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A "random group of misfits" or being "part of something bigger"? Exploring experiences of attending a non-religious congregation

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Religion is an important part of many people's lives and there is some evidence that attending church or other religious congregations is positively associated with psychological well-being. However, religious participation is declining in Western Europe and North America. Sunday Assembly is a non-religious gathering that intends to provide a similar communal experience and a sense of spirituality to the church, but without the religious element. In the current study, we aimed to explore the experiences of and motivations for attending a non-religious congregation in relation to well-being.

Methods: A qualitative approach was taken, gathering data through semi-structured interviews with participants from Sunday Assembly congregations across England.

Results: Thematic analysis was used and three key themes were found: (1) searching for meaning and community, (2) Sunday Assembly as protective of mental health, and (3) loneliness in a crowd.

Conclusions: Sunday Assembly can provide a sense of belonging and improvement in mental health through shared experience and spirituality, and it can act as a coping mechanism during difficult times. Further research could explore the benefits of Sunday Assembly upon attendee's mental health, test the effectiveness of Sunday Assembly as a coping mechanism, and whether continued attendance improves mood over time.

Introduction

On a global scale, religion is an important part of many people's lives, with 84% of people identifying with a religious group in 2015 (Pew Report, 2017). However, there are demographic and cultural variations across the world. In economically developed nations, where religious freedom is high, people appear to be leaving organized religion rapidly (Diner, Tay, and Myers, 2011), and attendance at religious congregations is declining in Western Europe (Bullivant, 2018) and North America (Twenge et al., 2016). There is also a demographic element, with younger people less likely to identify as religious or participate in religious activities, such as attending a service and prayer. The Pew Global Forum estimates that there will be 1.3 billion people worldwide who will not identify as religious by 2060.

Looking specifically at the reports by British Social Attitude Survey, UK (National Centre for Social Research, 2018), a steady decline is observed in the religious belief amongst the British public. Fifty-two per cent of people in Britain identify as not belonging to any religion in comparison with 31% in 1983, when this trend was first measured by the survey. This is shown to be a generational trend, as individuals tend to be less religious than their parents. Another

interesting trend reported by BSAS is that non-religious are increasingly confidently atheists, with one in four stating they do not believe in god compared to one in ten just 20 years ago. On the other hand, the number of agnostics has only slightly increased from 15% in 1998 to 18% in 2018, and there was a statistically significant decrease in those who believe "some of the time" over the same period. This demonstrates that it is not just a case of believing and not belonging, but that the lack of belief also plays a role in lack of engagement with religious communities. The BSAS also showed that just 11% of the British population trusts churches or religious organizations compared to 35% who have confidence in the legal system and 36% who have confidence in the education system.

Why is this significant from a psychological perspective?

There is a substantial body of the literature around the relationship between psychological well-being and religious belief and practice (e.g., Diener et al., 2011; Ellens, 2008; Villani et al., 2019). Although the findings are not consistent, there is some evidence that attending church or other religious congregations is positively associated with psychological well-being (Green and Elliot, 2010)Leondari and Gialamas,

2007; Diener et al., 2011). In fact, Diener et al. (2011) examined global as well as USA samples, and it became evident that this was also not limited to Christianity; similar results were found across the four major world religions.

There is some evidence that religious participation is protective of psychological health. For example, regular attendance of religious rituals reduces the incidence of depression (Balbuena et al., 2013; Barton et al., 2013; Li et al., 2016) and suicide attempts, with more frequent attendance associated with fewer attempts (Rasic et al., 2011). Stewart et al. (2019) conducted a review of 32 studies on anxiety and religion, and almost all the religion, spirituality, faith, prayer, religious community, and worship studieswere associated with reduced anxiety. These effects were observed in both healthy individuals and in various patient populations.

Although the literature has been focussed on Christian rituals and congregations, in western, democratic societies, research outside these parameters has shown similar results (Chang, 2009; Loewenthal & Dein, 2016; Roemer, 2010). In a study on the observance of the Sabbath amongst Orthodox Jews, Dein and Loewenthal (2013) observed improvements in mental wellbeing. Japan is of particular interest in this area of scholarship, as it is similar in many ways to other modern industrialized democratic societies, but there are differences in terms of the predominant religions, religious practices, and rituals. Religiousness in Japan is a mix of secular activities and several religious traditions, such as Shinto, Buddhist, and folk (Roemer, 2010). Participation in the Shinto Gion festival in Kyoto gave a sense of pride, positive self-identity, self-esteem, and positive well-being to the men who were involved (Roemer, 2010).

According to Diener et al. (2011), the relationship between religiosity and well-being is dependent on social circumstances. If social conditions are difficult, then religiosity is associated with higher social support, feelings of respect and meaning, and higher levels of well-being. However, if there are good social conditions, religiosity is not as widespread, and there is no significant difference in well-being between religious and non-religious individuals. Furthermore, the benefits of attending church do not seem to translate to those who are non-believers and the religiously unaffiliated. Speed and Fowler (2017) looked at happiness and life satisfaction in data from the Canadian General Social Survey focusing on Ontario. Their analysis showed that church attendance and prayer were not significant predictors of happiness in the religiously unaffiliated, suggesting that attending church does not have inherent value to everyone.

Spirituality is another concept of interest, as it is closely linked religiosity and subjective well-being. Ammerman 2005) provides a useful working definition of spirituality, as an individual's idea about the meaning of life and the extent to which they feel connected to the world around them. According to Ammerman (2013), spirituality is not a unitary concept, but includes several dimensions. More importantly for the current study, it is relevant not just to religious contexts, but secular contexts as well. Janowski and Vaughn (2009) suggest that spirituality takes place in different contexts including traditional religious contexts and non-traditional contexts, such as the natural world and can be defined as "a search for the sacred" (Hill & Pargament, 2003, p. 65) involves the experience of significance (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

How easy is it to separate religiosity from spirituality? Chaves (2011) suggests that it is difficult to be spiritual without being religious. There are certainly cultural elements to the debate; Rassool (2000) discusses this in an Islamic context where there is no distinction between religion and spirituality and religion provided a way of life and the spiritual path for salvation. On the other hand, Perera et al. (2018) set out that in the west it is acknowledged that not every individual who seeks self-awareness, self-empowerment, and self-actualization pursues a particular religious belief or faith. Ammerman (2013) notes that spirituality can occur without religion, and that an individual can be religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, both spiritual and religious, or neither.

Itvzan et al. (2013) have highlighted the confusion over the operational definitions of religion and spirituality and have suggested that the lack of agreed definitions and consistency is hampering progress in this field. According to Zinnbauer et al. (1997), spirituality is associated with experience of the supernatural, whereas religion with a formal religious organization, rules, and rituals. Similarly, Ellens (2008) describes spirituality as the longing or internal motivation to seek out anything irrespective of whether it is religious or not. On the other hand, religion is associated with practices engaged with by members of a congregation or social organization, outward worship, and theology that reflect an understanding of God and the world (Ellens, 2008).

Furthermore, there are organizations that transcend traditional dichotomies, such as secular/modern religious/traditional in a study on women's circles, which describes spirituality as one element of these gatherings (Longman, 2018). The interesting thing about women's circles is that it is not strictly religious, spiritual, or even secular. They are post-secular: they have spiritual elements, and well-being of the members is of central importance (Longman, 2018). This enhanced well-being appears to be achieved through the communal experience of participating in these groups.

