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Sense of Community within Oxford House Recovery Housing: Impact of Resident Age and Income

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Abstract

The experience of psychological sense of community (PSOC) can play an important role in the substance abuse recovery process. This study explored the relationship between PSOC and setting-level variables of age and income amongst residents living in Oxford House, a communal, self-governed recovery housing model ($n = 70$). Age and income variables were not related to an overall PSOC or components such as shared common mission or feelings of reciprocal responsibility. However, both age and income variables were significant predictors of the harmony felt within these houses. The role that PSOC may play in recovery facilities and other co-housing arrangements was discussed, and implications for future research and application were outlined.

Keywords

Psychological sense of community; Oxford House; recovery housing; age; income

If a person described the significant non-family relationships within their life, the ensuing narrative would likely include what community psychologists call a *psychological sense of community* (PSOC: Sarason, 1974). This construct refers to the sense of belongingness that members feel within a group possessing shared values and emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In addition, these communities possess the capacity to influence and be influenced by their members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Over the past three decades, community psychology has generated a body of research on the experience of PSOC (see Fisher & Bishop, 2002). When facing a significant behavioral change, such as remaining abstinent from drugs and alcohol, it is possible that individuals rely on social supports experienced from a positive PSOC (Ferrari, Jason, Davis, Olson, & Alvarez, 2004).

More recently, definitions of PSOC stressed the contextual nature of the construct. Since Sarason's (1974) acknowledgement that PSOC varies by situation and over time, many studies explored specific contextual and cultural definitions of PSOC (Bishop, Colquhoun, & Johnson, 2006; Hill, 1996; Lyszak, 2004). Another trend in the theory of PSOC focused on multiple levels of analysis, on both the individual and group level (Hill, 1996). Finally, contemporary research on PSOC explored how the construct of PSOC related to other similar constructs, such as group cohesion, social support, acculturation, and collective efficacy (Proescholdbell & Roosa, 2005).

Few studies examined PSOC within substance abuse recovery settings, such as *Oxford House* - a self-run, democratic mutual aid co-housing movement for persons in recovery (Oxford House, Inc., 2006). Founded in 1975, the Oxford House model facilitates an environment where persons in recovery live together, managing their household as a collective unit. Oxford House households average eight same-sex residents and operate with a universal rule that participants stay totally sober. Rules also extend to day-to-day tasks such as routine chores and behavior related to conflict management. The primary decision-making forum is a weekly house meeting in which an 80% majority vote is needed for

consensus-building (Ferrari et al., 2004; Oxford House, Inc., 2006). Currently, over 1,200 Oxford Houses exist in the United States, Australia and Canada.

Social support for abstinence is a tenet of Oxford House. Each Oxford House is open to anyone committed to staying sober, regardless of her or his background. This value of diversity is expressed in the culturally diverse groups of individuals who live within Oxford Houses, including a significant number of houses for women and women with children. Furthermore, the individual members within each house vary among individual characteristics such as age, income, type of employment, and educational level (see Jason, Ferrari, Dvorchak, Groessler, & Malloy, 1997). Up to this point, only a limited number of studies have explored how such heterogeneity of residents impacts the psychological experience of Oxford House residents.

Several studies explored house characteristics in the Oxford House experience (e.g., Ferrari, Jason, Sasser, Davis, & Olson, 2006; Ferrari, et al., 2004; Jason, Ferrari, Freeland, Danielewicz, & Olson, 2005). One study found that Oxford Houses, compared to traditional therapeutic communities, were more likely to set rules around destructive setting-level behaviors (e.g., vandalism), extend greater personal liberties to members, and allow personal possessions to be brought into the house (Ferrari et al., 2004). In another study that examined house business meetings, it was found that these meetings functioned largely as a forum to address procedural and day-to-day issues at the house level, rather than an opportunity to delve into matters pertaining to specific residents (Jason et al., 2005). Finally, Ferrari et al. (2006) found Oxford Houses to possess well-maintained interior and exterior characteristics, suggesting that setting-level factors may create a greater sense of home.

In general, PSOC is strengthened the longer a person is part of a community (Hill, 1996; Skajaeveland, Garling, & Maeland, 1996). Research on Oxford House participants indicated that a primary reason individuals chose to become members was the camaraderie and abstinence social support they received within the setting (Jason, Ferrari, Smith, et al., 1997; Ferrari, Jason, Olson, Davis & Alvarez, 2002). Although both female and male residents reported valuing social support in recovery, women placed greater emphasis on social supports than did men (Kim, Davis, Jason, & Ferrari, 2006). This sense of fellowship among residents increased the longer members stayed in an Oxford House (Bishop, Jason, Ferrari & Huang, 1998).

