

**SETTING LEVEL CHARACTERISTICS IN
CONSUMER-RUN ORGANIZATIONS THAT
ENHANCE MEMBER OUTCOMES**

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ABSTRACT

Setting level characteristics associated with consumer-run organizations (CROs) were examined to determine which were related to positive outcomes among 250 participants in 20 CROs. An interview was conducted with participants to gauge their perception of setting level characteristics and personal outcomes of services. The results indicated the setting level characteristics of organizational climate and sense of community were related to improved outcomes of services. The setting level characteristics and perceived improvement of member outcomes indicates a relationship between a person's perception of their environment and a person's perception of their own improvement over time. These results support the continued focus on organizational capacity building, encouraging participation, and increasing social support as critical features of CROs.

Consumer-run organizations (CROs) are recognized as a critical component to the mental health system and are more widely dispersed than community mental health centers (Goldstrom et al., 2006). Previous research has emphasized the

importance of setting level characteristics in CROs, including social support (Mowbray & Tan, 1993), sense of community (Herman, Onaga, Pernice-Duca, Oh, & Ferguson, 2005), and organizational health (Brown, Shepherd, Wituk, & Meissen, 2007). This research examined the relationship between the setting level characteristics of:

1. organizational climate,
2. social environment,
3. sense of community, and
4. organizationally mediated empowerment with outcomes of services for 20 CROs.

Background of CROs

CROs are operated by persons who have been diagnosed with a severe and persistent mental illness. CROs take many forms, most commonly “drop-in centers.” However, CROs also engage in many other activities, including advocacy, peer counseling, for-profit businesses, crisis alternatives to hospitalization, and self-help groups (Mowbray & Moxley, 1997; Segal, Silverman, & Temkin, 1995a; Silverman, Blank, & Taylor, 1997; Vu, Wituk, & Shepherd, 2005). Paid consumer staff and volunteers conduct day-to-day operations at CROs and manage resources, design and provide services, and maintain the structure and functioning of a 501c3 non-profit organization.

The President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health’s final report, *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America* (2003) recognizes that Consumer Operated Services, such as CROs, are an important part of a recovery approach, and an “emerging best practice” that is promising but is less thoroughly documented than other evidence-based practices. CROs have embraced “recovery” and attempt to provide a positive atmosphere that encourages consumer empowerment and taking on more leadership roles and responsibilities, including a more active role in their treatment (Report of the Surgeon General on Mental Health, 2000).

Consistent with the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, there is a growing recognition of the importance of organizational setting characteristics and their relation to individual attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes (for review, see Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Setting characteristics are one of the key factors in CROs thought to be helpful to members based in a shared experiential knowledge of mental illness and the treatment system. It is proposed that these characteristics naturally promote a mutual help atmosphere with a strong sense of community (Herman et al., 2005).

The current study examines CRO setting characteristics and their relationship to members’ perceived outcomes. More specifically, it was hypothesized that outcomes of services would be significantly and positively related to several CRO setting characteristics that have been previously examined, including:

1. organizational climate,
2. social environment,
3. sense of community, and
4. organizationally mediated empowerment.

Each of these setting characteristics is described in more detail below.

Setting Characteristics of CROs

Organizational Climate

The organizational climate of a setting may affect an individual's experiences and outcomes, especially in "membership" organizations (Brown et al., 2007). A CRO is characterized as a supportive, organized, and predictable setting where people are allowed to participate comfortably (Holter, Mowbray, Bellamy, MacFarlane, & Dukarski, 2004). However, if the organization experiences difficulties in leadership or functioning, this may affect those who work and are served by the organization. An earlier study found that CROs represent a setting that promotes learning, striving, and growth; includes creative and interesting activities; helps people feel positively connected; and provides leadership opportunities (Brown, 2004). The latter constitutes an important aspect in perceived recovery of CRO members (Brown et al., 2007). Further, significant relationships are found between levels of perceived social support, perceived organizational functioning, and member coping.