Even though it is not necessarily straightforward to separate religiosity and spirituality, there have been several attempts at quantitative study to disentangle the effects of spirituality and religiosity on well-being. Itvzan et al. (2013) examined the link between religion, spirituality, and psychological well-being with participants from various religious institutions and spiritual meetings. The 267 Italian participants were assigned into four groups with the following characteristics: (1) a high level of religious involvement and spirituality, (2) a low level of religious involvement with a high level of spirituality, (3) a high level of religious involvement with a low level of spirituality and, (4) a low level of religious involvement and spirituality. Comparisons were made between the groups on three measures, including psychological wellbeing and for the most part, groups 1 and 2 scored higher than groups 3 and 4, in all three areas of psychological well-being, namely: self-actualization, meaning in life, and personal growth. These results demonstrate the significance of spirituality on psychological wellbeing irrespective of whether this is experienced through religious participation. There is evidence that religiosity and spirituality together have an additive effect on well-being. In a cross-sectional study of 1,046 Brazilians, Vitorino et al. (2018) showed that the higher the levels of combined spirituality and religiosity, the better the health outcomes. However, as with the link between religiosity and wellbeing, the evidence is not always consistent. Counted et al. (2018) performed a review of 20 studies published between 2007 and 2017, looking at the link between relational spirituality and quality of life within a health-care setting. In this context, the term relational spirituality refers to the need to find meaning in life and to try to find attachment to something sacred. They found that 12 studies showed a positive link between spirituality and well-being, 3 showed a negative relationship, and 5 studies showed no association.

The rise of secularism and spirituality as separate from religion can also be seen in the existence of Pagan and New Age groups. Taylor (2001) suggested that spirituality can be experienced through nature-based group experiences of hallucinogenic alteration of consciousness, mountaineering, or neo-shamanic rituals. This can create a sense of social bonding with nature and the participants. Along these lines, the ritual trance hypothesis suggests that shamanic religion created social bonds between participants and maintained a social equilibrium due to the trance state and ritual dancing causing the release of endorphins (Dunbar, 2013; Dein, 2020). This then encouraged the formation of larger social groups, and these were further established by the creation of buildings for worship, such as churches, and individuals specializing in religious practices, such as shamans. There is evidence supporting the trance hypothesis (e.g., Balbuena et al., 2013; Winkelman, 2004, Low (2015)).

Dein (2020) further suggests that the development of the ability to experience the breakdown of ego, i.e., to be in a transcendental state could had led to enhancement of social bonding. Furthermore, Farias et al. 2013) showed that unusual experiences, ideas, and social support satisfaction predicted participation in modern spiritual practices, such as New Age and Pagan (Farias et al., 2013)Interestingly, levels of anxiety and depression did not significantly predict participation in modern spiritual practices, and neither did insecure attachment.

One important question is how we can operationalize well-being, spirituality, religiosity, and religious status. Doing so would help to tease apart the different effects of spirituality and religiosity on different facets of well-being for individuals with different levels of religious attachments. Villani et al. (2019) did exactly that. In their study, spirituality was broken down into four different dimensions: purpose, innerness, interconnection (sense of belonging and connection to the environment and other individuals), and transcendence. Religiosity is split into three dimensions: commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment. The 205 participants, who were members of various religious groups in London, UK, were divided into three categories: religious, uncertain, and non-religious.

Subjective well-being, defined as a measure of how people feel about their lives (Diener et al., 2011), is divided into the following components: life satisfaction, and balance between positive (pleasurable feelings) and negative (painful feelings) effect. This is one of the measures that is often used when investigating the relationship between religious involvement and psychological wellbeing (Diener et al., 2011; Leondari & Gialamas, 2009). Whilst there are some critics of subjective well-being as a measure due to its reliance on self-reporting amongst other things, it is nevertheless a well-recognized and used tool in this area. The results of Villani et al. (2019) showed that different dimensions of spirituality and religiosity showed different links to subjective well-being. The results suggested that spirituality was consistently associated with well-being, regardless of religiosity, while religiosity is linked to well-being only for strongly religious individuals. It is conceivable that a non-religious organization that promotes spirituality could also have positive effects on well-being of individuals that are not religious if the values of the individual and the organization align.

When considering the impact of religiousness/spirituality (R/S) upon well-being, it is important to consider whether religion and spirituality can have an impact upon the risk of developing mental health problems and recovery from them when they occur. Depression is a common mental disorder, and there is a body of the literature exploring the links between R/

S. When considering depression from a slightly less clinical perspective, Swinton et al. (2001) describes a depressed person's spirit as having been inhibited, crushed, or flattened by biological, social, or psychological events so it is perhaps not surprising that there might be a link between spirituality and depression. A recent systematic review showed that around half of the 152 the studies (49%) showed a significant negative relationship between religiosity/spirituality and depression, while 41% showed no relationship, and 10% showed a positive relationship or mixed results (Braam et al., 2019). Religiosity had a negative association with depression in individuals with psychiatric illnesses. The authors also noted that religious attendance was the most commonly used measure and showed a modest but consistent ability to predict a decline in depression over time.

Further studies have also shown mixed results in this area. Desrosiers and Miller 2007) showed that there was a negative relationship between relational spirituality (daily spiritual routines, forgiveness, and coping) and depressive symptomology in adolescents, but only for the female participants. In a study of adults in an urban clinic, Doolittle and Farrell (2004) found no significant relationship between attendance to religious services and depression. However, importance for prayer, belief in a higher power, and finding meaning in hardship had a negative association with depression. It would seem that spirituality may be beneficial to some, although by no means all, when it comes to protecting against depressive symptoms.

Psychosocial factors are important to consider in the context of both depressions and R/S. Akbari et al. (2020) found that there was a positive association between spiritual well-being and perceived social support with postpartum depression in 200 mothers in Qom Province, in Iran, which affirms the spirituality is a possibly important psychosocial resource in preventing depression or coping with stressful events in the post-partum period. In the context of early childhood educational staff. Spirituality was shown to have a negative relationship with depression for a population (Whitaker et al., 2021). More specifically, the more frequent the daily spiritual experiences, the lower the depression risk, interestingly, this was consistent irrespective of the level of adverse childhood experience of the participants.

It is possible that using wider definitions of spirituality, Sunday Assembly might be considered a spiritual experience and could provide some of these same benefits. Whilst the findings are by no means consistent there is certainly sufficient evidence of R/S being beneficial to some people's mental health, reducing the risk of depression, different studies have shown different aspects of R/S to be helpful. This is worthy of further exploration within a secular setting as Sunday Assembly is able to offer some aspects of a religious or spiritual experience and community that could help to further understanding of which elements of R/S are beneficial to mental health and whether these can be to some extent replicated or whether the non-religious nature of Sunday Assembly brings different benefits or none of the same benefits.

The use of religious beliefs or practices as coping mechanisms during stressful life experiences or events and the relationship to mental health outcomes is another area of relevance in respect of non-religious congregations and psychological well-being. Examples of religious coping include prayer, seeking comfort from one's faith, and obtaining support from members of a church (Abernathy et al. (2002).In a study of older medically ill adults in the USA, Koenig et al. 1992). found religious coping to be inversely related to cognitive symptoms of depression but not somatic symptoms. Coping strategies can be divided into either behavioural or cognitive. Cognitive strategies are processes that involve people changing their subjective perceptions of stress inducing situations or reappraisal of the meaning of problems, whereas behavioural strategies centre around actions aimed at making changes to stressful situations or alleviating distress. Koenig et al. (1988) classifies religious coping strategies as cognitive coping strategies citing placing faith and trust in God as being one of the most common coping strategies cited by older adults. Private religious activities including Bible reading and prayer are also stated to be heavily dependant on cognitive processes.

Unpicking the different elements of religious coping to separate out which elements have been beneficial to people facing difficult situations is far from straightforward. Psychosocial processes play an important role, with some researchers (Gross-Holtforth et al., 1996; S.E. Taylor, 1983) suggesting that the association between mental health outcomes and religious coping disappears once self-efficacy, perceived control, or social support are controlled. However, other researchers including Tix and Frazier (1998) found that that religious coping was not mediated by cognitive restructuring, social support, or perceived control. McIntosh (1990) suggested that during times of crisis, religion may help people regain a sense of control, by providing meaning to negative events. Non-religious congregations may be able to offer some elements of religious coping such as social support but does not overtly offer or promote placing faith in God.

