. According to Tracy (2013), "the advantages of unstructured interviews are that they allow for more emic, emergent understandings to blossom, and for the interviewees' complex viewpoints to be heard without the strict constraints of scripted questions. Furthermore, less structured interviews are more likely to tap both content and emotional levels" (p. 139).

The qualitative interviews focused on the choir members' perceptions of belonging in their community of practice. As such, guiding questions that touch on choir members' motivations for voluntary organizational membership (e.g., What prompted you to choose this particular group? Did you look into joining other choirs?) were asked. The majority of the interview questions focus on choir members' perceptions of the communicatively enacted

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

characteristics of mutual engagement (e.g., How does the choir work as a unit? In what ways does the choir not work as a unit?), negotiation of a joint enterprise (e.g., What have you seen change in the choir since you have joined?), and shared repertoire (e.g., When talking to other members, what phrases or terms do they use to indicate they are a choir member?). The latter part of the interviews focused on choir members' experiences of belonging and identification with the group (e.g., Do you belong to the choir? What makes you think that?). While the guiding interview questions were posed to facilitate conversation about choir members' experiences of socialization and belonging within their community of practice, field observation was my primary means of examining the ways in which Wenger's (1998) defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire were communicatively enacted. The two methodological approaches of qualitative interviews and field observation were mutually informative while yielding focus-specific data.

### **Data Analysis**

Before beginning the analysis process, I determined a phenomenological approach to data characterization. This is "a focus on consciousness and the life world, an openness to the experiences of subjects, a primacy of precise descriptions, attempts to bracket foreknowledge, and a search for invariant essential meanings in the descriptions" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014, p. 31). As the central research purpose was to discover both the ways in which the defining characteristics of communities of practice are communicatively enacted, and belonging is experienced by organizational members, the phenomenological approach to characterizing data was an easy extension of the data collection methods utilized for this project.

**Method and process.** The data analysis began with manual transcription of the eighteen, one hour long interviews that were conducted. Though a time-intensive process, manual

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

transcription facilitates an additional level of interaction with the data. The researcher is thus more familiar with the data, having manually transcribed interviews before entering the analysis process. Field notes were developed from raw notes (Tracy, 2013) recorded by the researcher over the five weeks of observed rehearsal attendance. Written records, the “first, unprocessed notations of the field” (Tracy, 2013, p. 114), were recorded over eleven hours of the season’s initial registration process and five consecutive rehearsals.

According to Tracy (2013), iterative analysis “alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories” (p. 184). This was the analysis process adopted for this research, as I entered the process of data analysis with the existing theoretical framework of Wenger’s (1998) defining characteristics of communities of practice. By using iterative analysis, I was able to achieve the goal of the application of Wenger’s (1998) framework to the community choral setting while allowing themes to organically emerge from the data. Manual coding of field notes and interview transcriptions was conducted.

The grounded theory approach of open coding is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Data were categorized by the research concepts of Wenger’s (1998) defining characteristics of practice as community: mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, and the additional concept of belonging in a community of practice. Participant accounts and researcher’s field observations were thematically organized by these categories. “In contrast to content analysis, the codes in a grounded theory approach do not need to be quantified but enter into a qualitative analysis of the relations to other codes and to context and action consequences” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014, p. 227). This grounded theory approach of



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

open coding enables the researcher to capitalize on the benefits of qualitative analysis methods, categorizing data thematically and privileging the perspectives of the research participants. The second cycle process of axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) was then used. This is “the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding” (Tracy, 2013, p. 195). Once participant accounts and researcher’s field observations were thematically categorized, these accounts and observations were compiled within these categories in order to compare accounts to observations. These comparisons enabled the researcher to draw out recurring themes, as well as experiences and observations which deviate from these common themes. Axial coding serves the purpose of exploring relationships between categories of the central theoretical framework. This allows the researcher to key in on commonalities between participant experiences, reinforced by field observations, and to distinguish outliers or atypical examples of the theoretical phenomena.

According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), “grounded theory proceeds not in terms of drawing samples of specific groups of individuals, units of time, and so on, but in terms of concepts, their properties, dimensions, and variations” (p. 8). As I approached the data with predetermined research concepts, applying a theoretical model to an organizational setting rather than inductively developing a theory from the data, the principles of grounded theory seemed most appropriate.

**Validity and reliability.** A few particular steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. Altheide and Johnson’s (1994) criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research was consulted in ensuring validity. Thick description, concrete detail and explication of tacit knowledge, the “largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances,” are offered in the presentation and analysis of data (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 492). I also ensured validity by reflecting

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

multivocality in data presentation (i.e., noting contradictory experiences of choir members), including record of member reflections: “sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study’s findings, providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation and even collaboration” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844).

The first step taken to ensure data reliability was constant researcher self-reflexivity, “the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers’ interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene” (Tracy, 2013, p. 2). Data gathering methods were chosen in specific consideration of the possibility of my own experience in the organizational setting coloring my perspective on the research field. The initial intent was to enter the scene as a participant, as well as a researcher. However, by taking on the role of complete observer, the data would not be skewed by my own experience as a choir member. In an effort to remain constantly self-reflexive throughout the data collection process, I also recorded analytic reflections, which are “commentary about researcher insecurities, fears, or uncertainties; the way others are relating to the presence of research; initial theories or gut reactions about the scene; and interpretations related to research interests” (Tracy, 2013, p. 121). Transcriptions of these analytic reflections were also created in addition to data collected from interviews and field observation for continued reference throughout the analysis process. These were used to check researcher bias and compare field notes to fresh analytic impressions for more valid and reliable data.

Another prominent step taken to insure reliability of the data was the development of a clear codebook prior to data analysis. Categories were determined by the proposed research concepts: mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, shared repertoire, and belonging in communities of practice. Directly related to the project’s proposed research questions, this

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

created a clear and reliable coding system to provide answers for the research questions and exemplify the application of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework to the organizational setting of a community choir.

### **Chapter 3 – Results**

This research focused on four central questions: What are the communicative indicators of mutual engagement within the choral setting of a community of practice, (2) How is the joint enterprise of a community of practice communicatively negotiated within the choral setting, (3) What are the communicative aspects of a choral community's shared repertoire which indicate membership and community identity, and (4) How is belonging communicatively enacted in a choral community of practice? These proposed research questions reflect the application and examination of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework to the organizational setting of a community choir. The participants of this study consisted of fourteen women and five men from the community choir, including members who either currently or have previously held supporting organizational roles, such as board member or bookkeeper, and the choir's director. For the purposes of this research, the director's observations are included in the presentation of data as supplemental support, as he does not strictly hold a voluntary organizational membership. The identity of the choir and its members are kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The majority of interview participants have been a part of the choir for ten years or more, with seven participants having been members through all fifteen years of the choir's existence.

This chapter outlines the data gathered through field observation and qualitative research interviews in two primary sections: assimilation and socialization, in which I'll offer a brief overview of this process for community choir members, and defining the choir as a community of practice, which will outline the communicative indicators of Wenger's defining characteristics of communities of practice, as well as the indicators of belonging and the way in which it is experienced by members of the community choir.

### **Assimilation and Socialization**

As the processes by which individuals prepare to assume an organizational role, join, and then participate in that organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Kramer, 2010), assimilation and socialization inform the ways in which individuals engage in organizational processes. These experiences also indicate particular aspects of the organizational setting which may define its type and culture. Assimilation and socialization are uniquely experienced by individuals but common themes may be examined within organizational settings. For example, two individuals that are members of different non-profit organizations are likely to experience similar socialization process that are unique to voluntary organizational membership, such as the informal process of knowledge seeking from established members. This stands in contrast to employees of two different corporate organizations who are likely to experience the formal socialization process of a company retreat or training program. Though each of these individuals will bring their own experiences and perspectives to these processes, commonalities may be observed within organizational settings and particular differences distinguish organizational types. These processes inform the ways in which individuals participate in the organization and enact the characteristics of communities of practice. For these reasons, a brief overview of assimilation and socialization of community choir members is offered.

**Anticipatory socialization and voluntary organizational membership.** In this time period prior to joining the community choir, potential members examine their own motivations and perceived benefits for organizational participation. Voluntary organizational membership presents a unique set of motivations and perceived benefits. Though they stand apart from the specific monetary gains of employment, they can include other motivations such as skill development and professional growth. These are some of the distinct benefits of any

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

organizational membership, whether it be voluntary or employment. Distinct motivations for voluntary organizational membership, specifically in leisure organizations such as community choirs, include “socializing and recreational opportunities” (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014, p. 2) and “sustained identity investments” (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012, p. 152). These were the primary motivations reflected in responses from interview participants.

