

Examining the Psychological Sense of Community for Individuals with Serious Mental Illness Residing in Supported Housing Environments

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Abstract The psychological sense of community is an important aspect of community life; yet, it remains largely unexamined among individuals with serious mental illness (SMI). Sense of community represents the strength of bonding among community members; and this social phenomenon likely impacts the process by which individuals with SMI integrate into community life. The current study examined sense of community (SOC) for individuals with SMI by assessing the relationships between neighborhood experiences, unique factors related to SMI (e.g., mental illness diagnosis), and sense of community in the neighborhood. Participants were 402 residents of supported housing programs who used mental health services in South Carolina. Hierarchical linear regression was utilized to determine which components of community life helped to explain variability in sense of community. In total, 214 participants reported that it is very important for them to feel a sense of community in their neighborhoods. Neighbor relations, neighborhood safety, neighborhood satisfaction, neighborhood tolerance for mental illness, and housing site type emerged as significant explanatory variables of sense of community. These findings have implications for interventions aimed at enhancing SOC and community integration for individuals with SMI.

Keywords Psychiatric disability · Sense of community · Supported housing · Community integration · Neighborhood

Introduction

Seymour Sarason (1974) argued that the psychological sense of community constitutes the defining feature of community life. Sense of community (SOC) has been linked to increased psychological well-being (Pretty et al. 1996b; Prezza et al. 2001), perceptions of belonging and community connectedness (Sonn and Fisher 1996), and participation in the community (Chavis and Wandersman 1990). Sense of community has been investigated and argued to be relevant for diverse populations, ranging from school-age children and urban neighborhood residents to indigenous Australians and Latin American residents in Caracas (e.g., Garcia et al. 1999; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Perkins et al. 1990; Pretty et al. 1996a; Sonn 2002). However, there has been little research investigating the relationship between sense of community and well-being of persons with serious mental illness living in community settings. It may be particularly important to bolster the psychological sense of community for persons with serious mental illness because they often face societal barriers to community living, including stigma and discrimination (Cook and Jonikas 2002; Cummins and Lau 2003; Kloos 2005; Prince and Prince 2002). Similar to persons without diagnoses of mental illness, individuals with SMI function better in communities that are perceived to be tolerant and supportive (Newman et al. 1994; Wong and Solomon 2002). As mental health policy for individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) continues to shift from long-term hospitalization to community-based care, uncovering ways to enhance the psychological sense of community for this population may be a fundamental pathway by which they can move from being marginalized, undervalued members of society to becoming actively involved community members and agents of their own recovery (Nelson and Peddle 2005).

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