There have been attempts to create secular organizations and rituals that closely mirror religious rituals, such as Comte's Church of Positivism, which aimed to become the "Religion of Humanity" and had temples in the UK, France, and Brazil, where they held regular services; however, this movement was unable to recruit sufficient new members to continue and has

mostly closed down save for one active congregation in Brazil (Mill, 2015). There are also individual non-religious churches or congregations established such as New Unity in London (new-unity.org) or Seattle Atheist Church (seattleaethist.church), however currently the organization of this type with the widest reach is Sunday Assembly. Sunday Assembly is a non-religious gathering founded in London in 2013. Sunday Assembly describes itself as a secular congregation that celebrates life and its motto is "Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More". It is inclusive to all, meaning people are welcome to attend regardless of whether they do or do not have religious beliefs, and therefore whilst it is a secular congregation it should be stressed that although non-religious it is not atheist (Sunday Assembly, 2019). There are gatherings in the UK and across the world.

This secular community intends to provide a similar communal experience to a church but without the religious element. Whilst there are some variations across different assemblies, they broadly follow the same format. There is a host, a speaker, a poet, and a member of the congregation who shares their personal story. During the session, there is a short period of quiet reflection, a collection, and communal singing of pop songs. Before, afterwards, and in some assemblies during, there is an opportunity to socialize over a cup of tea and cake or biscuits and chat to other attendees. Assemblies are usually based around a theme and are mostly volunteer run. The London assembly meets twice a month and the regional assemblies usually meet once a month. There are some similarities between Sunday Assembly and religious establishments. For example, Katie Cross (2017) suggests that Sunday Assembly in Scotland seems to retain some of the rituals of the religious traditions. Charles et al. (2021) observes that "were one to see a video of a Sunday Assembly taking place without sound, it would be largely indistinguishable from many evangelical churches".

Sunday Assembly is a relatively recent phenomenon so has not been the subject of a wide range of research, some of the academic literature is of a sociological nature, for example, exploring "communal secularity" (Smith, 2017) and "belonging without believing" (Bullock, 2017). However, there have been some recent studies looking and different elements of Sunday Assembly from a wellbeing perspective. Charles et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study on participants of SA and Christian assemblies across the UK to investigate the effects of SA on social bonding. They measured social bonding before and after the rituals, and they found that secular and Christian rituals increased social bonding and positive effect and decreased negative effect. Price and

Launay (2018) undertook a longitudinal study among 92 members of Sunday Assembly, participants completed a questionnaire once a month for 6 months that measured wellbeing and participation in both SA and non-SA social activities. Panel analysis of the longitudinal data showed that where participants had participated in the SA small group activities this positively influenced their wellbeing over the course of the study, especially amongst males. Taking part in the non-SA social activities had no impact upon wellbeing. Another interesting feature of the data in this study was the participants perceived that the informal socializing and cooperation that happens before and after the Sunday assembly event itself was most important for friendship formation and creating a sense of community.

Research on the link between religiosity and well-being appears to suggest that religion gives certainty and meaning to individuals, which might be the reason why it has positive effects on their well-being. Researchers tend to suggest that being religious gives a sense of certainty, which is probably the reason why it is associated with high certainty (e.g., Hogg et al., 2010). However, evidence has emerged that uncertainty is not necessarily linked to negative outcomes. Frost (2019) interviewed 50 Sunday Assembly goers in the USA and performed a narrative analysis to find out more about how these participants handle certainty and uncertainty that being non-religious entails. Frost (2019) found that some participants were comfortable with uncertainty and with the fluidity that this uncertainty entails. In fact, some participants disapproved of Sunday Assemblies positivity and certainty, and would have preferred more nuance.

Smith (2017b) describes a sociological study he performed on Sunday Assemblies in the USA. He points out that although SA downplays the idea of "belief", they nevertheless influence individuals in terms of their world views and beliefs. This occurs through ritualistic practices, similarly to religious institutions. According to Smith (2017b), the rituals employed in the SA create a "secular solemnity", which is similar to the atmosphere occurring in religious congregations (p9). Smith suggests that SA tends to encourage "collective effervescence" (a term coined by Durkheim), where members focus intently on an idea and elevate it to something sacred. Smith notes that emotion is an important concept to consider, and it should not be ignored by overemphasizing the cognitive dimension of religion, as is usually the case.

The current study provides an opportunity to further explore whether similar themes around spirituality and psychological well-being that are found in

religious congregations are also elicited by the secular community provided by the Sunday Assembly. Given the wealth of community health psychology literature that demonstrates the benefit of community-based interventions (e.g., Blank et al., 2007: McNeish et al., 2019), in general, this certainly seems to be a logical line of enquiry.

Methods

Participants

Seven participants took part in the study (three women and four men), their ages ranged from 36 to 78 years. They were drawn from three different Sunday Assembly Congregations in cities across England. All participants identified as white British. They varied from semi-regular attendees through to people who were regular volunteers and had been involved for over 5 years.

Participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling as this is an initial exploratory study. Although there are no particular sampling requirements for thematic analysis, when using interviews, Braun and Clarke 2013) recommend at least six participants, due to the emphasis on trends across the data as opposed to ideographic meaning. The sample size was adequate, providing sufficiently detailed and rich data.

The inclusion criteria were that the participant should be regular attendees at Sunday Assembly having attended at least three assemblies in the last 9 months. This sample universe was chosen as the first author required more than just occasional attendees to obtain the best quality data and it was also intended to allow a wider spectrum of people to take part including both those who are more deeply involved as volunteers as well as those who just attend regularly without being involved any further. Similar studies with respect to religious or social groups tend to focus on those who regularly engage, although direct comparison was not the intention here.

Volunteers were contacted by Sunday Assembly congregations in northern England and were asked to share details of the study on their social media, mailouts and through their networks with participants of the Sunday Assembly. The first author also attended the Sunday Assembly congregations in different cities in northern England in order to publicize the study to potential participants. Potential participants were then invited to email the researcher. Following this, the researcher contact details were also shared informally amongst some of the Sunday Assembly network, which might be considered snowball sampling. The methods used for sourcing of the sample of participants, and the voluntary nature of participation, can result in self-selection bias (Costigan & Cox, 2001) in that those who consent to be interviewed may be different from those who don't participate but for reasons that do not relate to inclusion or exclusion criteria. Whilst some self-selection bias, such as gender bias, can be counteracted by using a suitable purposive sampling frame to ensure male and female representation, as has been the case for this study (three women and four men), some subtler systematic biases between participants and non-participants are harder to deal with (Oliver, 2014). It is possible that these may be in play with respect to the racial homogeneity of the participants here. Bullock (2017) argued that the demographic profile of Sunday Assemblers is homogenous, and attendees are typically from the same ethnic group (white British) and are not necessarily representative of the communities in which they are situated despite the "radically inclusive" ethos. Bullock's (2017) study had 35 participants of which only 24 were White British and 11 from other ethnic groups. Bullock also collected data on education, relationship status, previous and current religious beliefs, and social class, which were not collected for this exploratory study but could have been useful in hindsight.

It's possible that even within the sample universe potential for this study participants may have self-excluded for a range of reasons. The first author is a white woman and some of the participants put themselves forward after seeing her speak at assemblies. Homophily may also have a role to play here, in a number of ways related to social networks. The sharing of the study details on social media and networks (snowballing) may have resulted in the study being more visible to certain sections of the Sunday Assembly congregations, also, those who related more to the first author as being like them may have been more likely to put themselves forward as a potential participant. It is not possible to fully eliminate self-selection bias in interview-based research such as this study, ethical good practice has voluntary participation at its centre.

Design

The qualitative design of semi-structured interviews was suitable as the aim was to investigate participants' experiences of this relatively new phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended discussions of participants' experiences of attending a non-religious congregation in order to capture the depth and detail in the data to enable useful analysis. The theoretical framework chosen was critical realism. This approach recognizes that our understanding of reality is socially constructed, and that language forms the social and interpersonal interpretation of the world (Burr, 2015). This

framework sits between a constructionist and essentialist position, between realism and relativism. The underlying assumption is that a reality exists independent of the observer, we cannot know that reality with any certainty. However, this can be accessed through research and that participants language provides a window to that reality (Lyons & Coyle, 2016). This provides the justification for the use of coding for both semantic and latent meaning.

