

Supporting People Living with Dementia: Choral Music and Wellbeing

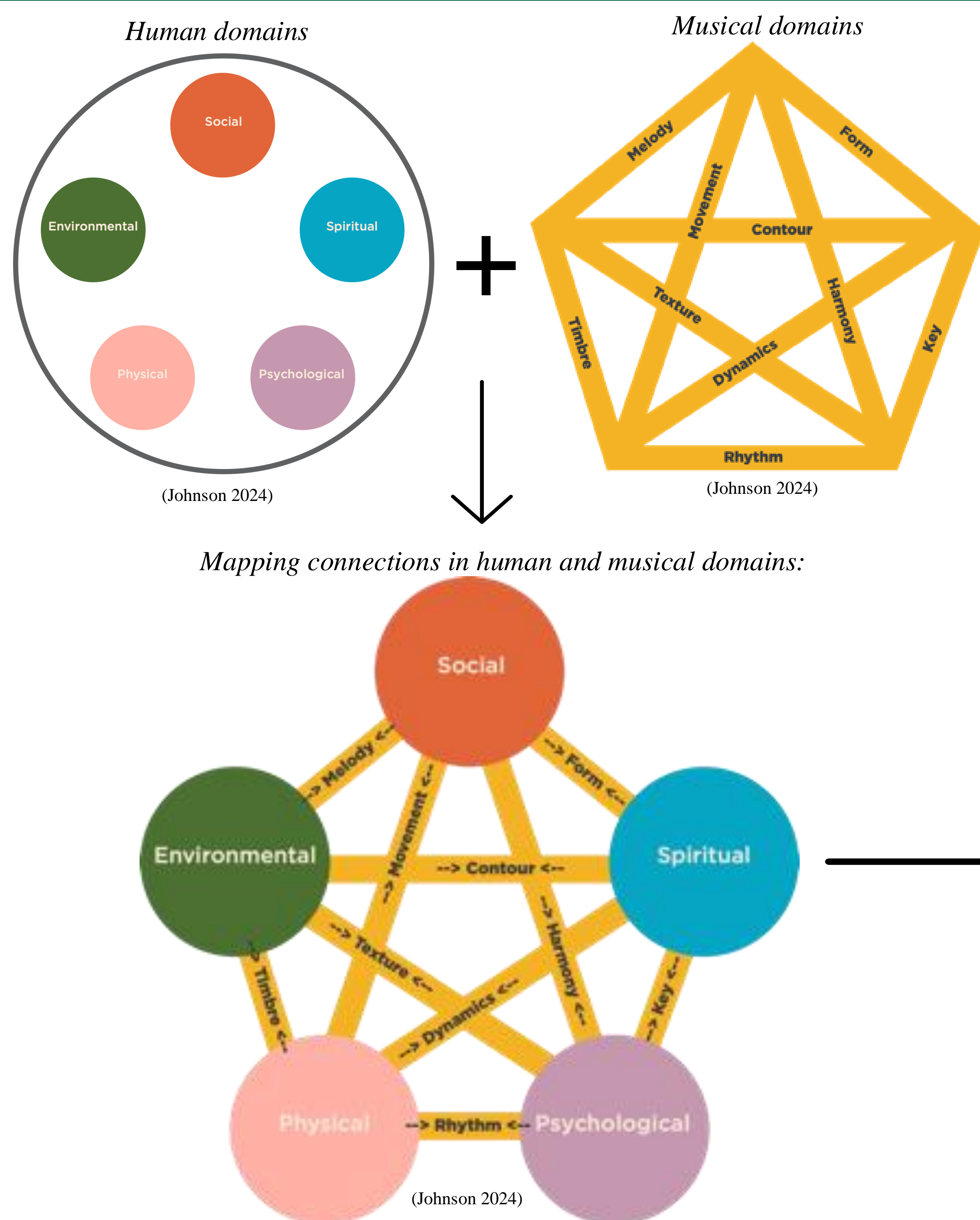
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ABSTRACT

