

## Evaluating the Impact of Participation in Consumer-Run Organizations

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### **Abstract**

Consumer-run organizations (CROs) serve as drop-in and activity centers for adults diagnosed with mental illness. These nonprofit organizations, which are entirely run by consumers (people diagnosed with a severe and persistent mental illness), provide social, recreational, and psychological support. This research examines these three aspects among two groups of CRO members: 1) new members (those who have been a member of a CRO for three months or less) and 2) existing members (those who have been a member of a CRO for one year or more). The study will compare the difference between self-reported measures of sense of community, recreational activity, and psychological well-being among the two groups using the Sense of Community Scale, Social Participation Scale, and the Herth Hope Index. A discussion of the possible effects that CRO exposure has on these factors will be provided. This study will examine the hypothesis that increased CRO exposure contributes to increased social interaction, recreational activity, and psychological well-being.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been much attention given to people with mental illness and how to help them integrate into main stream society. One model which has received some attention is that of the Consumer Run Organization (CRO). A CRO is an organization that approaches mental illness from a mutual help perspective (Silverman, Blank, & Taylor, 1997). It supportive network of peers is formed through the common experience of living with a psychiatric disability (Kauffman, Ward-Colasante, & Farmer, 1993; Borkman, 1999). Although CROs vary in exactly what they provide to their members, however providing activities, social support and opportunities for leadership is common among most CROs (Mowbray, Moxley, Jasper, & Howell, 1997; Segal, Silverman, & Temkin, 1995; Silverman, Blank, & Taylor, 1997).

The importance of CROs extends beyond the social interactions which they provide to people with psychiatric disabilities. Trainor et al. (1997) found that following participation in CROs, participant's reports of inpatient service usage decreased by 91%. Additionally findings suggest that CROs operate for eight dollars a day per person. Current research also suggests that participation in a CRO facilitates community integration (Ochocka et al. 2006).

### **Methods**

Members of eight CROs participated in this study. The CROs were chosen based on a combination of the population density of the area in which they were located, the number of members, Member Impact scores and Organizational Effectiveness score. The Membership Impact and Organizational Effectiveness scores were computed by Shepherd et al. (2004). Sampling the CRO population using the above measures allowed a selection of CROs that could be used to accurately represent the population of CROs in Kansas. The all member survey was open to any member of participating CROs who was present when the surveys were being administered.

The sample consisted of 111 participants, 53 males and 57 females. Sixty-one of the participants had attended the CRO for 3 months or longer. Prior to the administration of the survey instrument, a consent form was explained to the participants by the researcher. . To aid as a reminder, participants were provided with cards containing the answer scales and were prompted to refer to the scales when necessary. Participants were also provided with a paper copy of the survey instrument to aid with clarification of the questions being asked. The administration of the instrument took on average one hour. After completion of the interview, the participants each received five dollars, and were required to fill out a receipt as proof of payment

## **Results**

A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to discover if there was a difference in scores on items of three measures, Sense of Community Scale, Social Participation Scale, and the Herth Hope Index related to the length of time attending a CRO. From the Herth Hope Index, there were two items that were statistically significant. The item, "Can see probabilities in the midst of difficulty"  $F(1,67) = 7.49, p < .01$  and, "I have a hope that gives me comfort",  $F(1,67) = 4.22, p < .05$ . There were no items from the social participation scale that were statistically significant. Most of the items from the sense of community scale were significant at  $\alpha.05$ .

## **Discussion**

The findings regarding sense of community are not surprising. An example of an item from the measure is, "Friendships made here mean a lot to me." It is expected that a person who has been involved in an organization is going to have stronger friendships with other members of the organization than a person who has just become part of the organization. The lack of significant findings on the social participation scale may seem counter intuitive, as one might expect greater social involvement to be displayed in increased activities within the community. One possibility for this finding is that regardless of how long a person attends a CRO, their socioeconomic status is likely to remain constant. In other words, there is no difference between new members and old members, because regardless of their length of membership, they are not able to afford concert or museum admission. Additionally, because a large number of CRO members do not have their own transportation, they are unable to easily, or inexpensively travel to the locations where events take place.

The most interesting findings are in the significant findings of the Herth Hope Index. The finding suggests that there is a characteristic of CROs that enables people to look past obstacles. This may be a result of the increased sense of community that grows with time participating in the CRO. The connections that people make at CROs may provide a social support network that facilitates creation of alternative solutions to problems.

## **Conclusion**

The findings may have produced more questions than answers. However, the findings do suggest that there is something taking place that is increasing people's ability to handle difficulties in life.

## **Acknowledgment**

The data used in this paper is from data collected for the National Institute Mental Health funded grant, Promoting Effective Practices for Kansas Consumer-Run Organization