Materials

Some open-ended questions were prepared, the initial questions were intended to allow the participants to "warm up" and collect some basic information about how long they had been attending and what their reasons for first going were (see Appendix). Then the questions went on to explore how the participants felt after attending an assembly and their own perceptions of the benefits and, for balance, the downsides they had experienced. The part of the experience they most and least enjoyed were explored then the social and community aspects. Although the questions did not specifically mention psychological wellbeing or mental health, they were to some extent informed by the social support element of religion being cited as a factor in the religious effect on psychological well-being (Diener et al., 2011). Therefore, we aimed to explore the participants' experiences of the different elements of the assembly including the poetry, talks, moment of reflection and particularly gaining participants' views on the communal singing.

Data collection

The interviews took place in person at a variety of locations including cafes, the homes of the participants (following a strict safety protocol) and on one occasion in a park. The interviews lasted as long as was required in order to answer the questions, explore some of the answers in more depth, and ensure adequate information was collected; the shortest interview was 16 minutes and the longest 52 minutes. The interviews were recorded on a handheld audio recorder then transcribed by the first author, including the first author's own questions and speech.

Data analysis

Sunday Assembly is a relatively new and fairly unique concept, so there is not the same knowledge of the different dimensions or accepted ways of measuring these as there are for religions. A qualitative method was appropriate in order to dig deeper in people's experiences. Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method, and the data was then thematically analyzed from a critical realist perspective.

As touched upon above, a thematic analysis from a critical realist perspective was undertaken. The "Big Q" approach was adopted, which uses qualitative techniques within a qualitative paradigm as opposed to a little q approach, which involves the use of specific qualitative technique but not (necessarily) within a qualitative paradigm, the distinction between the two approaches having first been suggested by Kidder and Paul Kidder and Fine (1987), Big Q methods are "concerned with the lived experience and participant-defined meanings" (Willig, 2001), whereas those who use little q methods tend to impose their own meaning during data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Capaldi and Proctor, 2005). The steps set out by Braun and Clarke 2015) were followed.

The reason for taking this approach was multifaceted. Firstly, this approach welcomes and acknowledges researcher subjectivity. In this case, the first author has some prior knowledge of and involvement with the Sunday Assembly community, making it difficult to be truly objective. This is just one element of the researcher's unique standpoint. Another factor in this choice of approach is the fluid and flexible processes that this entails. Sunday Assembly is a fairly new phenomenon, and it was appropriate to keep things open ended and let the data speak rather than imposing too rigid an analytical framework.

An inductive approach to the analysis was chosen. As mentioned previously, although Sunday Assembly has grown exponentially, it is still very small and very young by the standards of any world religion, so it was important to be open about what the participants had to say about their experiences. Furthermore, the existing theories and concepts around religion and/or social group membership and psychological well-being might not be the most suitable lens to interpret the data through. However, a purely inductive approach is not possible as the researcher's standpoint will guide the analysis as will broad ontological and epistemological frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2015). The data was coded for both semantic and latent meaning and some of the themes emerged from both.

As the first author conducted and transcribed the interviews, there was already an immersion in and knowledge of the data before the formal process of analysis began. However, the formal process of analysis started by reading and re-reading the transcripts to become familiar with the data. The coding process started with the second read through and the initial codes were created then refined added to subsequently. This led to the identification of the overarching themes. As this was an inductive analysis, there were no restrictions on the themes. Three main

themes were identified with a couple of subthemes. When analysing the themes, some of the theories and knowledge in relation to religious involvement were useful in terms of analysis. Furthermore, other broader concepts and theories, for example, around introversion and extroversion, were also applied when relevant to the theme. Finally, the second and third authors, both of whom had no prior connection with Sunday Assembly, undertook further analysis. The third author read through one of the transcripts with the themes identified by the first author in mind. The third author was able to identify all the themes within that transcript, while at the same time not identifying any new theme that the first author did not identify. The second author analyzed all the transcripts and was in agreement with the themes but changed the label for two themes and provided additional suggested quotations to underpin the first and second themes. This provides reassurance in the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Ethical considerations

When considering the research design, project, and proposal, several ethical issues needed to be considered. Although the topic was not an especially controversial one, some of the issues around religious belief could have been potentially sensitive.

Some of the macro ethics considerations were also key when narrowing down the field of the research in terms of the potential benefit and harm to the wider world. Although the research topic studied is something that is fairly niche, there are potential benefits to both a small community of people who are involved in Sunday Assembly and potentially wider reaching implications if psychological benefits are found in terms of transferability and applicability.

The first author and interviewer were also mindful of some of the researcher–participant relationship issues that could arise from doing qualitative fieldwork interviews ensuring the right balance was struck when using interpersonal skills appropriately and avoiding "faking friendships" (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). This was particularly applicable to this project as the researcher already had some involvement in the non-religious congregation as a volunteer at Sunday Assembly. Two of the participants were known to the first author prior to the commencement of recruitment for the study. Although the first author did not have any counselling qualifications, some use of empathic reflection did take place during the interviews.

Informed consent was addressed through the participant information sheet that also comprehensively covered issues around data, discussions with potential participants, and further informed and documented using the consent form. It was made clear within these documents the process for withdrawing and that there would be no problems caused by their withdrawal. Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee at Manchester Metropolitan University (Ref No.: 10,576).

Once the interviews had taken place, participants were provided with a debrief sheet to read through and given an opportunity to ask any questions. No participants showed any signs of having been distressed following the interviews. The researcher had not fully anticipated the extent to which some participants would share details of their own struggles with mental health problems, particularly as there had been no inclusion criteria regarding mental health. However, the debrief sheet did contain information from the NHS website around depression and anxiety as a possible resource in case this was required by the participants following the interviews. Pseudonyms were used by the participants to ensure anonymity.

Analysis and discussion

Three themes were identified in the data: "searching for meaning and community", "Sunday Assembly as protective of mental health" and "loneliness in a crowd".

Theme 1: searching for meaning and community

The first theme that was identified from both semantic and latent meaning was that participants were searching for meaning and community when they came across or heard about Sunday Assembly. The initial questions around where they heard about Sunday Assembly and what prompted them to go to their

first one provided some of the data for this theme.

I missed going to church so I was trying to find that experience without all the God bollocks and so when I heard about Sunday Assembly that seemed to fit the bill exactly, (Paul, p1)

We were looking for a community where we felt comfortable, where it was a positive atmosphere, where people were genuine, where you felt very comfortable and at ease, and it was real life experiences". (David, p1)

I was suffering from depression and I was unhappy by the lack of support … in a community sense … I basically said to my husband, if you don't find me somewhere, I'll go to church" (Susan, p1)

I was looking for something in the way of a group or an organisation I could join and I'd been looking at the British Humanist Association … bit it was a bit cold and militant … it didn't meet the human,

ironically, side of this I was after so I thought I'd give Sunday Assembly a try (Ben, p1)

It's human nature to want to belong, to find a tribe, to feel you are part of something bigger" (Ben, P1)

A sub-theme under this is finding Sunday Assembly as part of a journey for participants.

We have tried different churches and for a variety of reasons we just kept looking until we found something we were comfortable with ….on our journey of discovery" (David, p1)

"I think it was on the back of my own personal journey coming out of a church environment, so just over 10 years ago now, but missing that" (Paul, p1)

As Sunday Assembly is a fairly new phenomenon, it is perhaps not surprising the participants had to search to find it. It does not have the history and infrastructure of established religions and people would not have been born into it or raised in its traditions as would be the case in the major world religions. However, digging a little deeper into the data and uncovering some latent meaning, the participants identified something that they were missing, such as social support, a sense of meaning or purpose and respect that might otherwise have been provided by religious involvement (Diener et al., 2011). It was an interesting feature of the data that participants had been involved in churches either historically or just prior to their involvement with Sunday Assembly. This information arose naturally from interviews; childhood religious affiliation or any changes in religious affiliation were not specifically addressed in either the demographic information collected or the initial questions. As Speed and Fowler (2017) identified, the religiously unaffiliated and non-believers do not seem to gain the psychological benefits of attending church. So it would seem here that the participants have tried to find something else to fill a potential gap. In some cases the participants had previously been involved in a religious congregation and perhaps experienced that sense of community or simply enjoyed the experience.