The complex nature of dementia care requires creative, multifaceted supports and resources from various disciplines, especially for rural dwellers living with dementia. Considering the projected increases of dementia diagnoses in Canada, estimated to reach 1 million by 2030 (Alzheimer's Society of Canada, 2024), as well as Saskatchewan's high percentage of rural residents (Statistics Canada, 2022), this calls us to action. Understanding the physical, psychological, spiritual, environmental, and social domains of the human is helpful in building efficacious supports to quality of life and wellbeing throughout a person's dementia journey. As a multi-faceted praxis which closely maps onto human dimensionality, music has the potential to intersect and integrate all human domains. Choral music is increasingly recognized as a viable nonpharmacological support in the wellbeing of people living with dementia (Beynon & Lang, 2020; Hobeika & Samson, 2020; Tamburri et al., 2019). Inspired by two established models which represent the interconnectedness of the human – Engel's seminal biopsychosocial framework (Engel, 1978) and the medicine wheel from many Indigenous teachings (Greer & Lemacks, 2024) I have developed a model of human dimensionality juxtaposed with music, in which music can help integrate domains and contribute to the wholeness of the human. For the purposes of this work, wellbeing will be defined as: the experience of wholeness across the domains of human life. Building from this definition, I posit that participation in choral music is an effective contributor to human wellbeing because of its capacity to integrate the domains. In this poster I discuss current work in choral music for dementia support and end by sharing potential future work in using digitally-delivered choral music programming to contribute to the wellbeing of rural people living with dementia in Saskatchewan.

INTERSECTIONS OF HUMAN & MUSICAL DOMAINS



MUSIC PARTICIPATION AND WELLBEING

Research demonstrates that music participation, specifically group singing, is an especially effective nonpharmacological support for people living with dementia, as music processing utilizes parts of the brain that are often spared until late in the progression of dementia (Beynon & Lang, 2020; Voices in Motion, 2024). Group singing provides cognitive benefits (Ferrerri et al., 2019), can temporarily renew communication ability, episodic memory (Tamburri et al.), and a sense of identity, personhood, and agency (Beynon & Lang, 2020; Lang, 2020), and has been shown to contribute emotional benefits (Coulton et al., 2014), diminishing anxiety, loneliness, and stress (Tamburri et al., 2019), releasing oxytocin and dopamine (Levitin, 2019), and contributing to a sense of connection and belonging (Keeler et al., 2015; Osman et al., 2016). In some cases, choral participation was linked to delayed move to long-term care and diminished reliance on the healthcare system (Tamburri et al., 2019; Voices in Motion, 2024). The benefits of participating in choral music are not only for people with a dementia diagnosis, but also extend to informal caregivers. Additionally, while caregivers to those living with dementia report isolation, burnout (Tamburri et al., 2019), and a higher burden of distress than do other caregivers (Alzheimer's Society, 2024), choral programs have enabled caregivers to develop networks with others in similar caregiving situations (Osman, et al., 2016) increasing their social supports and overall wellbeing. Choral singing can contribute to a person's experience of wholeness both by integrating the domains of self and by providing an opportunity for integration with others. Participating in music can integrate and temporarily renew aspects of the self that have been lost through the progression of dementia. A song can elicit memories and feelings, bringing back the capacity to sing, albeit temporarily. When a song reawakens these important aspects, the person living with dementia is often capable of participating like other choristers, giving a sense of contribution, belonging, self, pride, personal agency (Lang, 2020), and a reduced focus on the dementia diagnosis.