Like many leisure organizations, many members of the community choir are retired and thus more likely to seek out participation in such organizations. Singing in the community choir offers the opportunity to engage in choral music and be a part of a community organization. For some members, participation in the community choir offers an artistic outlet apart from other aspects of life. This is the case for Kim, who recently retired from the local university as professor emeritus. The majority of her free time was spent in activities related to her work, such as professional and academic associations. For her, the primary motivation for joining the community choir was engagement in an activity entirely separate from her work. The choir offered her the opportunity to engage in an artistic activity and a social group apart from professional connections.

For some members, singing in a community choir involves the investment in a sustained identity (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). The majority of participants that I interviewed have a history of choral singing, or some other musical activity, such as instrumental performance or musical theatre. For every member who had a history of choral singing or some other form of musical engagement, these experiences were very positive and brought enjoyment both through the benefits of the art form and the social connections that were established. This history of involvement and enjoyment of the art form was described thusly by one participant: “I have always sung in choirs, always been involved in singing. I loved singing in my high school choirs

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

and I chose vocal music as my college major so I sang with choirs all the way through college and you know I missed singing with people” (Allison, personal interview). Extended engagement in the activity solidifies it as an aspect of individual identity. Many participants described themselves as singers simply because they had been involved in choir for so long. It has become an important part of their lives and regardless of the organizational setting, it is an activity they are always drawn to.

Many of the participants described particular physical and psychological benefits as their primary motivating factors for joining the community choir. One such example comes from Alice, an older retiree who has been singing in choirs since elementary school: “when it’s working you all breathe the same so that is a unifying factor for people and if you breathe the same you know you’re being in the same space the same second. It’s incredibly rewarding so yeah singing in a group is terrific...it’s a big thing for me” (Alice, personal interview). This personal fulfillment experienced through the physical aspect of unified breath is an important aspect of choral singing for Alice and motivates her to continue engaging in choir.

These aforementioned aspects of socializing and recreational opportunities, as well as the investment in a sustained identity, are motivating factors for individuals to engage in the practice of choral singing and can be experienced in any choir. The primary motivation that participants discussed for joining this particular community choir was the lack of an audition. Members of the community choir are not required to audition in order to participate. This aspect provides ease of access and eliminates a significant barrier to voluntary membership. Some of the choir members do not have a great amount of technical expertise. In fact, some of the choir members do not read music; they learn by the music by ear. An audition would eliminate their option of participation. Since this choir does not require an audition to participate, more singers are able to

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

engage in and benefit from this particular community. Upon making the choice to join the community choir, organizational members enter the encounter phase of socialization.

**Encounter.** The encounter phase is initiated by the individual becoming a member and assuming some organizational role (Kramer, 2010). For the community choir, this is marked by the individual paying their session fee and attending their first rehearsal. At that point the individual assumes the organizational role of singer in the community choir. This choir encourages participation in supporting organizational roles, such as serving on the board or fundraising, but these are not required for membership. Singers' roles are further defined by assignment to a section based upon their vocal range (e.g. soprano or tenor). Though the structure of the organization is determined by this division of sections, the hierarchies choir members encounter remain primarily informal. These informal socialization processes are socially negotiated and particularly driven by established members. I encountered such a process during field observation. Though the choir members are seated by section during rehearsal, there is no formal seating chart; however, singers prefer to sit by particular people who assist their technical learning or with whom they have a strong personal connection. During one rehearsal, I was sitting in the alto section in order to better observe individual experiences and conversations between choir members. Just before the rehearsal began, a woman came in and asked if I might move over one chair so she could sit by a particular person, explaining "we're like little kids with our seats" (field notes). This is an example of a process that would have to be negotiated by a newcomer to the community choir.

The encounter phase also involves uncertainty management for newcomers. As the majority of research participants had a history of choral singing, the majority of uncertainty experienced involved the entrance into a new social group, rather than uncertainty over



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

engagement in the practice of choral singing. Generally, the rehearsal process of one choir compared to another does not greatly vary; thus a new member of the community choir may rely on their previous choir experiences to inform their encounter with a new choral group. I had the opportunity to interview the choir's newest member and he described his own uncertainties as he experienced this encounter phase: "I guess the deficit in being a strong reader...I didn't know how that level would work in the group and I find it works just fine. I suppose that was maybe like the only concern...nothing from any kind of personal or any kind..." (David, personal interview). For David, his greatest uncertainty came from his specific technical expertise with this choir, rather than engagement in the organizational setting or establishing new social connections. As newcomers engage in information seeking, establish new relationships, and adapt to the organizational culture, they move into the metamorphosis phase and no longer consider themselves to be newcomers (Kramer, 2004).

**Metamorphosis.** According to Schlossberg (1981), the transition from newcomer to established member occurs as individuals reach a sense of comfort and confidence in their organizational membership. For the majority of choir members, this is a gradual process as they get to know their fellow singers, become comfortable singing in their own sections, and become familiar with the director's teaching and leadership style. As they reach a certain level of comfort and confidence, they look forward to weekly rehearsals and seasonal concerts. Many interview participants described this sense of comfort being distinguished by group recognition: "we can walk in and people know who we are and it feels comfortable you know" (Martha, personal interview). As older members leave and new members join, the comfort level must be renegotiated. Choir members must get to know new people and learn how their own voice fits with the new voices. These elements reflect the processual nature of socialization (Bullis &

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Bach, 1989). Socialization is also an outcome which may be indicated by members achieving a sense of belonging. This will be discussed later as an extension on the defining characteristics of communities of practice.

For some choir members, the metamorphosis phase is distinguished by a significant event which indicates a sense of established membership (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). The event can vary from a significant performance to a personally formative moment in rehearsal. Though he's only been a part of the choir for four months, David described a specific moment which signified his established membership. The choir had travelled to a smaller town to give a Christmas concert: "all these people filled this little church and it was just looking out at them and seeing the look of just awe...and the joy in their faces boom Christmas happened for me and I said I am really glad to be part of this group. You know we just did a cool thing so yeah, that's when it happened" (David, personal interview). This was a moment of mutual connection as my own experience of metamorphosis into a choral group I once participated in was instigated by a significant moment. Though my experience was distinguished by recognition of membership from an established group member, David and I were able to identify with each other's stories, thereby mutually affirming our significant socialization experiences.

The reasons which motivate organizational engagement, the roles individuals assume, and their experiences of establishing membership inform the ways in which members participate in the organizational setting. For members of the community choir, this participation is defined by elements of practice as community, as the organizational setting is an exemplar of a community of practice. The following presentation of data analysis reflects the specific application of Wenger's (1998) defining characteristics of communities of practice to the choral organizational setting and provides answers to the proposed research questions.

### **Defining the Choir as a Community of Practice**

According to Wenger (1998), there are three distinct characteristics which distinguish communities of practice apart from other organizational groups: mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. These three characteristics drove the inquiry process and data categorization. Through field observation and qualitative interviews, communicative indicators of each of these characteristics were revealed. Results of these data analysis are presented to further understanding of Wenger's (1998) definition of communities of practice and the reaches of this theoretical framework, as well as the particular implications for the additional construct of belonging.

**Mutual engagement of a community choir.** The social component is intrinsic to the choral music experience and a primary motivator for choir members' engagement in the practice. Mutual engagement involves the collective experience of community members and their ability to meaningfully connect to the contributions and knowledge of others (Wenger, 1998). A voluntary organizational member is likely to encounter a wide variety of experience levels and knowledge bases. To understand the application of this characteristic to the community choir, the following research question was posed:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the communicative indicators of mutual engagement within the choral setting of a community of practice?

As community choir members come together, there is a central purpose of learning and performing music. This purpose drives the entirety of the practice. Supporting organizational roles, such as the music committee which organizes and assigns sheet music or fundraising activities, facilitate the learning and performance of choral music. Mutual engagement involves the establishment of membership in the community of practice. Members of the community choir

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

are required to attend a determined number of rehearsals prior to a concert. Singers can learn their parts individually but it is not until all of the parts are brought together in rehearsal that the art form exists. Choral singing requires this mutual engagement in the practice and thus choir members participate in the rehearsal process as they learn music for the ultimate goal of performance. By singing together, these individuals are established as members of the community choir.