Social Environment

A positive social environment defines a setting in which members can help each other while helping themselves, a concept similar to the Helper Therapy Principle (Riessman, 1965). Mowbray and Tan (1993) describe the setting of CROs using five factors, all of which are related to social environment. These include: group support and mutual learning; intimacy and sharing; release of frustration/anger; personal freedom; and ability to complain. Most members reported closeness with others at the CRO, were able to openly share thoughts and feelings, and were able to be themselves (Mowbray & Tan, 1993). Furthermore, members felt encouraged to make their own decisions, support and help each other, and learn from each other.

Sense of Community

Sense of community is thought of as the connection one feels with his or her surroundings and the relationships a person has with others in this setting. McMillan and Chavis (1986) explain sense of community as involving four separate elements: membership (the right to belong to the community because one is invested in it), influence (individuals influence the group and the group

influences individuals), integration and fulfillment of needs (reinforcement from interaction with the group), and shared emotional connection (frequent positive and high quality interactions). It has been suggested that sense of community is fostered in CROs, which provide individual members with a place that is supportive and presents opportunities for the development of peer support networks (Hardiman & Segal, 2003). The relationships developed within CROs provide quality interactions and understanding that contribute to the development of sense of community (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001).

Organizationally Mediated Empowerment

Research has shown that members view CROs as caring, empowering settings where they feel accepted (Nelson, Lord, & Ochocka, 2001). Maton and Salem (1995) found that CROs show several key characteristics of empowering community settings, including:

1. a belief system that inspires growth, is strengths-based, and is focused beyond the self;
2. a role structure that is pervasive, highly accessible, and multifunctional;
3. a support system that is encompassing, peer-based, and provides a sense of community; and
4. leadership that is inspiring, talented, shared, and committed to both the setting and the members.

The social environment of CROs is an important asset for members in developing new skills and enhancing their overall well-being.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 250 members of 20 CROs in Kansas. Of these participants, 113 (45.2%) were male and 132 (52.8%) were female, 212 (85.1%) were Caucasian, 25 (10%) were Black/African American, 18 (7.2%) were Native American, 10 (4%) were Hispanic, and 2 (.8%) were Asian. Fifty-five percent of participants lived alone in their own house or apartment, and 33% lived with friends/family in their house or apartment. Only 5% lived in a controlled environment such as a group home or adult foster care. No participants were homeless.

For this sample, level of education included 35 (14%) who indicated that they had less than a high school degree, 91 (36%) had graduated high school or received a GED, 100 (40%) had technical training or some college education, 11 (4%) had graduated college, and 10 (4%) had a graduate degree. The mean age for this population was 45, and ages ranged from 19 to 72 years old. Almost half of all participants (46%) were single and had never been married,

while 23% were divorced, 5% were widowed, and 3% were separated. About three-quarters (77%) were not in a long-term committed relationship with a significant other at the time of the interviews, while 17% were married, and 6% were living with a partner.

Instrument

This research is based on face-to-face interviews with study participants. The interview included a collection of several standardized scales, including: Organizational Climate (University of Kansas, 1996), Social Environment Scale (Mowbray & Tan, 1993), Sense of Community (Holter et al., 2004), Organizationally Mediated Empowerment Scale (Segal, Silverman, & Temkin, 1995b), and Outcomes of Services (Mental Health Statistical Improvement Program Consumer Survey, 2000).

Organizational Climate

The Organizational Climate scale was adapted from the Kansas Family Satisfaction Survey developed at the University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare (1996) to assess consumer perceptions of their local community mental health center. Some questions were not appropriate for a self-help organization such as CRO (i.e., “Staff told me what side effects to watch out for”), and were removed or modified.

The current version of the Organizational Climate scale is constituted by an 11-item, 5-alternative Likert scale, and was designed to measure the extent to which the CRO creates an organizationally stable and accessible setting. Questions included inquiries about leadership opportunities, member input and feedback, safety, and positive environment (i.e., “This place helps people feel connected in a positive way”; “This place is inspiring and encouraging”). No psychometric properties have been published to date, but Cronbach’s Alpha showed relatively high reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

Social Environment

The Social Environment Scale was designed to measure the extent to which individual CRO members perceive support and value for one another in their organization. This scale derived questions from Mowbray and Tan’s (1993) Group Support and Mutual Learning Scale (8 items, $\alpha = .81$) and the Intimacy and Sharing scale (5 items, $\alpha = .70$). Mowbray and Tan (1993) based their items on the Group Environment Scale and the Community Oriented Programs Environment Scale (Moos, 1974; Moos & Humphrey, 1974). Cronbach’s Alpha was high ($\alpha = .91$).