Bishop et al. (1997) surveyed males living in Oxford House and found that the difference in an individual's age and the cohort age of his Oxford House was a significant predictor for how long the individual chose to stay in the house. Results indicated that persons with larger differences in age from the average house age reported staying *longer* in the house. It was suggested that in recovery communities, younger members may benefit from the experiential knowledge of older members, and the oldest members benefit from the helper principle. Thus, age outliers of a house were more likely to stay for longer periods (Bishop et al, 1997).

In addition to age, it is likely that income, and the range of income within houses, is related to PSOC. As described above, Oxford House is a self-run model that emphasizes a house's financial self-sustainability as well as solidarity amongst members around sobriety. Income relates to these guiding principles such that the composite of each individual's income affects the stability of these rented dwellings. Furthermore, the value that each Oxford House places on abstinence asserts that this shared connection may be more powerful than the similarity of members' socioeconomic status.

Bishop et al's (1997) findings on age, as well as the hypothesis that income diversity is positive for the PSOC of a house, exist within a broader body of research on groups, where

there is not a clear consensus on the role of heterogeneity/homogeneity in predicting group experience. Work groups have been examined in regard to performance on different types of tasks, and it was found that tasks requiring creative judgment making benefited from group heterogeneity (McGrath, 1984), while demographic homogeneity was found to result in greater group cohesiveness (Jackson, 1992). The general research on age diversity within groups suggests that groups with wider age diversity had higher turnover rates and lower reported group cohesion (Jackson, 1992). For example, attitudes and values have been shown to vary as a function of age cohort (Elder, 1975; Oakes, 2003).

There is a clear need to better understand the role that demographic heterogeneity/homogeneity plays in Oxford House settings, including psychological constructs such as PSOC. Ferrari, et al. (2002) have described the PSOC that members experience as a critical component to the success of the Oxford House model, and have called for further research to better understand how PSOC contributes to and is influenced by other factors in the Oxford House experience. One area that has only begun to be explored in Oxford House is the extent to which the interpersonal dynamics of a household have on an individual's experience of his or her house. Given that social support is reported as one of the driving motivations for persons entering Oxford House, advancing knowledge regarding correlates of PSOC is warranted (Jason, Ferrari, Smith, et al., 1997).

The present study addresses this need by exploring how characteristics of age and income among persons living in Oxford Houses related to overall household PSOC. By pooling PSOC scores for a specific house, the present study explored how resident characteristics of age and income related to overall house PSOC. This study contributes to the growing consensus that PSOC research should utilize multiple levels of analysis, not simply individual-level exploration (see Brodsky, O'Campo, & Aronson, 1999; Hill, 1996). Furthermore, our understanding of PSOC within Oxford Houses would expand the "extra-individual"-level construct of community (Proescholdbell & Roosa, 2005) from the individual- to group-level. In addition, the present study outlined a method for creating house-level variables from individual data. We expected houses with high age heterogeneity to report a higher PSOC than houses with low age heterogeneity. Also, houses with high income heterogeneity were expected to report a higher PSOC than houses with low income heterogeneity.

Method

This study was a secondary data analysis using data described from Jason et al.'s study (1997) consisting of 897 individuals living in 214 different Oxford Houses in the United States. For each of the 214 houses, the number of participants per household ranged from a single individual to every member of the house. Therefore, it was necessary to establish a method of filtering households with low representation to preserve the robustness of our house-level variables. A dummy variable with a ratio score between 0 and 1 was constructed to construct house-level data. The ratio was calculated by dividing the number of individuals participating in the study by the total number of beds in that specific house. This coefficient reflected the percentage of members representing the individual house. In order to merge individual-level variables into house-level variables, we sought houses with a relatively high member representation. A house ratio score of 0.70 (i.e., 70% member representation) was set as the cutoff ratio score for a house to be included in the present study. This cutoff reduced the sample to 70 houses from the original 214.

All Oxford Houses are same-sex in composition. Of the 70 houses, 66% settings were male and 34% were female, and residents reported a mean age of 38 years ($SD = 5.17$). The mean income across houses from all sources of revenue in a given month was \$802.42 ($SD =$

\$398.20). Houses were coded as having heterogeneous race/ethnicity membership, homogenous European-American membership, or homogenous African-American membership, yielding 81.4% ($n = 57$) of settings in the present sample as heterogeneous. A minority of houses were ethnically/racially homogenous, with 11.4% ($n = 8$) of these houses being European-American and 7.1% ($n = 5$) African-American. It should be noted that there were significant Latino/Hispanic non-White, Native American, and other representations within houses such that no house setting consisted exclusively of members from any of these ethnic/racial groups.