Many interview participants noted the diversity of the choir as a reflection of the diversity of the larger community. Choir members come from a wide variety of experience levels, from first time singers this season to people who have been singing all their lives. There are also elements of socioeconomic, religious, age, and occupational diversity. This diversity was described as a particular advantage to the choir: “we’re a very diverse group and we come from every walk of life imaginable...there’s professional singers or professional musicians and people that are just next door or down the block, across town, rich, poor, it’s quite amazing. And to get them all to come together and give this back it’s such a gift...” (Alice, personal interview). An element of mutual engagement, this diversity contributes to the richness of the experience of membership for singers. Many members described the group’s diversity as a learning point as well. Encountering people from other walks of life has taught them greater compassion and identification with those not like themselves. Elaine described this aspect of mutual engagement in her interview:

I’ve learned to be less judgmental than I was before...there’s all economic areas represented, a lot of huge variation of age as well not as huge as it tends towards older but we do have a number of young people in um a lot of different vocations and it is a little different in that way...I’ve been surprised by the ability level of people that I would

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

look at um I bet they're not really good and they turned out to be quite good so it's been a little learning experience for me (Elaine, personal interview).

These opportunities for group diversity and personal learning are enriching elements of mutual engagement that distinguish this particular community and are important aspects of membership.

The majority of choir members have a history of music and that positive engagement in the practice of choral singing motivates their choice to become part of this particular group. A notable exception to this motivating factor of a history of engagement is that of Joy, a member of the choir who had never sung before joining this group at the age of fifty-one. Her son was a singer who passed away at the age of twelve and this loss motivated her to try singing, as it was something he had enjoyed. An opportunity to join the community choir at its formation was presented to her by a friend who recognized her need for an emotional outlet. Since membership with this community choir does not require an audition, Joy was able to just join and she found a group of people eager to embrace her and impart their technical knowledge. She has been singing with the choir now for fifteen years. This characteristic of mutual engagement enabled Joy to benefit from the experience and knowledge of her fellow choir members, as well as introducing her to a supportive community.

A unique aspect of engagement in this particular community of practice is the lack of an audition. It eliminates a barrier to membership and sets unique expectations for mutual engagement. For many choir members, an audition is an insurmountable barrier to group membership, whether it be due to lack of technical expertise or lack of confidence in their own voice. This barrier does not exist for members of the community choir, thus enabling greater diversity and setting expectations for mutual engagement in this particular community of practice. Sharon is a newer member of the choir who has a long history of choral performance,

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

both professionally and at the community level. She described the difference of the non-auditioned community choir in comparison to other choral groups:

they were very warm and welcoming and accepting and I think some of it has to do with the fact that it's not an auditioned group because I've been in a lot of groups where you definitely feel more...competition. I don't feel that at all in this group...everybody gives it their best shot...everybody kind of works together and pulls each other along and so I feel like we kind of rise to the best. It is interesting though because I've definitely felt that difference and I think it does have to do with the no audition thing (Sharon, personal interview).

This atmosphere of acceptance is initiated by the lack of an audition and facilitates free mutual engagement for a greater variety of choir members, thus enriching the membership experience.

Within the rehearsal space, the primary indicator of mutual engagement was in choir members teaching and facilitating the practice for each other. Between songs, many singers would turn to each other to check notes, rhythms, or text. This was prominent on more difficult pieces or sections of a piece that were particularly challenging. Many choir members sit next to the same people in every rehearsal and have developed stronger connections with these individuals. Choir members often turned to each other for clarification of technical points. In these instances, choir members with greater technical expertise offer assistance to those with less experience and technical knowledge. This sharing of technical knowledge is an important aspect of mutual engagement and a distinct, observable indicator of this characteristic of communities of practice.

**Negotiation of the joint enterprise of a community choir.** Choral singing is by nature a joint enterprise. Negotiation of a joint enterprise involves participating in a joint effort while

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

negotiating the meaning of the practice for this particular group of people. The practice is not fully determined by an outside mandate nor by any individual within the community (Wenger, 1998). To understand the application of this characteristic to the community choir, the following research question was posed:

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How is the joint enterprise of a community of practice communicatively negotiated within the choral setting?

Negotiation of this joint enterprise began at its inception. The community choir was founded by a few people who gathered some friends and fellow singers together for the purpose of creating an accessible choral environment. These founding members recognized the value of a community choir that is open for anyone who has a desire to sing. The choir was officially formed in the fall of 2001, immediately following the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Their first performance was at a memorial service in a local park. A few interview participants spoke about the poignancy of this inaugural performance and the meaning it established for this particular choir. It was a time of emotional vulnerability and people nationwide were seeking comfort and security. This community pulled together and this choir established its foundation from this experience: “It turned out to be a very good and sort of healing thing since there was a big memorial thing down at the park and the community, we hadn’t sung together! We just did this one rehearsal and then went and sang so that was very I think it brought people together in a way that music can” (Kim, personal interview).

Over the course of fifteen years, the choir has developed, membership has changed, and the meaning of the practice for this particular group of singers has been renegotiated. Membership has become increasingly more stable with far fewer new members joining each season and the majority of choir members having participated for five to ten years. One interview

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

participant described this changed sense of meaning in direct contrast to the group's origin: "We don't need each other quite as much right now emotionally or we don't think that we do. We know each other, we're good to the newcomers but it's not the same as when all of us were newcomers and we've had you know we've settled down. We're much more disciplined so musically we have grown exponentially. Socially we probably have also but I don't think we need each other quite as much" (Joy, personal interview). Membership has become less about the desire for the community and more about engagement in the practice of choral singing. Both elements remain present but over time the balance has leaned more toward the technical aspects of the practice. This was the primary draw for Matt, a high school student who is the community choir's youngest member. Matt has been in choirs nearly all his life, primarily in the school setting. In our interview, he specifically described the value of his membership in this choir compared to others: "Community choir is a great one to be in though. The music is sophisticated but not as complicated to learn. It's a beautiful sound with everybody in there. Me being the youngest person there I don't know it's nice to be around seasoned veterans so I joined to enhance my own experience both in life and singing" (Matt, personal interview). Each individual in the choir negotiates meaning of their own membership experience as the meaning of the practice is collectively negotiated by the group.

A unique aspect of this defining characteristic for this community of practice is the role of the director. Though not a rigid form of hierarchy, the director holds a leadership position and is an integral part of negotiation of the joint enterprise. His choice of music, organization of performances, and facilitation of rehearsals sets parameters for the negotiation of meaning. Just as a strong sense of trust and connection is established between choir members, a strong connection is built between choir members and their director. This individual is the unifying



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

force, the central component to every performance. He guides the choir and acts as an interpreter of the music. This community choir has been through tumultuous seasons of change and renegotiation through a few different directors. The difficulties of these years were described to me in several participant interviews. Within the first four years of the choir's existence, there were three different directors. One of these is the current director who for health reasons had an inconsistent leadership role during those years. The first director had a very ambiguous leadership style, making interpretive choices of the music in the performance, rather than rehearsing these elements ahead of time. This left many choir members feeling insecure and performances were very nerve wracking, particularly for individuals with lower levels of technical expertise. Another director was far too rigid, demanding a much higher level of technical expertise and often disregarding the importance of the social component of choir membership. Though there were different accounts as to the events which led to these director's departures, it was clear that these transitions were highly conflictual and even led to many individuals leaving the choir. There was even talk of disbanding the group; however, the core group of established members at the time were committed to this particular community and its practice. Some choir members left for a few seasons that have since returned. One member described it this way: "I'm amazed that it has come back stronger because that was a difficult period and it could have been disastrous in terms of whether it would have continued or not but I'm glad that it was able to morph through that. Because a lot of people had some attachment with the conductor...and I was one of them. So that was one of the reasons why I dropped out for a while but it just left a hole. It took me a long time to realize it but I need to have it" (Lollie, personal interview). For Lollie, it was ultimately commitment to the art form which motivated

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

her decision to return. She went on to describe the connection she has established with the current director as a motivating factor for sustained membership.