Social Identity Theory may be applicable to the results of this study, to help understand some of the themes and the way that people relate to Sunday Assembly. Social identity theory looks at how individual identity is constructed around in-group vs out-group categorizations (Islam, 2014). Greenfield and Marks (2007) showed that religious social identity has a mediating effect between attending church frequently and psychological well-being in terms of increased positive and decreased negative affect, as well as increased life satisfaction. If attendees at Sunday Assembly consider themselves to be part of Sunday Assembly as a social group, then this could shape their self-concept, and have a similar positive effect to well-being, as going to church does for religious individuals. As Paul stated that "it's human nature to want to belong, to find a tribe, to feel you are part of". In respect of this theme "searching for meaning and community", it is conceivable that some of the participants were in some sense searching for a social identity, which would allow them to feel that they belong to a community. Furthermore, participants were asked whether they felt part of the Sunday Assembly community. Their answers gave some insight into the extent to which they identified with the group. James spoke about people who attended Sunday Assembly as being "one of my gang" and the people who attended were of a "similar mind set". This would seem to demonstrate that for this participant at least Sunday Assembly was very much part of his social identity and he identified other attendees as part of his "in" group. However, Joyce said that they only felt part of the community "once a month on a Sunday", which suggests that some of the participants did not feel that Sunday Assembly was a big a part of their identity. It is probably not relevant that the attendees can say they are a member of a social category, in this case a member of the Sunday Assembly congregation. It is more important whether the self-categorization is seen by them as meaningful and relevant, and whether they have internalized this identity and whether it plays a crucial part in understand themselves and their place in the world (Jetten et al., 2014; Turner et al., 1987)

There will of course be variation between the experiences of those attending assemblies, and the reasons why they choose to attend and what they gain from the experience and community. The importance placed on the group identity of being part of Sunday Assembly will also vary between attendees. It would certainly be possible to gain some of the social benefits of being part of the community even without the group membership being a strong part of an attendee's self-identity. Frost (2019) identifies the religious as being more embedded in identity affirming social networks than the non-religious. Attendees of Sunday Assembly can, subject to acceptance by members of the group, choose the extent to which they want to become embedded with the community.

Frost (2019) discussed how attitudes towards certainty and uncertainty influence the identity and beliefs of nonreligious attendees of SA in the USA. She found that some individuals identify themselves with very strong conviction and certainty with dominant politicized nonreligious identities. However, not all nonreligious individuals can identify with such certainty-filled discourses; instead, some have no interest in such discourses, while others created their own narratives that are characterized by deliberate

uncertainty. The importance of certainty was not the same across individuals, and it is not a binary issue; there is a gradient of attitudes towards uncertainty. Some individuals had a very positive attitude towards uncertainty, and they seemed to consider uncertainty as a way of life, and this uncertainty was perceived as a way to get away from anxiety and isolation. She also found that how important nonreligion was for participants' life also influenced to the extent to which uncertainty motivated their actions.

How is this related to the current study? Lorraine mentioned that before she joined SA felt she had lost her identity. SA appears to have helped her feel less lost and inspired, by being part of a nonreligious group. Ben mentioned the fact that SA is science based. So perhaps science provides a framework that helps individuals deal with uncertainty? Uncertainty is inherent in science. Frost (2019) suggests that some individuals see uncertainty as a valid identity.

Psychosocial factors do seem to play an important role when looking at the impact of religious involvement upon wellbeing. To some extent the way in which Sunday Assembly is set up does have parallels with churches or other religious organizations that try to create a sense of community. Being part of a coherent or "meaningful" social group (Stewart and Lonsdale, 2016) was something that some of the participants were searching for. Research by Goldberg and O'Brien (2005) with 115 late adolescent Jewish Women strongly suggests that identifying as part of a Jewish community and actively engaging in community-based activities is predictive of psychological well-being in this group. Price and Launay (2018) showed participation in the SA small group activities positively influenced wellbeing, especially amongst males. Participants also perceived that the informal socializing and cooperation that happens before and after the Sunday assembly event itself was most important for creating a sense of community.

Smith (2017b) notes that SA tends to emphasize the importance of emotion. Although there is no object of worship (e.g., a God), the emotion creates a sense of community. He also notes that SA goers find comfort in the social dynamics of the congregation. The atheist rituals according to Cimino and Smith (2014, as cited in Smith, 2017b) are about celebrating humans and the world around them. Another interesting point Smith makes, is that SA somewhat downplays the issue of non-belief, and instead promotes the idea of volunteering and doing good for the community through volunteering, which can potentially unite individuals Frost (2019) notes that religious involvement has long been associated with higher levels of pro-social activities, such as volunteering and community activism. Recent quantitative studies have found that atheism and other more committed forms of nonreligion can

encourage civic engagement and be associated with better mental health outcomes in a similar way that a committed religious identity can, whereas agnostics and more uncertain "nones" are more likely to experience anxiety and depression (Baker et al., 2018; Frost & Edgell, 2018; May, 2018). That said, not all SA goers want to get involved in volunteering, some of them appear to just want to enjoy the SA congregation,

The inclusion criteria for the current study required regular attendance so it would seem that Sunday Assembly may have been meeting some of the needs identified by the participants as being what they were searching for.

> "Always nice people there. Yeah it's just that feeling, it's just a reminder, because the ethos of it is helping people, being kind to people, and communal spirit" (Joyce, p2)

> "I think it's always a really positive feeling of sort of quite a nice community spirit" (Lorraine, p2)

Charles et al. (2021) investigated the effects of SA on social bonding and found that secular and Christian rituals increased social bonding and positive effect and decreased negative effect. These quotes from the participants seem to echo these findings

The spiritual element of Sunday Assembly is explicitly mentioned by some participants:

> "for want of a better word .…. a spiritual exploration" (David, p3)

> "although Sunday Assembly isn't a spiritual experience, it could be on one level, although it's not religious". (Joyce, p4)

These quotes from the participants seem to cut through to the essence of the debate around whether it's possible to have a non-religious spirituality or spiritual experience. Ammerman (2005) asserts that spirituality can occur outside the context of religion and provides a wider definition as an individual's idea about the meaning of life and the extent to which they feel connected to the world around them., This fits well with this theme of searching for meaning and community. The central tenets of Sunday Assembly are "Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More" and these could certainly fit in with Ammerman's definition. Ivtzan et al. (2013) have discussed the confusion and debate over the operational definitions of religion and spirituality. Their results demonstrated the importance of spirituality on psychological wellbeing irrespective of whether this is experienced through religious participation. The study by Longman (2018) on women's circles and post-secular culture describes spirituality as one element of these gatherings. Longman (2018) identifies the women's circles as "part of 'subjective well-being culture' that can be characterised as more post-secular that strictly religious, spiritual or secular" (13). Pagan and New age groups also offer an alternative spirituality separate

from what might be considered mainstream religion (Taylor, 2001). The rise of secularism has led to the separation of spirituality and religion and they each acquired distinct connotations. Sunday Assembly could almost be seen as attempting to bridge the gap by enabling a spirituality of sorts within a social organization but without the specifically theological or god element or as a place where people can have spiritual experiences.