Sense of Community

The Sense of Community scale (Holter et al., 2004) is a 13-item, 3-alternative Likert scale, and was designed to measure the extent to which the CRO was a setting that promoted connections between members and with the organization. This scale measures a sense of belonging, friendship, and socialization, and provided an internal reliability of .84.

Organizationally Mediated Empowerment Scale

The Organizationally Mediated Empowerment Scale (Segal et al., 1995b) consisted of 21 items; however, a modified version was used in this study. The modified scale contained 13 of the original items, while four original items were removed as irrelevant to CRO participation. Eight items were added in this context. Participants answered “yes” or “no” to each item, and the total number of “yes” responses for an individual served as a measure of that individual’s level of participation in the CRO.

The developers report a high degree of internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$ at baseline, .90 at 6 months), and good stability (.67). Cronbach’s Alpha for the current study showed similar reliability ($\alpha = .91$).

Outcomes of Services

The Outcomes of Services scale is a modification/extension of the Mental Health Statistical Improvement Program (MHSIP) Consumer Survey (2000). Some of the outcomes included in the *MHSIP Consumer Survey* (2000) relate to symptom reduction, empowerment, and improved social skills.

One of the four domains, Outcomes of Services was incorporated in the February 2000 version of the *MHSIP Consumer Survey*; this domain provided the questions for the current study. The *MHSIP Consumer Survey’s* Outcome of Services scale (2000) was designed to measure a consumer’s satisfaction with a program and the positive effects perceived to have occurred as result of participation in the program.

The current Outcomes of Services scale is constituted by an 18-item, 5-alternative Likert scale assessing aspects of coping, recovery, and community integration as compared to prior conditions. This scale included seven items from the *MHSIP Consumer Survey*, five items that were added to the scale in the common protocol for COSP (Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, 2000), and three items constructed by the authors. All questions used a 5-point Likert style response, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”

Reliability of the *MHSIP Consumer Survey* ranges from .91 to .98 (Teague, Ganju, Hornik, Johnson, & McKinney, 1997), and has been used widely with persons in psychiatric rehabilitation programs in 16 states. Cronbach’s Alpha was computed for this scale (noting the slight modifications), and remained quite high ($\alpha = .94$).

Procedure

When scheduling visits with the CROs, researchers attempted to schedule times when the most members would be available. All members were asked to complete the interview forms if they were present at the CRO on a scheduled day. Participation in this survey was completely voluntary, and 99% of those present participated. Participants were read the consent form, informed about anonymity of their answers, and told they could discontinue the interview at any time. Each participant was paid \$5 to honor the time committed to the interview.

RESULTS

Stepwise regression analyses were conducted to explore which characteristics were related to higher outcome scores. The variables entered included: organizational climate, social environment, sense of community, and organizationally mediated empowerment. The results indicate that two characteristics were significantly related to Outcomes of Services scores for members of CROs. The first was organizational climate ($F(1, 241) = 81.59, p < .001, R^2 = .253$, adjusted $R^2 = .250$). Therefore, those who believed the organizational climate of their CRO was positive were more likely to show higher “Outcomes” scores. Organizational climate accounted for the largest amount of variance for increased “Outcomes” scores, with a zero-order correlation of $.50, p < .001$.

The second significant variable was sense of community ($F(2, 240) = 45.03, p < .001, R^2 = .274$, adjusted $R^2 = .267$). Sense of community indicated that those who felt a stronger sense of community with their CRO reported higher “Outcomes” scores. Sense of community had a zero-order correlation of $.35, p = .01$. Social environment and organizationally mediated empowerment did not prove significant. Model statistics and regression statistics are reported in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

It was the purpose of this study to examine which CRO setting characteristics were related to higher Outcomes of Services scores for CRO members. Organizational climate and sense of community were found to be significantly related to increased “Outcomes” scores.