The communal nature of the artistic form which distinguishes it as a joint enterprise is also extended to the audience. As choir members perform, the audience is invited to participate in this negotiation of meaning. They bring their own perspectives, ideas, and expectations to each performance and share in the experience of the music. An audience's response can dictate the sense of meaning for the choir that is producing the music. This aspect of negotiation of the joint enterprise was brought to my attention by Alice, who is one of the oldest members in the group and has been singing in community choirs nearly all her life. She said, "you can go out and sing in the woods to the birds. You can go stand on the shore and sing out over the water. You can go out and sing to yourself in the car but when you sing to an audience then it's complete...it's not their applause. It's their attention and you don't get that any other place...it's still such a broadening exercise that it just is completely intoxicating" (Alice, personal interview). For Alice and others, this experience of sharing their enterprise with the larger community is greatly rewarding in its capacity for unification of the community and elevation of the art. Though the same musical repertoire may be performed at another time, the experience is completely unique in that moment as it is performed by the choir and shared by the audience.

Another important aspect of the negotiation of this joint enterprise is the engagement in supporting organizational roles. There are a number of tasks that choir members undertake and resources they provide to facilitate the practice. Eight of the participants I interviewed either currently or have previously held supporting organizational roles, such as bookkeeper, music committee, or board member. Some choir members provide refreshments for the brief intermission at each rehearsal. It was brought to my attention during my interview with the

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

director that the majority of names on the donors list are choir members. All of these supporting organizational roles facilitate the joint enterprise of the community choir and indicate a secondary level of engagement. Without the joint efforts of choir members in these supporting roles, the community choir would not be able to function.

The choir members' engagement in the communal artistic form is the primary communicative indicator of negotiation of a joint enterprise. Often this negotiation is guided by a director and shared in by an audience. Engagement in supporting organizational roles facilitates the practice and functions as a secondary level of the joint enterprise. Choral singing provides a unique setting for the negotiation of a joint enterprise and is an exemplar for this defining characteristic of a community of practice.

**Shared repertoire of a community choir.** The characteristic of the shared repertoire of a community of practice involves the combination of reification and participation. As members of the community choir engage in the shared repertoire, they are reifying its central role to the choir while renegotiating its particular meaning for the current group of singers. Shared repertoire refers to the artifacts which facilitate the practice itself and the discourse by which members express their forms of membership and community identity. As Wenger (1998) notes, "Because the repertoire of a community is a resource for the negotiation of meaning, it is shared in a dynamic and interactive sense" (p. 84). To understand the application of this characteristic to the community choir, the following research question was posed:

RQ<sub>3</sub>: What are the communicative aspects of a choral community's shared repertoire which indicate membership and community identity?

There are a number of formal artifacts which facilitate the practice of choral singing, such as the rehearsal space, music folders, and quite literally, the choir's repertoire. As choir members

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

mutual engage in the practice and negotiate the joint enterprise of choral singing, they are drawing upon a shared set of musical repertoire. Each individual's voice contributes to the creation of the same piece of music. The director's influence in this characteristic of this community of practice is present through his choice of music. I inquired about this process during our interview. He said, "first of all I've got to find something that speaks to me. If it doesn't speak to me it's not going to speak to the choir. There has to be something about any composition that has value: musical value, subject matter value, text value um integrity" (George, personal interview). By choosing particular pieces for the choir to learn and perform, he establishes the foundation for shared repertoire. A unique element of the community choir's shared repertoire is a piece that has become a mantra, or musical mission statement. This piece is sung at the end of every concert and is a celebration of the unifying power of music. It reflects the choir's established mission statement, a formal discursive resource which emphasizes the building of community through music. It also provides an opportunity for members beyond the exit phase to maintain connection with the community choir, as previous members who know the piece are invited to join the current members in singing this closing piece. Many interview participants described this focus on community to be of great importance to their own experience and a primary aspect of their sustained membership.

Community was a prominent theme throughout the majority of participant interviews. Many choir members used community as a key descriptor of the group. Choir members are both participating in the community and reifying its central purpose. Community is established within the choir but also plays an integral part beyond the boundaries of the choral group. For some of the choir members, engagement in the larger community was the primary motivator for membership: "I've always been in choirs. No matter where I've gone I've always had music as

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

my get to know a community everywhere that I've gone and traveled yeah, always done that. Always done music of some sort" (Sue, personal interview). Sharon is another choir member who has moved many times in her adult life and also described engagement in choirs as a means for engaging in the larger community.

Interview participants also described a number of shared values which distinguish community identity and reflect their sense of their own membership in the community choir. The unifying power of choral singing as a practice, enjoyment of the music, physical and psychological benefits of choral singing, and the importance of coming together to create something beautiful were the central themes of these descriptions. It is a "group art effort" (David, personal interview) that all of the choir members have committed themselves to. Membership in the community choir was described as an integral and fulfilling aspect of choir members' lives, but not a primary resource for identity construction. Interview participants described singing as an important part of their lives among other activities, roles, and occupations. This adds to the richness of their community membership as those who sustain membership are committed to the choir among their other life demands and chosen activities.

Though not as readily reflected in participant interviews, the informal discourse through which choir members indicate membership and community identity was a prominent aspect of field observation and a clear communicative indicator of the community choir's shared repertoire. The primary discursive resource observed was the use of humor. A few examples of this humor discourse were mentioned in participant interviews: "we do tend to once in a while make a snide remark about the sopranos...I mean I know some sopranos from outside of there that I talk to if nobody's looking at me" (Lollie, personal interview); "there's always those community jokes about parts...And between some of the sopranos and the basses we've got

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

some kind of cute banter going back and forth” (Sue, personal interview). This was evident in field observation as choir member’s interacted with each other between songs and during the rehearsal intermission. Teasing between sections was common, reflecting friendly competition and individual’s strong identification with their vocal part (e.g., bass or alto). Even though there is not a formally established seating arrangement, choir members tend to sit in the same place each time. If individuals were late to rehearsal, there were jokes made about lounging across their empty seats and “throwing them off” (field notes) when they did join the group for rehearsal. There were notable occasions of the director engaging in humor discourse. When discussing artistic interpretation of a piece, he referenced the written notation as such: “You know what *allegro ma non troppo* means? Watch the conductor” (field notes). Though choir members vary on levels of technical expertise, there was an established understanding that his comment was not a direct translation of the Italian notation. This joke also drew upon the commonly held understanding that choral singers are notorious for neglecting to watch the director.

The participation and reification of the practice are combined through the community’s use of shared repertoire. Individuals craft meaning of membership and establish community identity through the use of formal and informal discursive resources. Community choir members draw from the shared musical repertoire, mission statement, and humor discourse to negotiate the meaning of their own membership and collectively craft community identity.

### **Belonging in a Community of Practice**

In addition to Wenger’s (1998) primary defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire of communities of practice, the theoretical construct of belonging was examined. This addition follows the precedent set by Iverson (2011;

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

2013) in his work on knowledge management and volunteers in communities of practice. The importance of belonging springs from Scott, Corman, and Cheney's (1998) structural model of identity, which establishes the interactive and enacted process of identification. Applied to communities of practice, belonging is the enactment of mutual identification. Individuals may identify with the community and even participate in crafting community identity but belonging is not established until this identification is mutually enacted by the other members of the community. Wenger (1998) establishes this connection between identity and belonging:

Identity is a locus of social selfhood and by the same token a locus of social power. On the one hand, it is the power to belong, to be a certain person, to claim a place with the legitimacy of membership; and on the other it is the vulnerability of belonging to, identifying with, and being part of some communities that contribute to defining who we are and thus have a hold on us. Rooted in our identities, power derives from belonging as well as from exercising control over what we belong to (p. 207).

Identification and belonging are mutually influential, playing a large part in the experience of established membership. To understand the enactment of this theoretical construct in the community choir, the following research question was posed:

RQ4: How is belonging communicatively enacted in a choral community of practice?

The communicative indicators of enacted belonging, though observably similar, were perceived in a wide variety of ways by different choir members. For example, some members distinctly experienced a sense of belonging through participation in supporting organizational roles, such as the music committee or serving on the board, while other members in these same roles found the experience to be conflictual and interfered with their engagement in the practice. For many choir members, the simple act of recognition in rehearsal attendance is a significant

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

contributing factor to their sense of belonging: “we can walk in and people know who we are and it feels comfortable” (Martha, personal interview). As choir members attend rehearsal, they are recognized and greeted by other choir members. This is a communicative indicator of recognition of their membership. They know and are known by other choir members, at least in the capacity of fellow singers. Nearly all of the interview participants described a sense of belonging established apart from consistent social interaction. As is the case with most volunteer-driven organizations, members do not often interact outside of the organizational environment. Community choir members described this particular group as a distinct community; many even used the term family, describing an emotional vulnerability and strong connection across age and personal differences. After fifteen years with the choir, Joy does not spend time with other choir members outside of rehearsal, but said, “they’re the eighty people that I know better than anyone else” (Joy, personal interview). This sense of connection to other members of the choir was derived specifically from engagement in the practice of choral singing. Many interview participants described particularly emotional experiences in rehearsal or performance that contributed to their sense of belonging to the choir. These experiences were perceived as unique to the organizational environment: “It’s a relationship...it’s the exchange. You have to make the exchange in being there and offering all you’ve got to be able to make it a part of you. Or be a part of it so it’s the exchange that happens. I don’t think it happens on as many levels in other areas of communication because it’s emotional and the expression...it’s so powerfully moving” (Alice, personal interview). By participating in the group art effort of choir, individuals are engaging in a joint enterprise. Any and all personal differences are set aside for the sake of producing music together.