Heelas and Woodhead (2004) suggest that spiritual allegiances are being shifted from older and more traditional institutions to new ones, which could reflect the shift from churches to secular institutions such as Sunday Assembly. Counted et al. (2018) found a positive link between spirituality and wellbeing in the majority of the studies they reviewed on the subject. The relative decline in organized religion and increase in people describing themselves as spiritual rather than or as well as being religious is thought to reflect moves towards more individualistic societies. It seems also to be connected to social conditions (Diener et al., 2011). However, even in relatively stable secular western democracies, some people do have psychological needs that may have been previously met through religious practice or involvement in religious congregations. Those participants in this study who described searching for meaning and community either explicitly or implicitly described unmet psychological needs that they hoped might be fulfilled via Sunday Assembly and also described some of these needs as having been met. Our study suggests that through the involvement in organization, members of the Sunday Assembly create a sense of community through rituals and social ties, promote spirituality and provide social support and all these factors can enhance well-being. Our results broadly agree with previous studies showing spirituality can be linked to positive psychological outcomes, such as well-being (Akbari et al., 2020; Braam and Koenig (2019); Desrosiers and Miller, 2007; (Doolittle & Farrell, 2004); Itvzan et al. 2013; Valliani et al. 2019; Whitaker et al., 2021) and better quality of life (Counted et al., 2018; Vitorino et al., 2018). According to Cnaan and Curtis , 2013congregations can embody the values, emotions, and ideologies of a group, and they are crucial in making human belief and practice part of a formal institution. According to Smith (2017), normative behaviours and beliefs can be developed within a congregation. Secular congregations, such as the Sunday Assembly, can allow, through rituals and performances, the expression of a secular structure or beliefs that have been internalized. It may be a case of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater and exploring ways that secular organizations such as Sunday Assembly can provide some of the benefits of religious practice and involvement such as community and meaning, but without a religious element that is unappealing to a significant demographic.

Theme 2: Sunday assembly as protective of mental health

The second theme that arose from coding for meaning in the data was that participants found attending Sunday Assembly to be protective of their mental health in different ways, two sub-themes were found, namely, (a) Sunday Assembly as a coping mechanism and (b) positive and negative affect.

Subtheme: Sunday Assembly as a coping mechanism

This was a subtheme that arose from coding for latent meaning in the data. This emerged in many cases around the question of what the participants felt were the benefits to them of attending Sunday Assembly. Several participants shared information about their mental health issues, namely depression and also personal difficulties, where they had used Sunday Assembly as a way of coping with these difficulties.

> "I was using it to, I was just trying to stop staying in bed, stop letting the depression cloud over, no matter what I felt like, I could go to Sunday Assembly, go be round people, and that became my place to go" (James, p2)

Ben below refers to attending Sunday Assembly for the first time when he was suffering from depression and using attending Sunday Assembly a "reset switch" to avoid patterns of negative thinking.

> "It's that I have a tendency to look at the negative in life, and have had depression in the past, and I think I probably did have when I first started going, but the atmosphere and the nature of Sunday Assembly, even when the topic is quite science based, tends to be quite optimistic. So, for me, it's a reset switch and it sort of encourages me not to get into this negative spiral about the world" (Ben p2)

Lorraine is referring to Sunday Assembly as providing a spark, making her feel positive and being a turning point, which prompted her to seek professional help with her depression. Sunday Assembly could be said here to have an almost transformational effect.

> "At the time I was actually quite depressed, I was out of work and I'd been looking for work for a few months and was feeling really quite out of sorts and was feeling like I had lost my sense of identity and lost a bit of control over things. At the time I felt I needed something else to give me something. That was quite an important element of that and it really did help. It genuinely really did, and it was something that, for the first time in a while actually I felt really quite positive … I felt that spark" (Lorraine p3)

"It prompted me to do something else, I um sort of, went to get CBT" (Lorraine, p3)

It would seem that to some extent the participants who reported using Sunday Assembly as a form of coping mechanism could be said to be employing non-directed efforts to reduce depressive symptoms or to cope with a difficult time in life.

"I think it's just that reminder that there's lots to be positive about and one of the things that can often be said to depressed people is 'bear in mind tomorrow is another day' and you can take that one of two ways, either you can say or right more shit in store or you can say oh maybe tomorrow won't be the same as today. If I was to encapsulate it into one sentence that's it, the opportunity for tomorrow to be better than today was" (Ben, p2)

In their systematic review of 152 studies, Braam et al. (2019) found religiosity/spirituality to be protective against depression in approximately half of the studies with religious attendance showing a modest but consistent ability to predict a decline in depression over time. This seems to be in line with what is reported by participants in the current study in a non-religious context, which is, by attending Sunday Assembly it is providing either improvement in depressive symptoms or protection against recurrence number of different ways of coping including seeking comfort in one's faith, prayer, and obtaining support from members of a church (Abernathy et al., 2002). During times of crisis, religion can provide a sense of control though providing meaning to negative events McIntosh (1990). Religious attendance and being part of a religious community provides additional coping mechanisms when people are facing problems that push them to their limits (Diener et al., 2011). There is also some evidence of the stress buffering effects of religious involvement (Ellison et al., 2001). One element of this is the "sense of larger, benevolent forces at work in the universe" which Sunday Assembly does not offer through a shared belief system or from people in a position of leadership in the same way it would in a religious organization. Another aspect of religious coping is prayer. As Sunday Assembly is non-theistic, communal prayer is not part of the assemblies. However, assemblies generally do have a short period of quiet called the "moment of reflection".

There is often a debate when looking at religious coping as to how much of the coping is down to psychosocial factors (Gross-Holtforth et al., 1996; S.E. Taylor, 1983; Tix & Frazier, 1998). One of the key elements that Sunday Assembly does offer, and that is referred to by some of the participants is the social support and community element. However, that is not the only protective element. The content of the assemblies, namely the optimistic topics, and also the atmosphere are both mentioned as being preventative of getting into a negative spiral of thinking. This is interesting when looking at this through the lens of the different types of coping mechanism, namely behavioural and cognitive. Koenig et al. (1988) classify religious coping as a cognitive form of coping, whereas it does not seem as easy to classify the use of attendance at a non-religious congregation as a coping mechanism. Some participants seemed to enjoy the social aspect. For example, James talks about "being around people", whereas Ben seems to get more from the positive atmosphere and nature of the assembly acting as a "reset switch", which seems to be more of a cognitive process, with the outcome being that he sees things in a more positive light. Lorraine states that attending an assembly prompted her to go and get CBT and that could be considered more of a behavioural step towards alleviating distress. Susan highlights the benefits to her of attending the "Live Better" subgroups as being both social support from the friendships and also advice she received. Some participants also mentioned the "Live better" subgroups from Sunday Assembly, which whilst not specifically designed to help those with depression or other mental health problems, they can nevertheless be a useful resource.

"It's still had an effect on me … the advice that I received from the people on it and the friendships that I made through the people on it, have not only made me continue with my goal but feel better in other ways" (Susan, p5)

In the study by Price and Launay (2018), participation in SA the small group activities positively influenced wellbeing, especially amongst males and this seems to be reflected here in the comment about the smaller "Live Better" group.

Some of the participants have sought out Sunday Assembly and what it provides as a way of helping them during difficult times. The effect of attending Sunday Assembly being a catalyst for getting out of a negative mindset and in some cases almost transformational demonstrates this being a potentially useful tool, which would benefit from further investigation.

Sunday Assemblies typically take place once or twice a month, while churches tend to hold congregations every week. One of the issues reported by participants, was that if they missed one assembly, it was a long time to wait until the next one. This might be a crucial difference in terms of building the sense of community, providing social support and building relationships with other members of the group. Lorraine compared this to when she had been a member of a church youth group when she was younger.

"I was a more frequent attender … it was a weekly thing so you could go with more regularity … I did feel more part of that community" (Lorraine, p4)

In the context of religion and social ties, frequency of interaction was found to matter a great deal in terms of the likelihood of offering social support (Merino, 2014). In respect of religious rituals, the positive effects seem to be best maintained when ritual attendance was at least once per month (VanderWeele, 2017). If Sunday Assemblies were to increase the frequency of their events then there might be greater chances of members of the congregation turning to each other for social support due to more embedded social networks. However, it should be noted that different assemblies have subgroups and other ways that people can be involved.

Subtheme: Positive and negative affect

One of the sub themes that was identified from the obvious semantic meaning was that attending Sunday Assembly provided an improvement or boost to the participant's mood immediately after the assembly. This was clear from the responses to the questions around how people felt after they had been to an assembly and what the benefits had been to them.