The organizational climate scale consisted of questions regarding leadership, participation opportunities, learning, and other positive aspects of the organization (i.e., growth, safety, creativity, inspiration, etc.). These aspects are likely related to the stability of the organization and to effective leadership, with stability and effective leadership helping to strengthen a positive organization environment (i.e., less stressful situations, less conflict, etc.).

The second significant factor proved to be sense of community. Those who reported a strong sense of community with their CRO were more likely to report

Table 1. Predictors of Consumer Outcomes in Consumer-Run Organizations

Variable	Model 1				Model 2			
	<i>b</i>	SE	B	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	β	<i>T</i>
Constant	1.35	.277	—	4.867	.860	.334	—	2.571
Organization Health	.583	.065	.503	9.03	.501	.072	.432	7.002
Sense of Community					.334	.130	.158	2.565
Model Statistics				Model 1				Model 2
Adjusted R^2				.250				.267
Change in R^2				.253				.020
SE estimate				.619				.612
<i>F</i>				81.59				45.03
Change in <i>F</i>				81.59				6.58
Significance of Change in <i>F</i>				.000				.011
Model Significance				.000				.000

higher “Outcomes” scores than those who did not. This supports the idea that a strong sense of community and support can contribute to increases in hope, autonomy, and personal responsibility (Davidson, Chinman, Kloos, Weingarten, Stayner, & Tebes, 1999). Sense of community is often highlighted as a critical element of self-help groups and organizations, especially CROs.

This study supports the notion that setting characteristics are related to perceived benefits to CRO members. There are a number of things that CROs as organizations can do to enhance their settings to benefit members. For instance, CROs should hold activities in the community with multiple social activities to enhance the members’ exposure to other people and to help increase the size of the social network of their members.

CROs should also provide welcoming environments to new members. For example, CROs could potentially implement a “buddy” system for new members, whereby they pair an existing member with a new member to help the new member become acquainted with the organization and with the other members. A welcome kit for new members may be another idea.

Additionally, many CROs in Kansas currently have a process that allows for member participation in leadership and provides opportunities for members to provide feedback to the organization’s leaders. These strategies allow members

not only to feel welcome, but also constitute an opportunity for them to play an integral role in the organization's operations.

Member feedback can also provide CRO leaders with new ideas and assist CRO leaders in the development of services and new programs responsive to members' needs. These approaches can enhance settings that encourage positive organizational climate, a stronger sense of community, and a chance for members to build relationships with others, and with the organization itself.

There are several other considerations regarding these findings. One is the need for professionals and others to encourage and promote increased social network size for consumers, increasing the amount of participation and sense of community for consumers. Increasing the size of social networks ensures that people with psychiatric disabilities are more integrated into the community, have access to more social supports, and a range of other benefits that come with having significant connections with other people.

Another consideration points to the need to encourage and promote participation and attendance in CROs and other community organizations. These organizations may serve to promote empowerment as well as a sense of community among the mental health consumer population. Professionals also may provide a valuable service to CROs by helping these organizations find needed resources within the community, and by informing others of the existence of CROs in the community.

Limitations and Recommendations

The nature of the sample may constitute a limitation. CRO members who participated in the survey were current members of the organizations, and likely more regular attendees since those interviewed were at the CRO on the scheduled and publicized days of the interviews.

Future research should examine in more detail how these unique self-help organizations can become more organizationally healthy and competent and what type of capacity building would help CROs gain organizational health and stability. At the same time, great care should be taken so that these grassroots, self-help organizations are not co-opted with possible weakening of their ability to empower mental health consumers (Holter, Mowbray, & Robinson, 2002).

Encouraging the positive climate and size of CROs may help improve the recovery of members, while simultaneously strengthening the organization and increasing the stability and sustainability of CROs. These organizations provide positive atmospheres for consumers, in which they have opportunities to make social connections, empower themselves through various activities, and improve their overall quality of life. With significant positive outcomes which these organizations represent, it is important to protect and support these organizations as they continue to benefit the members involved.

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