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Some members also described the mutual influence of this sense of belonging and the artistic product. For example, “You may not know a person all that well but you can’t help but get along with them because you know you’re a part of the same thing and it makes it very easy connection wise when we’re making music because you can get along so easily. A person, well in music at least, I think the more or better acquainted, the better you know a person...the better you sound as a group” (Matt, personal interview). As a uniquely communal art form, choral singing both requires and fosters a connected sense of community, facilitating belonging in the community of practice. For this community choir, a precedent is set with the lack of an audition. Many interview participants described the sense of inclusion and acceptance experienced in their socialization process, attributing this element to the lack of an audition. This facilitated the process and product of belonging even prior to organizational entry. With ease of access to membership, individuals found themselves more likely to be accepted into the group, thus facilitating the experience of belonging in the community choir.

A unique aspect of the belonging experience for community choir members was a distinct sense of belonging to the art form itself, rather than a sense of belonging to the particular choral group. Many interview participants described specific psychological and physical benefits of choral singing that contribute greatly to their lives. This was particularly evident in accounts from individuals who had a history of engagement in the art form. They remain committed to engagement in the art form regardless of the group in which they participate. An exemplar of this distinct sense of belonging to the art form came from Debra’s description of belonging. She has a long history of choral singing and has been with the community choir for ten years. She said, “If I left that choir I’d still find a place to sing” (Debra, personal interview). For several interview

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

participants, they feel a greater sense of belonging to the art form itself and engagement in the community choir is simply the vehicle for belonging.

There were two outlier examples of the experience of belonging in the community choir. These interview participants described ownership in the choir, distinguished from belonging to the community: “Maybe the choir belongs to me. Well um because it was a choice to be here. Sometimes with something it can belong to a family of origin but it appears you didn’t make a choice or you did but I think it’s an interesting question and I would say maybe both” (Carol, personal interview); and “It’s my choir. I have ownership in it yeah...because I’ve been there from the beginning” (Sue, personal interview). These interview participant responses reflected a desire to establish individual agency in the process of belonging and negotiating identity, though both described a sense of belonging to the community choir.

Upon joining the community choir, members move through the socialization process toward the resulting experience of belonging and the formation of identity, both individual and collective. Potential for belonging is a motivating factor for individuals considering voluntary organizational membership and an important aspect of sustained membership. Wenger’s (1998) defining characteristics of a communities of practice, mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, intersect with the unique aspects of the choral art form. As choir members participate in the practice of choral singing, they negotiate its meaning for that particular group. Drawing from the resources of the practical artifacts and common discourses, choir members move through the socialization process toward a distinct sense of belonging to the community. These defining characteristics are also demonstrated in unique ways within this organizational context. The art form necessitates mutual engagement, negotiation of meaning is often guided by the director, the most prominent discourse is a shared sense of humor, and

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

belonging is connected directly to the art form, rather than the particular choral group. Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework and the additional construct of belonging reflect the communicative aspects of the choral community of practice.

### **Chapter 4 – Discussion**

I use this final chapter to present the theoretical implications of this research, its limitations, and future research directions. The application of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework on communities of practice to a choral community presents new possibilities for its use in organizational communication research, as well as the practical use of its concepts within a greater variety of organizational settings. A few themes arose from the data which were beyond the specific focus of this research and warrant further examination. Future examination and use of communities of practice theory may enable better understanding of non-profit organizational environments and voluntary membership, as well as fostering healthier organizational environments.

#### **Theoretical Implications for Communities of Practice**

According to Wenger (1998), the greatest significance of communities of practice theory is its bridging of the gap between individual and social learning. From this theoretical perspective we come to understand learning not as an individual cognitive process, but as social participation: "both a kind of action and a form of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do, but who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). This change in the understanding of how people learn and participate in groups leads to a different, and more detailed understanding of the ways in which communities are built, as well as their vital importance as environments of learning and identity formation. My examination of the communicative indicators of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, shared repertoire, and belonging stems from the understanding that organizational processes are communicatively constructed. When choir members engage in the established practice of choral singing, negotiate its meaning for their particular group, and enact belonging while drawing from

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

a shared repertoire, they are communicatively constructing a community. These processes are observable and assessable within the organizational setting. As members participate in the community of practice, they are communicatively constructing its structure, rules, and processes.

By observing and assessing the communicative processes of this choral community of practice, I was able to better understand the application of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework to various organizational settings. First, this application yields further support for the use of the framework itself, as well as the application of its concepts within organizational communication research. Next, I discuss the implications of organizational socialization on newcomer participation in communities of practice, as the socialization of new members is an inconsistent process, rather than a linear progression. Finally, the examination of belonging, as it extends from Wenger's (1998) framework, provides important implications for both communities of practice theory and the further examination of this particular construct within voluntary organizational membership and civic engagement. My discussion on theoretical implications of this research also includes the distinct social benefits of the choral arts that are present within the data. With the use of a communication perspective on participatory arts, I am able to specifically highlight social benefits of the choral arts, thereby adding to the body of empirical support for their importance in civic life.

### **Test of Communities of Practice Theory**

With its focus on voluntary participation in a leisure activity, this research is an exemplar of Wenger's (1998) framework on communities of practice within a unique organizational setting, thus furthering support for the theoretical framework itself. Further support for the communities of practice framework will facilitate its understanding and application of its concepts to future research in organizational communication. The theoretical framework of

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

communities of practice enables a new discussion for the ways in which people learn within various organizational types, develop individual and communal identities, and build communities within organizational settings. These processes are communicatively enacted and through their enactment, individuals engage in the construction of knowledge processes, identification, and modes of belonging. Wenger's (1998) initial research was conducted within a claims processing organization and his development of the communities of practice framework offered an innovative perspective on aspects of participation in a corporate organizational setting. Iverson's (2011; 2013) work on communities of practice was within non-profit organizations, focusing particularly on the knowledge management of volunteers within those organizations. By applying communities of practice theory to the choral community setting, I was able to highlight the particular intersections of the art form with the theoretical framework. As choral singing does not exist apart from the community, it specifically requires these elements of mutual engagement and negotiation of a joint enterprise. In the context of the community choir, these defining characteristics of the community of practice were communicatively enacted through engagement in the art form. The practice itself may have specific implications for the ways in which these defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire are communicatively enacted. This offers further support for the centrality of the particular practice around which the community is formed. Engagement in the practice may not merely be the common denominator or locus for organizational participation, but more prominently feature as a conduit for enacting the community.

According to Iverson (2011), "CoP [communities of practice] theory also provides advantages for recognizing how enacting organizational knowledge connects with and extends other organizational co-processes, such as the development of professional identity" (p. 48). For

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

the community choir, these co-processes include the management of the board, fundraising efforts, and recruiting new members: all processes which facilitate the primary practice of choral singing. Without these co-processes, the community choir would cease to exist. Identifying these co-processes within the theoretical framework on communities of practice facilitates their examination as co-processes, rather than defining characteristics of the organization. These aspects of board membership, fundraising efforts, and recruiting new members facilitate the practice but do not necessarily define it. Wenger's (1998) distinction between defining characteristics of communities of practice and organizational co-processes allows for their distinct examination and theoretical discussion. According to Iverson & McPhee (2008), the three central concepts of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire act "as mechanisms to determine the existence of CoPs [communities of practice] and to explore further the communicative nature of CoPs," apart from the other processes and concepts which focus on how to "implement communities of practice as a solution to knowledge issues in organizations" (p. 178). By distinguishing the three defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, I was able to clearly apply the framework to this organizational setting and focus particularly on the ways in which these characteristics are communicatively enacted.