Normally better than when I went in (Ben p2)

Very uplifted, I always feel, sort of happier … very nourished and enriched (Susan, p2)

Lovely, much better, lovely and warm (David, p2)

A bit of an uplift in my soul …. I always feel good for having been there (Joyce, p2)

You do feel positive when you come out, It's the whole thing isn't it? That hour and half or couple of hours of just having a nice time and getting the feeling that I am glad I went. And that's not always the way when you go to church (Ben, p4)

As participants have reported positive affect after attending SA, this could reasonably be considered likely to have affected their subjective well-being at that time. The participants were not generally interviewed immediately after attending assemblies. Some were interviewed just prior to the assembly event. There was also a variety of time differences between the last assembly attended and the interview.

These findings are in keeping with the results of Charles et al. (2021) who found that Sunday Assembly, as a secular ritual, to have increased positive affect and decreased negative affect through increased social bonding in a similar way to Christian rituals. There are different elements of the assemblies that could possibly account for some of the reported mood boost outside of, or in conjunction with, the communal side of things.

One part of Sunday Assembly that could contribute to the reported post Assembly improvement in mood is the communal singing. Several participants mentioned this as something they enjoyed or in response to the question around their favourite part of Sunday Assembly.

"kind of communal singing, which is complete nonsense and I used to hate at church but is surprisingly good fun, I really enjoy and get into that, apart from the kazoo" (Paul, p1)

"I do like the singing" (David, p3)

"the singing as well, I'm rubbish at it and I feel sorry for the person next to me but I have read stuff since about communal singing, like other group activities, whether you are skilled or not, it's the participation that makes the difference" (Ben, p3)

"Actually, strangely, I really enjoy the singing part of it now" (Lorraine, p2)

"it's that being together and singing, I've very much enjoyed singing with the band" (Susan, p4)

Gick (2011) undertook a review of a number of studies around the relationship between singing and well being and concluded that despite some methodological shortcomings there is "inconclusive but promising evidence for some potential benefits of singing to health and well-being". Some of the studies were of choirs (Bailey & Davidson, 2005) or of singing as an intervention, such as a community singing programme (Hillman 2002)where an element of more formal structures such as rehearsals and performance was involved which is different to the less formal and unrehearsed (by the congregation) communal singing that takes place at Sunday Assembly. Gick (2011) also highlights that social factors may also play a part in the reported benefits of singing upon wellbeing due to the opportunities for social interaction involved. However, it is certainly possible that the singing that takes part at Sunday Assembly may account for a proportion of the reported boost in mood reported by the participants.

The moment of reflection within the assembly could be considered an opportunity to be mindful, engaging in a form of meditation, albeit briefly.

"I'm big into meditation, I love the quiet time, and quiet time is very easy to have when you are on your own, you know, when my wife goes to work and I can meditate and I do throughout the day. It might only be for a couple of minutes but it's a chance to catch your breath and to think about what's going on and put things in perspective, but it's quite a different feeling that you have, if you have quiet time in company" (David, p3)

The origins of meditation are religious, the practice of "just sitting" has origins within Taoist, Hindu and Buddhist religious practices (Bazzano, 2019).

However, the practice of mindfulness has been, in some cases separated from religious and adopted by some sectors of the secular world, including Sunday Assembly. In a review of numerous studies into mindfulness, Cresswell (2017) concluded that there is some evidence that mindfulness interventions may reduce self-reported measures of negative affect and improve measures of positive affect in healthy populations. The literature on the topic of meditation and mindfulness tends to focus on consistent formal interventions, so it is a little different to what is being offered at Sunday Assembly, and it would be reasonable to consider whether the amount of quiet time/meditation offered during a typical assembly (2 minutes) would be enough to be beneficial. There is some evidence that even brief mindfulness interventions can buffer affective reactivity including negative affect (Broderick, 2005), although even studies looking at brief interventions, the interventions tended to be longer than 2 minutes. Although Sunday Assembly is not intended to be an intervention and the "moment of reflection" is a small but consistent part of the Assembly it is possible that this may be beneficial to the moods of some attendees.

The results connected to this subtheme do seem to provide some evidence that attending Sunday Assembly provides an increase in positive affect, it is not possible to nail down the specific elements that create this mood boost from the data but in addition to the communal side of things, both the singing and the "moment of reflection" were mentioned by participants as being their favourite parts of the ritual. There is some pre-existing evidence around these practices as being beneficial to mood and mental health, and whilst the benefits may vary between the attendees as to which bits they enjoy and benefit their mental health, the combination seems to be a winning one for some. Furthermore, our results do show that secular congregations can be linked to positive psychological outcomes, similar to religiosity (Barton et al., 2013; Balbuena et al., 2013; Diener et al., 2011; Green and Elliot, 2010; Goldberg & O'Brien, 2005; Leondari and Gialamas, 2009; Li et al., 2016).

There was some evidence of negative affect in relation to involvement in Sunday Assembly. The organization is run by volunteers, and the increasing demands on their time and resources can negatively affect their mood. When discussing the downsides of attending and being involved in Sunday Assembly, some participants who were more involved as volunteers cited issues around the time taken and demands of being a volunteer.

> "One of the things that I don't like is that it takes a tremendous amount of work, so there have been times where I have felt really stressed by it "(Susan, p6)

> "It does take half a day to do it, even though you are only there for an hour, you've got to get to and from and so there are other things I could be doing with that time, but I can't off the top of my head say they would have been better things for me" (Ben, p3)

Whilst Ben does highlight the opportunity cost, he does state that the other things he could have done might not have been a better use of his time. A balance between the psychological well-being of the attendees and the volunteers needs to be struck in terms of improving the overall well-being of all those involved, which almost brings us into utilitarian philosophical considerations around seeking the greatest good for the greatest number, which are beyond the scope of this study. These results in this theme bring to mind the results of the study by Villani et al. (2019), which showed that there is a positive relationship between a sense of purpose and life satisfaction and positive affect, while there was a positive relationship between interconnection and negative affect. Another relevant study here is Roemer (2010) where the participants were involved organizing and conducting some of the most visible parts of the Shinto Gion festival in Japan, which kept them very busy, taking considerable amounts of time and energy. However, the participation gave the men involved a sense of pride, positive self-identity, self-esteem, and positive well-being. Overall, it seems that despite some of the downsides in terms of the time taken up, the participants who were volunteers found attending Sunday Assembly to be beneficial to their mood and well-being.

Theme 3: loneliness in a crowd

The third key theme that emerged from the data was that of "loneliness in a crowd" (James, p3) or the struggles with some of the social aspects of Sunday Assembly reported by some of the participants. This often came up on response to the question about whether there were any parts of Sunday Assembly that the participants did not like. Typically, there are opportunities before, during and after the assembly for attendees to have a drink and sometimes cake or biscuits and speak to other attendees. Some participants seemed to relish this opportunity to talk to others.

> "I've never been at a Sunday Assembly meeting where I have spoken to every one of the others, I'll speak to a number and on a good one I'll have contact with half and that's a good proportion for me" (David, p2)

However, there was a distinct pattern in the data of participants who found this element of Sunday Assembly to be a struggle.

"I find the socialising most difficult, and I think there are times, despite everyone's best efforts, there are times when people feel a bit left out" (Susan, p7)

"The worst bit for me is when I am standing there, and I'm very good at the, if you come up to me and say 'Hey, my name is and start talking to me then great, I'm your best friend, I'm all in. I'm very much like that but me going up to you and saying 'I'd very much like to talk to you' then if I manage to do that then that's an achievement" (James, p7)

"I don't find the mingling very comfortable ….so that's the thing that I find most uncomfortable about the whole experience" (Lorraine, p3)

There were also some comments where this unwillingness or perceived inability to speak to other members of the congregations were seen by participants as some sort of personal failing which needs to be addressed.

"Generally speaking, I do tend to slope off early, whereas if I just stayed around and brazened things out" (Lorraine, p3)

"I find the general socialising quite difficult, although I should force myself again, to be a meeter and greeter type person, I just hide a lot" (Susan,p7)

However, one of the participants showed some self-knowledge and insight around the possible reasons for his struggles with this element of the assembly.

