

Under vs. Overpopulated Consumer-Run Mutual Support Organizations

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1. Introduction

Consumer-run Mutual Support Organizations (MSOs) are independent, free standing entities controlled organizationally, administratively, and programmatically by people with mental illness. These organizations are similar to support groups such as Schizophrenics Anonymous in that they are based in a self-help/mutual-aid philosophy but differ in that they are typically incorporated nonprofits that can receive grants and often have paid staff governed by a board of directors. These organizations maintain a drop-in center with activities that foster mutual-support and provide leadership opportunities for members.

This study analyzes the impact of MSO organizational size on organizational functioning and the individual participation experience. Guiding analysis is behavior setting theory, which has previously been applied to understand the impact of school size on student outcomes (Barker, 1968). The results have policy implications for the funding of MSOs. Behavior setting theory provides insight into the dynamic interaction between organizational size and the effectiveness of MSOs. The theory states that underpopulated behavioral settings have more roles than members, providing opportunities for all members to develop new skills and become deeply involved (Barker, 1968; Schoggen, 1989). Underpopulated MSOs are appealing because previous research has linked meaningful involvement in MSOs to positive individual outcomes (Segal & Silverman, 2002). Overpopulated settings have more members than roles to fill, resulting in the most capable members filling roles while others are excluded (Barker, 1968). This competition improves the quality of the leadership base, which previous research has linked to MSO effectiveness (Kaufmann, Ward-Colasante, & Farmer, 1993). As a result, overpopulated MSOs appear attractive with respect to organizational productivity while underpopulated MSOs appear attractive with respect to individual participation benefits.

This study empirically tests the conflicting interests behavior setting theory predicts and explores strategies MSOs use to promote organizational productivity while encouraging contribution from everyone.

2. Method, Results, and Discussion

To test the above hypothesis, this study analyzes the organizational characteristics of 20 consumer-run mutual support organizations in Kansas. Organizational data was collected from two sources: quarterly reports and a survey administered to organizational leaders to supplement the quarterly reports. Quarterly reports from the Oct/Nov/Dec quarter of 2003 provided information on organizational budget size and the total number of members who attend the MSO. The survey of MSO leaders about organizational activities gathered data on the number of members contributing to organizational planning and management.

In their simplest form, findings from this study indicate congruence with the under and overpopulated behavior setting hypotheses. Just as the underpopulated/overpopulated hypothesis would predict, smaller organizations have a larger percentage of their members involved in operating the organization than do larger organizations. As the number of members in a MSO increases, the percentage of members contributing to organizational planning and management decreases ($r = -.65, p < .01$). The advantages of operating an underpopulated MSO are clear – all members involved in the organizations will be encouraged to aid in its operation rather than simply be the recipient of services. Underpopulated MSOs are particularly advantageous because they encourage those people who would otherwise naturally fall into the service recipient role to take on the role of service provider. In this sense, underpopulated MSOs are likely to be the most beneficial to those people who are most in need of it. If a setting becomes too underpopulated however, leaders will experience burnout and the organization may collapse.

While small MSOs struggle to prevent burnout amongst leaders, large MSOs struggle to prevent exclusivity amongst leaders. Overpopulated MSOs not only recruit the most competent leaders but benefit from having more leaders overall. Although the size of the organization has a major influence on the percentage of members involved in operating the organization, there remains a strong correlation between membership size and the number of people involved in organizational planning and management ($r = .74, p < .01$). Behavior setting theory does predict this correlation, stating that the number of roles in a behavior setting increases along with the number of people available to operate the setting, only at a slower rate. This

correlation is important because previous research by Brown (2004) has associated leadership size with organizational productivity. Additionally, research by Kaufmann, Ward-Colasante, & Farmer (1993) found that a large leadership base is critical to successful organizational functioning. Based on these studies, it appears that overpopulated MSOs are more likely to be successful in the long term because these organizations have more leaders.

Although the number of people who get involved in operating a MSO does have its upper limits, there are several strategies that large organizations can use to get more people involved, including emphasizing shared leadership, increasing the quality of current activities, and pursuing new organizational activities. The better an organization can share leadership responsibilities, the better it can achieve the benefits of both under and overpopulated settings. If larger organizations continue making efforts to get more members involved in operating the organization then the organization can continue to grow. If larger organizations continue to expand beyond their fundamental drop-in center operations then the behavior setting can continue to involve more people. By staying open longer hours, making more public presentations, organizing more social activities, and taking on new challenges the number of people who need to become involved can increase considerably.

Despite the advantages on an underpopulated setting, funding agencies tend to prefer the funding of larger organizations with overpopulated settings. There is a correlation of $r = .812$ ($p < .01$) between the amount of money granted to an MSO by the state and the number of people attending the MSO. One explanation for the relationship between grant size and membership size has to do with the advantages of having an overpopulated behavioral setting. These organizations attract more members, provide a larger number of people with leadership roles, and are more productive as organizations. Although the case for larger organizations with overpopulated settings is a compelling one, the benefits of an underpopulated setting cannot be ignored and funding agencies need to consider these advantages when making funding decisions.

3. Conclusions

Behavior setting theory calls into question the frequent assumption that larger organizations are advantageous. Smaller organizations may not be run as effectively but those people who do participate are encouraged to become more involved in operating the organization. Bigger organizations may be managed more effectively because they have more competent leaders but new members who join do not have as many opportunities to take on leadership roles. If it is organizational empowerment that facilitates personal empowerment, as hypothesized by Segal & Silverman (2002), then underpopulated settings may be more effective in facilitating the recovery of people less inclined to become involved in organizational operations.

4. Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the financial support of the Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services, Division of Health Care Policy, Mental Health. The authors would also like to thank Dana Soetaert for her feedback on earlier drafts of this work.

5. References

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