Wenger's (1998) framework may be applied to an organizational setting from a researcher's point of view, but by understanding the ways in which these characteristics are communicatively enacted, members of communities of practice are equipped with the necessary tools for sense-making of their own experiences and building these structures within their own organizational settings. I also found the enactment of belonging within communities of practice to be an essential addition to Wenger's (1998) central framework, the implications for which are

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

later discussed. Implementation of these theoretical principles across a variety of settings may foster healthier organizational environments and improve membership retention, whether it be voluntary or employed membership.

### **Socialization and Participation in Communities of Practice**

Two additional themes, strategic disengagement and select socialization, arose from the data that present particular theoretical implications for the study of socialization and participation in communities of practice. While beyond the initial scope of this research, these themes relate to the framework as they inform the ways in which organizational members participate in these settings. Communities of practice members have a greater responsibility for negotiating the terms of their participation in the given practice, in comparison to employees within a corporate organizational setting. These organizational members are determining the meaning of their own experience as they engage in the community of practice. This reflects a unique sense of agency in organizational membership, resulting in these unique aspects of strategic disengagement and select socialization.

**Strategic disengagement.** There were particular aspects of the practice that some choir members avoided, such as fundraising or being on the board. Choir members found that some of these aspects of the practice were instigators of conflict and damaged relationships within the group. In order to avoid conflict and maintain enjoyment of the community, these individuals disengaged from or entirely avoided these aspects of the practice. This strategic disengagement reflects the processual nature of socialization and identification (Bullis & Bach, 1989). Even as community members move through the process of socialization, it is neither linear nor consistent. Individuals may not necessarily reach a certain point of socialization or identity development and remain there. This process fluctuates between differing levels of engagement. It



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

may not necessarily affect that individual's sense of identification or belonging within the group, but strategic disengagement has specific implications for the discussion on the processual nature of socialization. Differing levels of participation in the practice also indicates the flexible nature of the socialization process.

**Select socialization.** This aspect for the community choir holds theoretical implications for the discussion on the socialization process. As is common within community choral settings, the choir is separated by section: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Within their own section, individuals are better able to hear their own part and this facilitates the participation of those who may not be as technically skilled. These sections remain rather nuclear within the choir, as members sit with their sections during rehearsals, stand by section for performance, and rarely interact between sections. This was not due to any animosity but the social comfort that individuals experienced within their sections. As such, an alto may have an entirely different socialization experience or sense of the group than a soprano, simply because of the individuals she happens to be surrounded by as the choir is separated by vocal part. Division by vocal part is a unique aspect of a choral community of practice, but the concept of select socialization may be universal as there are differing types of divisions within other settings, such as organizational roles or social demographics. As such, select socialization holds distinct theoretical implications for the ways in which the socialization process is examined and understood. It has been established that each individual experiences the socialization process differently due to their prior experiences and motivations for organizational membership (Kramer, 2010; Moreland & Levine, 2001; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), even within organizations or among a group of newcomers that undergoes formal socialization processes together. However, there may be

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

consistencies among organizational newcomers based upon the nuclear groups existent within the larger organization.

### **Belonging and Voluntary Organizational Membership**

In examining the socialization process for members of the community choir, I queried interviewees about their anticipatory socialization, in an attempt to seek out their motivations for joining this particular choral group. For many interviewees, the possibility of experiencing belonging to a community group was a primary motivator for engagement in the practice of community choir. This was especially apparent for those participants who had a history of engagement: prior experiences of belonging in other choral settings led to the expectation of such an experience in this new setting. The expectation of belonging was also set by this particular choir's lack of an audition. The founding members wished to provide a setting for community engagement, facilitated by participation in a choir, and the community choir maintains this focus of community building. Technical expertise is secondary to the civic focus, setting the expectation for belonging as they seek to build a more cohesive community through engagement in the practice of choral singing.

The experience of belonging is not only an important motivator for new membership, but it is also an essential component of sustained organizational membership. Even for individuals who have not been a part of the community choir for very long, the sense that they belonged within this particular organizational setting kept them returning week by week, season by season. They believed that they had a place, their voice was needed, and their membership was recognized by others. This social comfort and ease of engagement in a practice to which they were committed motivated their continued organizational membership. By examining the way belonging is communicatively enacted in these communities of practice, members have a better

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

understanding of how to facilitate this process for new members. For the community choir, sustained membership is an important aspect to the development of the practice. With a strong core of established members, the choir is able to take on more difficult repertoire, do more community outreach activities, and provide better opportunities for engagement in the practice of choral singing. By understanding this unique motivating factor of belonging in both the anticipatory socialization and sustained membership processes, we might better facilitate this experience in other organizational settings. Traditionally, belonging has not been examined as an important aspect in socialization and organizational membership. Belonging is clearly an important element in the building of organizations, maintaining established members, and fostering healthier organizational environments.

The process and product of belonging is also a catalyst for further civic engagement. Engagement in a social association fosters a sense of community attachment and group identity (Kwak, Shah, & Holbert, 2004). A singer who comes into the community choir and finds fulfillment as they engage in the practice and experience belonging may be more likely to engage in another non-profit organization. If a similar experience of belonging is likely to occur in another community organization, that singer may consider engagement in another activity they may not have previously considered, such as a community garden or work at a shelter for the homeless. The majority of interview participants were involved in at least two other community organizations and for many of those participants, connections to these organizations were facilitated by connections with fellow choir members. This engagement demonstrates flexible organizational barriers, with overlapping membership and interconnectivity between community organizations. It is this interconnectivity that establishes the foundations for a more cohesive community and stronger civic identity. Individuals with a stronger sense of civic identity may

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

experience a greater sense of responsibility to their communities, thereby encouraging further civic engagement.

### **Social Benefits of the Choral Arts**

Another theoretical implication for this research on a choral community of practice is the empirical support for the social benefits of the arts. The majority of the research on participatory arts is confined to physical and psychological benefits, specifically for older adults (Clift et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2006; Noice, Noice, & Kramer, 2014). Recent strides have been made to build empirical support for the importance of participatory arts in the educational realm. One of the larger gaps in the literature is on the specific social benefits of the participatory arts in civic life and across varying age groups. By building this particular body of empirical support for the arts in civic life, we may better establish its importance and further its facilitation. Music is a prominent aspect of the educational experience and continues to be a common aspect of civic life. Highlighting the social benefits of the participatory arts, specifically choral performance, provides further support for the importance of and need for community choir.

**Building communities.** When implemented in civic life, communities of practice may be the building blocks of stronger communities on a larger scale. Stronger non-profit organizations invigorate and strengthen the life of a community as opportunities for unique activity engagement are made available. For a few of the interview participants, engagement in the community choir was a particular means for engagement in the larger community. Though non-profit community organizations facilitate activities that may not necessarily reflect the broader interests of the community, they provide opportunities for community engagement by reaching a wider variety of individuals. If an individual moves to a new city and he or she has a history of engagement in the choral arts, they are more likely to engage in the new community if there is

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

opportunity for them to participate in their beloved art form. As individuals get to know people within their communities of practice, they are more likely to make social connections beyond the boundaries of those communities. These social connections are invaluable to establishing a sense of belonging within a new community and individual social health.

Many interview participants addressed the specific sense of personal connection they felt with their fellow choir members, describing the choir as a family. These individuals attributed that group dynamic and the nature of their relationships with other members to the particular aspects of the art form. Choral singing requires a particular sense of emotional vulnerability and interconnectivity. This emotional process was distinctly described by the choir's director, who noted that "as part of the choir we stand up, bear our souls, push ourselves to our physical limits, our vocal limits, our emotional limits to share the experience of making music with people. Even if we maybe don't like those people in some ways but loving them somehow in other ways like a family" (George, personal interview). Choral singing requires personal expression to be channeled into the group process to create the final product. The emotional vulnerability that is required by the art form facilitates the sense of connectedness that individuals experience as they sing together. Even the seemingly minute action of breathing together creates a unique sense of connection, moments of unification that transcend any social disparities. By creating art together and working toward a common goal, choir members found a unique sense of personal connection to each other that would not have existed otherwise. Many interview participants described this sense of connection to be the primary reason for overcoming perceptions of other choir members that may have hindered their social interaction. Variations in social class, education level, occupations, technical expertise, and life experiences were overcome due to the central commonality of singing together.