"I'm not brilliant in big groups, I guess I am quite an introverted person, so I look forward to meaningful conversations, milling around with a bunch of strangers, for me, sometimes I struggle with that" (Paul, p2)

There are a couple of possible issues here, firstly that Sunday Assembly may be particularly appealing to people who already have some social or communication difficulties for a number of reasons. Susan, who is on the autistic spectrum, and has referred to having communication problems (p8) explains:

"there's structured ways of getting involved, so it's got the best of both worlds, it's got being able to meet people, to get along with people. You aren't really left to roam about" (Susan, p2)

The radically inclusive ethos could appeal to those who may not feel comfortable in all social groups; Paul describes it as a "random group of misfits" (p2). Furthermore, as touched upon in the quote from Paul above, some people who are simply more introverted might not enjoy that element of the assembly. Psychological-type theory, originally proposed by Jung (1971) and then developed further by others, sets out that personality differences are best explained through four dichotomies. The relevant dichotomy here is the extraversion vs. introversion dichotomy, which is concerned with how individuals

obtain their energy, with extroverts "preferring to draw energy from the outer world of people and things and introverts preferring to draw energy from the inner world of ideas" (Baker, 2015). It is conceivable that these participants find the group socializing after an assembly to be overstimulating or, as Paul points out above, would prefer meaningful conversations to small talk.

Introversion has also been considered in a church context. Francis and Crea (2016) advise that "according to psychological-type theory, a church shaped by extroverts would give greater emphasis to social activities, while a church shaped by introverts would give greater opportunities for quiet and reflection"(p2), Card (2017) suggested in their review of the literature in this area that different personality types attend church for different reasons and that "different personality types were more inclined to be dissatisfied, especially if the church majority was of a different personality type i.e., extroversion vs. introversion". Baker (2015) found that in their study of churchgoers and churchleavers, personality type (of which introversion/extroversion was just one facet) played a role in church leaving, particularly amongst those church leavers who became agnostics or atheists. This has implications for secular organizations as it may be that certain personality types are more likely to be drawn to them and need to be catered for. There have been changes in some churches in the style of worship to a more animated, theatrical experience, particularly evangelical churches, and there has been a certain extent of mirroring some of this at Sunday Assembly. The question of how best to meet the needs of a congregation made up of introverts, extroverts, and those with communication difficulties is one that will need to be considered by religious and non-religious groups alike.

The negative aspect of socializing, whereby participants did not feel comfortable to socialize and lacked a sense of belonging may not just be down to personality traits such as introversion but may also link with Social Identity Theory. This may indicate that participants had not fully identified with the group of Sunday Assembly, i.e., being part of Sunday Assembly had not become an integrated part of their identity. Smith (2017) suggests that SA does not seem to create a sense of trust between individuals, or encouraging engagement between different social networks, as religious organizations seem to do. As one of the participants suggested, Sunday Assembly might need to occur more frequently than once a month to create a stronger sense of community and belonging to the participants.

Thumma and Travis 2007 considered similar issues in the context of megachurches. Megachurches are Protestant churches that average at least 2000 total attendees at their weekend services. One of the key

factors within megachurches, which has helped foster a greater sense of connectedness and belonging, are the smaller informal gatherings throughout the week and the month, as well as group meetings, and other activities sponsored by the church. Megachurches are highly organized in this respect and do not rely on informal networking to create social groups. Instead, they are structured in a way that they actively and intentionally encourage people to network and form social ties (Thumma and Travis, 2007). Based on the approximate sizes of congregation observed at the English Sunday Assemblies even the largest congregation would not attract the same sort of numbers of attendees as a megachurch. The Sunday Assembly congregations also have smaller related groups such as book groups, choirs, 'live better' groups and bands and general social meet ups. In their study of Sunday Assembly attendees, Price and Launay (2018) found that it was participation in SA small group activities that positively influenced wellbeing. These smaller groups, often with a specific topic or purpose could be more appealing to those who find the unstructured social elements of Sunday Assembly challenging. This could help them develop the connectedness and social ties that would enable them to enjoy the reported psychological benefits of attending Sunday Assembly

Limitations

The relatively small sample size of seven participants is a limitation of the study. However, this enabled rich and detailed data to be collected. After completion of the seventh interview, there was sufficient data to allow meaningful analysis.

All participants were aware that the interviewer was involved in the Sunday Assembly community. Two of the seven participants were known to the first author prior to the study. Whilst the chosen method of data analysis embraces researcher subjectivity, there may have been elements where the prior knowledge of the interviewer might have influenced the results. Furthermore, participants may have to some extent, either consciously or unconsciously have been reluctant to criticize Sunday Assembly or painted it in a more positive light due to their knowledge of the first author's involvement. However, the interviewer's background did prove useful during the coding and analysis of the data, in addition an understanding of the context was beneficial.

Summary and concluding remarks

The results of the current study offer some insight into the participants' reasons for attending Sunday Assembly; they are looking for a sense of belonging and community, which in turn appears to boost their well-being. Attending Sunday Assembly also seems to be beneficial to the mental health of the participants in terms of providing an increase in positive affect, which may be due to the sense of community, social interactions, singing, and meditation, or the combination of all the elements. Participants also reported that attending Sunday Assembly helped them to cope during stressful times, and they seemed to be using it as a tool for preventing or mitigating depressive symptoms. This is in keeping with both the results of the studies undertaken in connection with Sunday Assembly and those on the benefits to psychological health in relation to religious attendance and participation and also religious coping. Whilst Sunday Assembly is unable to offer certain elements of religious coping, such as belief in a higher power, it can provide a lot of the social, ritual, and identity elements that have been shown to be beneficial to mental health. There were mixed results in our data in connection with the social side of Sunday Assembly. Although participants did find comfort in the rituals, they also felt uncomfortable in the unstructured parts of the SA congregation, i.e., when there was no activity organized. The theme of loneliness in the crowd, around the difficulties experienced by some of the participants around the less structured social parts of the assembly experience indicates that it is important to consider ways to make the events inclusive and welcoming to different sectors of the population. There are also related considerations around the frequency of events and whether more frequent events may offer a greater sense of belonging and more opportunities for social interaction, developing and strengthening social ties and bonding.

This qualitative study further explores the experiences and motivations of attending non-religious congregations and possible links to well-being. Whilst some useful and important themes have been identified in the rich data collected, this could be developed upon. Given that the Sunday Assembly is a very recent phenomenon in comparison to religious communities, the themes identified here warrant further investigation, especially in relation to spirituality and well-being. A quantitative study looking at the relationship between spirituality and well-being in non-religious congregations is needed to further explore whether such congregations have similar effects on well-being as religious congregations.

It would be interesting to conduct work in the future, when there is a generational element added to attendance of these secular communities. Price and Launay (2018) have already looked at wellbeing over a 6 month period in connection with attendance at Sunday Assembly, The extent to which Sunday Assembly participation is related to both positive and negative affect could also be examined on a larger scale. Additionally, further

research could be conducted in respect of non-religious congregations in relation to personality traits such as introversion. The communal but informal singing would also be an area for further studies as the literature tends to focus on more structured singing such as choirs or interventions. The extent to which attendance at secular congregations is protective against depression or improves depressive symptoms would be another interesting are to explore, in light of the coping mechanism theme.D

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The first author is a former volunteer for Sunday Assembly. No financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct applications of this study.

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Questions used as guides in semi-structured interviews

Can you tell me where you heard about Sunday Assembly?

What prompted you to go to your first Sunday Assembly?

How long have you been attending Sunday Assembly?

Can you talk me through what happens at a typical Sunday Assembly?

How do you feel after you have been to Sunday Assembly?

What do you think have been the benefits to you of attending Sunday Assembly?

What do you think have been the downsides to attending Sunday Assembly?

Have you been involved in any other groups or events as a result of Sunday Assembly?

What are your favourite parts of Sunday Assembly?

Are there any bits of Sunday Assembly that you don't like?

Have you made any new friends or acquaintances though Sunday Assembly?

Do you feel part of a Sunday Assembly community?

Can you tell me about a positive experience you have had at Sunday Assembly?