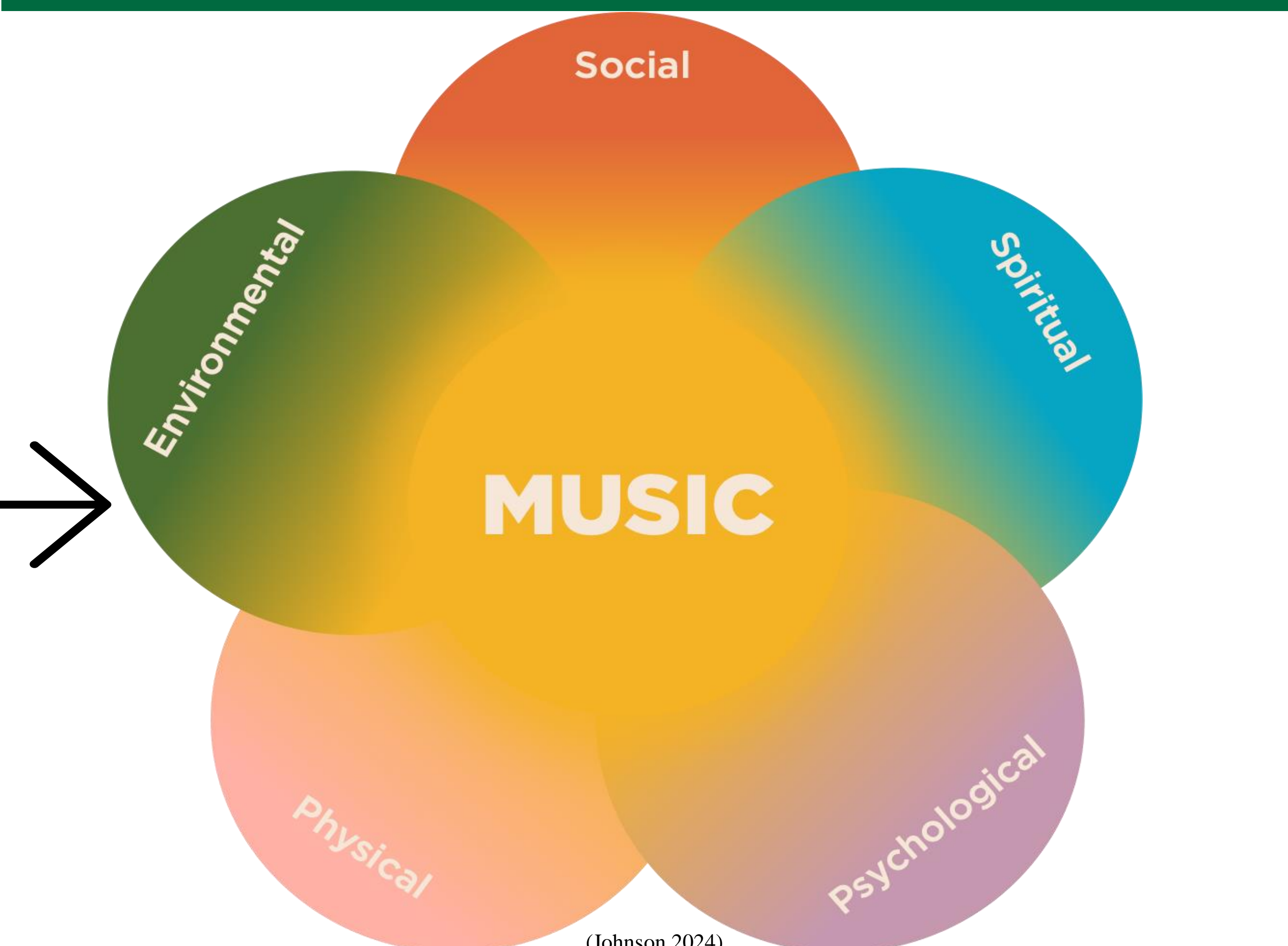
CURRENT WORK

As the pilot group for USask's Intergenerational Choral Connections research project, Timeless Voices intergenerational choir contributes to involving people living with dementia in social music making, bringing generations together to learn, connect, and make music transcending generational, cognitive, and health divides. Currently in its fifth iteration, Timeless Voices is comprised of students from USask and a Saskatoon public high school, elders at a long-term care facility, and various caregivers. Findings thus far have indicated enhanced wellbeing, meaningful social connections, learning, and a sense of joy and unity across participants.



Photo credit: C. Ukrainetz

INTEGRATION THROUGH MUSIC



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The complexities accompanying increasing projected dementia rates require interdisciplinary and innovative supports for those affected by dementia. Advances in technology afford the ability to bring the benefits of choral music to people in rural areas who may not otherwise have opportunity to take part. Digitally-delivered choral communities could be an efficacious adjunct to telehealth delivery (Morgan et al., 2014) in rural dementia care, providing meaningful support for people living with dementia and their caregivers through the physical, spiritual, psychological, and social benefits of music participation. Mobility, transportation, and distance issues need no longer be barriers to people experiencing the value of choral music. My future research aims to develop and facilitate an online choral program to increase accessibility and contribute to the wellbeing of rural demographics affected by dementia in a way that is equitable, sustainable, and ideally, reproducible well beyond the pilot group. The need is great, and so is the potential. Blending choral music expertise with psychology of aging, telehealth, and online community building may be a viable means through which to contribute to the wellbeing and quality of life of people living with dementia in rural areas.

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