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

**Social engagement.** Participation in leisure activities such as the community choir also facilitates opportunities for social engagement across the wide diversity of members. For example, older retirees in the choir are building friendships with high school students, bridging gaps of age and experience for mutual benefit. Several interview participants described the emergence of unlikely friendships from their engagement in the community choir, finding these friendships to be personally fulfilling and enriching to their social lives. Such connections might be facilitated in communities of practice organized around other activities, but the uniquely communal nature of choral singing lends itself more easily to that social connection and group unification. These aspects of social participation and community building are excellent exemplars for the unique social benefits of engagement in the choral arts.

### **Limitations**

**Researcher role.** My initial intent in approaching this research was to join the community choir in order to examine the socialization process, the communicative indicators of the defining characteristics of a community of practice, and the experience of belonging as a full participant. Due primarily to time constraints, I adopted the researcher role of complete observer for the fieldwork portion of data collection. Some of the advantages of fieldwork as a full participant include the first-hand experience of observed phenomena and fewer barriers between the researcher and participants (Tracy, 2013). As the choir members were aware of my presence as a researcher, there was a certain level of discomfort that I was not able to overcome. When participants are aware that they are being observed, there is a higher level of self-monitoring and personal censorship that occurs. By conducting field observation as a full participant, more accurate data on the communicative indicators of the defining characteristics of a community of practice may be gathered.

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Had I been able to conduct research with the community choir as a full participant, I would have been with the group for at least a season. This extended time period would have included not only rehearsals, but also performances and additional social opportunities, thus facilitating a broader look at the socialization and belonging experiences of choir members. It may also have provided a supplement to the limitations of interview data as responses are filtered through the participant's perspectives and desire to present certain favorable aspects of themselves or their choir experience.

**Limited scope of examination.** The specific focus on the three defining characteristics of Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework also limited examination of supporting organizational roles: the ways in which these roles facilitate the practice, the intersection of supporting organizational roles and the negotiation of meaning, and members specifically experiencing belonging through their engagement in these roles. By broadening the scope of examination, we might be better able to understand the nuances of communities of practice and the supplemental aspects of this organizational framework. The recognition of the limitations of this research gives rise to discussion of potential directions for further research.

### **Future Research Directions**

**De-socialization.** Though not a theme observed within this community choir, several interview participants described experiences of de-socialization in other choral groups in which they've previously participated. De-socialization is the antithesis of belonging in a community of practice: just as belonging must be communicatively enacted by the group, so de-socialization is the communicative enactment of the opposing impression, or the intentional anti-socialization of unwanted members. In her master's thesis on communication dialectics in a music community, Rohrbauck-Stout (1995) introduced this concept of anti-socialization, which is when members

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

attempt to prevent newcomers from being socialized into the community. Community choir members may engage in anti-socialization efforts if they perceive new members to be a threat to their own membership or the community identity they've been a part of negotiating. This de-socialization of members, though not observed within this community choir, is certainly present within the examination of socialization and warrants further exploration.

**Strategic disengagement.** With their distinct theoretical implications for socialization and participation in communities of practice, the emergent themes of strategic disengagement and select socialization also call for further examination. Strategic disengagement indicates a sense of agency as individuals participate in a community of practice for which Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework does not facilitate discussion. Mutual engagement in the practice does not require all-or-nothing participation. Community members determine their own level of engagement based upon their motivations for membership and negotiation of the practice's meaning for themselves. For example, if an individual joined the choir to meet new people, they are not likely to take on supporting organizational roles, such as board member or the music committee. Those who take on such roles within the organization are much more likely to be motivated by the use of their leadership skills, with social engagement being a secondary aspect to their membership experience. Strategic disengagement was also a key factor in conflict management or avoidance. Several individuals found that participation on the board or in fundraising endeavors instigated conflict with their fellow choir members and damaged relationships within the group. In order to maintain the established sense of community, they disengaged from these aspects of the practice.

**Select socialization.** In the context of the community choir, select socialization was clearly evident in the division of vocal parts and members' tendency to continue socially



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

operating within these nuclear groups. Though this may be less evident in other settings, internal divisions exist in all organizations, whether it be by particular organizational role, technical expertise, or even by department. These internal divisions may have specific implications for the initial socialization experience of new members, as well as the continued socialization process for established members. Select socialization may be primarily evident within organizational settings where the majority of socialization processes are informal, conducted by and between participating members. As informal socialization processes are more common among volunteers than employees, select socialization may have more specific implications for the understanding of voluntary organizational membership. It may be that select socialization has stronger implications for organizational settings where divisions are more formal, established by a hierarchy and mandated for organizational participation. By understanding the elements of select socialization, we may better facilitate a more cohesive socialization process within organizational groups or even use the nuclear nature of organizational divisions to better facilitate communities of practice within larger settings. These aspects of strategic disengagement and select socialization call for further examination within other organizational settings and through other research lenses.

### **Conclusion**

According to Wenger (1998), “we form communities not because we fall short of an ideal of individualism or freedom, but because identification is at the very core of the social nature of our identities and so we define even our individualism and our freedom in that context” (p. 212). His theoretical framework on communities of practice is built upon the foundations of social learning theory and identity development, facilitating a new discussion on the ways in which people learn together, build communities, and develop satisfying identities. This framework was

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

applied to the organizational setting of a community choir as an exemplar of a community of practice for its unique intersections of theoretical concepts with art form characteristics. This application revealed possibilities for the framework's application to other organizational settings, as well as unique characteristics of a choral community of practice. Approaching this organizational setting with the three defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, I was able to examine the ways in which these are communicatively enacted, thus providing further support for the application of Wenger's (1998) framework to varying organizational settings and the specific implications for non-profit community organizations. In addition to the three defining characteristics of communities of practice, I examined the ways in which belonging was communicatively enacted and its additional implications for socialization and membership in communities of practice.

By using qualitative methods of research interviews and complete observer fieldwork, I was able to honor and reflect the perspectives and experience of choir members. From my own experience within the choral organizational setting, I was able to lend analytic insight to participants as we engaged in the interview process and understand the expression of their own experiences using the associated terminology. Through field observation, I was able to easily access the research setting and observe the participants' experiences in context, thus offering further support and understanding of their personal accounts. I used an iterative analysis process to allow for emergent readings of the data as I transcribed field notes and interviews, facilitating consistent interaction with the data. The open coding approach allowed me to analyze data specifically by the three defining characteristics of mutual engagement, negotiation of a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, as well as the communicative enactment of belonging. The secondary process of axial coding allowed for comparison of participant accounts to highlight

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

emergent themes as well as distinguishing outlier examples of observed experiences. These qualitative methodological techniques facilitated the specific examination of participant experiences within the organizational context, thus providing more organic and accurate data.

Assimilation and socialization for members of the community choir were briefly examined as processes which inform the membership experience. Individuals were motivated to join the community choir for a variety of reasons, though the most common was a history of engagement in choral singing and the resulting desire to remain engaged. Some participants specifically described engagement in the community choir as a means for engagement in the larger community. Many participants described the specific physical and psychological benefits of the art form to be their primary motivating factors for engagement, thus providing further support for the importance of choral singing. The majority of socialization processes observed were informal, such as information seeking from established members and a gradual increase in comfort level with the technical aspects of the practice. Unique aspects of the socialization process were observed, such as strategic disengagement and select socialization with the nuclear vocal sections of the choir.

Mutual engagement was observed in rehearsal attendance and distinguished by the wide variety of member diversities, such as experience levels, differing occupations, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The lack of an audition provided ease of access to the choir and thus set the expectation for acceptance. These characteristics of this particular community of practice fostered membership diversity which was perceived by choir members to be of advantage to the group. Negotiation of the joint enterprise was guided by distinguished members of the community, such as the director and founding members who continue to participate. As membership has continued to become more consistent, members have had to renegotiate its

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

meaning, moving the focus away from desire for the community and more toward technical excellence of the practice. This was also a distinct point of intersection with the nature of the art form, as choral singing is at its essence a joint enterprise and the sharing of the practice with an audience invites them into negotiation of its meaning. Apart from the community, the art form does not exist and thus is an excellent exemplar for this characteristic of a community of practice. Shared repertoire of the community choir was reflected in its musical repertoire and discursive resources from which members might express their forms of membership and community identity. Though choir members drew from a set of shared values and sense of the group dynamic, the primary example of shared repertoire was the informal discourse that was reflected in both participant interviews and field observation. The use of humor was a distinguishing aspect of membership and often indicated a history of engagement in the practice of choral singing, as well as established membership in this particular community.

