



Understanding the experience of place: Expanding methods to conceptualize and measure community integration of persons with serious mental illness

Greg Townley*, Bret Kloos, Patricia A. Wright

Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina, 224 Barnwell College, 1512 Pendleton Street, Columbia, SC 29208, USA

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ABSTRACT

Community integration research explores community contexts and factors that encourage or hinder individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) from actively participating in community life. This research agenda can be advanced by using mixed-methods that better document the relationships between contextual factors and individual experience. Two such methods were applied to a mixed-methods study of 40 adults with SMI living in independent housing in the Southeastern United States. Their contextualized experiences of community integration were measured by applying innovative participatory mapping and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping techniques. Use of these methods in conjunction with one another facilitated the creation of activity spaces, which can measure geographic accessibility and help to represent an individual's experience of place and degree of mobility. The utility of these newly applied methods for better understanding community integration for persons with SMI is explored and implications for using these measures in research and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

All too often, individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) experience isolation and lack opportunities to fulfill meaningful roles and activities in their communities. This is unfortunate because there is abundant evidence that participation in community life positively affects health (Antze, 1976; Barrera, 2000; Strauss and Carpenter, 1977). While most research on the experience of SMI has focused on individual's functioning, we argue that it is important to understand the role of place in participation in community life, particularly as it relates to health. The emerging body of community integration research has been devoted to studying the community contexts and factors that encourage or hinder individuals with SMI from actively participating in community life (e.g., Aubry and Myner, 1996; Gulcer et al., 2007; Prince and Gerber, 2005; Wong and Solomon, 2002). This research agenda can be advanced by using methods that better document the relationships of contextual factors to individual experience. The overwhelming majority of community integration studies have used survey and self-report data to understand the experience of community life for persons with SMI. Further, few studies have directly assessed the impact of place on community integration, despite suggestions that it may be a critical component in the integration process (Carling,

1995; Yanos, 2007). The authors of this paper aim to contribute to the literature by presenting the methods and findings from a pair of innovative approaches to conceptualizing and measuring community integration. We argue that an expansion of the methods used for community integration research can better ground investigation in the physical and mental experience of place.

The paper begins with a brief overview of community integration research for persons with SMI, including an outline of key theoretical and empirical work in this area. We then discuss the need for expanding the methodological approaches used to investigate the physical and mental experience of place for individuals with SMI. From our research aimed at better understanding these contextual factors, we outline the methods and advantages of participant created community maps and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). We then present findings from these specific methods and suggest how these can be used to progress community integration research.

Community integration of individuals with serious mental illness

SMI is a term used to classify persistent psychiatric conditions that can greatly affect a person's behavior, thinking, emotions, and relationships (Kloos, 2005a, b). Diagnoses considered to be SMIs include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and severe and persistent depression. Traditionally, individuals with SMI have received high levels of intervention, often in specialized settings dedicated to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1803 381 8136.

E-mail address: Gregory.Townley@gmail.com (G. Townley).