The examination of belonging within this context was distinguished by the interactive and enacted process of identification. This was primarily enacted through membership recognition, as newcomers became known by established members. Some members specifically experienced a sense of belonging through participation in supporting organizational roles, though the examination of this aspect of belonging warrants further research. The most unique aspect of the belonging experience was a distinct sense of belonging to the art form itself, with the community of practice acting as a vehicle for engagement. A few participants described a sense of ownership in the group, rather than belonging to it. This seemed to reflect a unique desire for individual agency in the socialization process as it results in a sense of belonging. Apart from the particular ways in which belonging is enacted in this choral community of practice, it was clearly a motivating factor in the decision to join the community, an integral aspect of sustained

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

membership, and a catalyst for further civic engagement. The theoretical construct of belonging warrants further examination in other organizational settings as it provides supplemental support for other theoretical frameworks.

By understanding the ways in which people engage in, learn, and develop identities within organizational settings, we may be able to better facilitate these processes, thus fostering healthier organizational environments. The examination of the unique aspects of voluntary organizational membership may better facilitate this specific type of organizational engagement that is becoming more prominent. With the building of empirical support for the benefits of participatory arts, we may better establish their importance as components of civic life. Through this research, I have demonstrated an exercise in qualitative research methods, the exploration and furtherance of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework on communities of practice, unique aspects of socialization, and new possibilities for research on these transformative organizational elements.

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Appendix A

**Guiding Interview Questions**

*Introduction*

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I have an hour set aside for us, though we may not use the full time. Does that still work for you? I want to honor our time constraints. I encourage you to elaborate on your answers to my questions. Feel free to tell me what you think is the most important about your experience in community choir. If there is a particular topic I wish to cover, I may redirect the conversation. I have a list of guiding questions which I may use throughout the interview or deviate from. You are free to share or withhold any information from me during our conversation. You are more than welcome to ask me any questions about our interview or the research process. If you are ready, let's talk about your choir experience.

*Voluntary Organizational Membership*

1. How long have you been involved with the choir?
2. What prompted you to choose this particular group? Did you look into joining other choirs?
3. Why did you join community choir?

*Mutual Engagement*

4. How does the majority of the work done by the choir take place? For example, does it take place individually, or in the group rehearsal? Explain.
5. How does the choir work as a unit? In what ways does the choir not work as a unit?
6. What, if anything, have you learned from your fellow choir members? For example, assistance with music, dealing with social dynamics, reading the director, etc.

*Negotiation of a Joint Enterprise*

7. How have you impacted or influenced the choir?
8. What have you seen change in the choir since you have joined?
  - a. What led up to that change?
9. What level of expertise would you say that you have relative to other choir members?
  - a. How does that affect your interaction with other choir members?

*Shared Repertoire*

10. When talking to other members, what phrases or terms do they use to indicate they are
  - a. A choir member?
  - b. A part of your section?

## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

11. What do those phrases or terms tell you about them?
12. What beliefs and values do choir members have in common?

### *Belonging*

13. How much contact do you have with other choir members?
14. Do you belong to the choir?
  - a. What makes you think that?
15. How would you describe the group dynamic?
  
16. What advice would you offer individuals who might consider joining a community choir?

### *Demographics*

17. Gender (record)
18. Education and Occupation
19. Are there other community activities or organizations you are involved in?

Appendix B

**Recruitment Script**

My name is Aubrielle Holly and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies. This year I am conducting qualitative research on belonging in communities of practice. I am examining the motivations for individuals joining a community choir, how they are socialized into the group, how they experience a sense of belonging and identification with the group, and how this sense of belonging may encourage further civic engagement. It is tied into organizational studies on the unique dynamics of voluntary organizational membership and group members' need to establish a sense of a belonging. It also involves the application of a unique organizational framework which focuses on knowledge as it involves being together, living meaningfully, and developing a satisfying identity. This is where I need your help.

I am asking for interview participants. If you agree to take part in this aspect of the research study, you will be given an opportunity to discuss your experience in this community choir. Interviews will be taking place outside of regular rehearsal time and will last from thirty minutes to an hour. Your information will be kept confidential, the specifics of which are detailed in a consent form I will ask you to sign. Your decision to take part in this aspect of the research study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in or you may withdraw from the study at any time. You are free to share or withhold any information during the interview process.

This study is for the completion of my master's thesis, which is the culmination of my graduate work. Please do consider being a part of this exciting process! I will have a sign-up sheet for available interview times. You will be sent a confirmation email with the location and your scheduled interview time. If you want to participate in the interview process but there is not an available time that works for you, there is a designated page to put down your name and email and I will specifically schedule a convenient interview time. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask! Thank you so much for your time and assistance!

Appendix C

**Field Access Request**

My name is Aubrielle Holly and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies. This year I am conducting qualitative research on belonging in communities of practice. I am examining the motivations for individuals joining a community choir, how they are socialized into the group, how they experience a sense of belonging and identification with the group, and how this sense of belonging may encourage further civic engagement. It is tied into organizational studies on the unique dynamics of voluntary organizational membership and group members' need to establish a sense of a belonging. It also involves the application of a unique organizational framework which focuses on knowledge as it involves being together, living meaningfully, and developing a satisfying identity. This is where I need your help.

I am requesting permission for field observation. With your consent, I would like to attend the five rehearsals between Monday, January 25<sup>th</sup> and Friday, February 26<sup>th</sup>. During this time, I will be observing and taking notes on the rehearsal process and communicative interactions between choir members. As I'm observing organizational elements in context, I will be as unobtrusive as possible. In addition to observation, I will also be recruiting participants for interviews which will be conducted outside of scheduled rehearsal time. Participation in the interview process will be entirely voluntary. All personal information will be kept confidential. For the purposes of data analysis and presentation, I will be assigning a group pseudonym, as well as pseudonyms for interview participants.

This study is for the completion of my master's thesis, which is the culmination of my graduate work. Please do consider being a part of this exciting process. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask! Thank you so much for your time and assistance!

Appendix D

**SUBJECT INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT**

**Study Title:** A Qualitative Analysis of Belonging in Communities of Practice: Exploring Transformative Organizational Elements within the Choral Arts

**Investigator:** Aubrielle Holly, University of Montana, aubrielle.holly@umontana.edu

**Inclusion Criteria:**

- Currently participating in the community choir

**Purpose:**

This qualitative study presents an examination of belonging in communities of practice. The context of a community choir was chosen for its unique characteristics of voluntary organizational membership and the communal nature of the art form. The study's major themes include the discussion of supporting theoretical constructs, such as social learning theory and organizational identification, the unique experiences of individuals participating in community choir, the use of qualitative research interviewing and field observation, and the broader implications for belonging as a catalyst for civic engagement.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to take part in the interview process of the research study, you will be given an opportunity to discuss your experience in this community choir. You will be asked a few questions about your decision to join a choir, your reasons for choosing a particular group, and your experience in that group thus far. The interview session will last for 30 minutes to an hour.

**Risks/Discomforts:**

There is no anticipated discomfort for those contributing to this study, so risk to participants is minimal. Mild discomfort may result from discussing unpleasant experiences in the choir. Answering the questions may cause you to think about feelings that make you sad or upset. You are not required to disclose any information that makes you uncomfortable.

**Benefits:**

Your participation in this study will further the work on communities of practice as an organizational framework, as well as assisting the researcher in the completion of a master's thesis. The data gather from interviews will also foster understanding of experiencing belonging in communities of practice, assisting in the engagement of its challenges and exploration of its specific benefits.

**Confidentiality:**

Your records will be kept confidential and will not be released without your consent except as required by law. Your identity will remain private. If the results of this study are written in a scientific journal or presented at a conference, your name will not be used. Your responses will be associated with a pseudonym of your choice for the analysis of data and presentation of research. The data will be stored on a secure, personal



## BELONGING IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

computer. Your signed consent form will be stored in a secured file separate from the data. The interview recording will be transcribed without any information that could identify you. The recording will be deleted upon completion of the research process.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:**

Your decision to take part in the interview process of this research study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in or you may withdraw from the study at any time. You are free to share or withhold any information from the researcher during the interview process.

### **Questions:**

If you have any questions about the research now or at any time during the study, please contact:

Aubrielle Holly at [aubrielle.holly@umontana.edu](mailto:aubrielle.holly@umontana.edu)

You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Betsy Bach at [betsy.bach@umontana.edu](mailto:betsy.bach@umontana.edu)

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672.

### **Statement of Your Consent:**

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be

answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Printed Name of Subject

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Subject's Signature

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Date