The primary data consisted of PSOC scale scores, monthly income, and chronological age. The PSOC scale used was Bishop, Chertok, and Jason's (1997) 30-item, 5-point Likert (1 = *not at all true*, 5 = *completely true*) *Perceived Sense of Community Scale*. Scores on this scale were divided into three subscales, namely: (1) *mission* (12 items: "There is a sense of common purpose in this group"), referring to the sense of mission that members feel in the group's purpose; (2) *reciprocal responsibility* (12 items: "There is a feeling that the group looks out for its members"), the belief that members help one another in a reciprocal way; and, (3) *harmony* (6 items: "There are definite "in" and "out" groups within this group"), whether or not members perceived harmony existing within the group. The individual PSOC scores for each house were averaged, creating a single house-level variable for each PSOC score. Standard deviations of age and income were calculated for each house based upon individual data.

Results

Gender, geographic location, and race/ethnicity of houses were controlled for in an initial stages of analysis. The geographic location variable comprised of four different regions in the United States. House gender, geographic location, and race/ethnicity were not found to be significant predictors of PSOC. Separate regressions then were run for the four scores associated with the PSOC scores (i.e., total score, harmony subscale, mission subscale, and reciprocity subscale). The model consisted of house age heterogeneity and house income heterogeneity as independent variables. House age heterogeneity consisted of the standard deviation of member ages within a given house. Similarly, house income heterogeneity was measured by the standard deviation of monthly incomes of a house's members. Of the four analyses, the only significant model included harmony subscale scores. Both age and income were significant predictors for levels of harmony across houses, $F(2,67) = 5.86, p < .01$ (see Table 1.). The greater the heterogeneity for both age and income, the higher reported levels of reported house harmony.

Discussion

The Oxford House model of recovery states that the common bond of staying sober unites house members regardless of how dissimilar they are as individuals (Oxford House, Inc., 2006). The present study found some support for this hypothesis, in that houses with wider age and income ranges reported a higher level of harmony. This finding was consistent with some of the previous research on Oxford House (Ferrari et al., 2002), as well as research on task performance involving creativity suggesting that groups have better outcomes when a diversity of perspectives exists (Jackson, 1992). However, the results of the present study contrast other research that suggests likeness as an asset to group identity (Byrne, 1971). Results offer support for the notion that diverse groups can experience a high sense of harmony when united around a common purpose.

Previous research on Oxford House identified a mentoring relationship which took place between older and younger residents, such that members on the extremes of the house age

range were more likely to stay in the house for a longer period of time (Bishop et al., 1997; 1998). The group-level variable of age heterogeneity employed in this study provided further support for this claim, in that houses with larger age heterogeneity reported a higher sense of harmony. In addition, the finding that larger income heterogeneity was related to a higher harmony score is noteworthy. A possible interpretation is that the presence of one or two high-earning individuals in the house positively influenced the sense of harmony members felt in the house. It has been postulated that the presence of members who were established financially and professionally provided positive role modeling for other members trying to readjust in society after years of addiction (P. Malloy, personal communication, 2006).

One policy implications of this study is the affirmation that the formation of future Oxford Houses, and potentially other co-housing recovery settings, should not be constricted to demographically similar residents (specifically in regard to age and income). Moreover, identifying potential residents across a wide range of age and income may actually strengthen the ability of the home environment to promote recovery.

It is important to note that, of the three PSOC sub-scale scores (mission, reciprocal responsibility, harmony) only harmony scores were significantly related to age and income heterogeneity. The lack of correlation of relationship between age or income heterogeneity to mission scores was consistent with the Oxford House notion of solidarity across age and income. Nevertheless, the null finding of reciprocal responsibility should be interpreted with caution. On one hand, reciprocal responsibility should (like mission), be equal regardless of the level of house age or income heterogeneity. It is likely that mentor-mentee relationships existed across age and income ranges within houses (i.e., older and more established residents providing unreciprocated support to younger and less financially stable residents). Due to the complexities of the various types of reciprocal supports occurring at any given house, it may be that the 12 items that comprised the reciprocal responsibility subscale lacked the specificity to fully examine the phenomena.

Co-housing structures offer an efficient, supportive and economical way of living for various groups as they work toward their common goals. Oxford House is one model that demonstrates the potential benefits of this type of group structure. Other populations might benefit from similar models (e.g., persons with chronic mental illness, persons with chronic physical illness and dual diagnosis populations, as well as single parent families). Historically, informal forms of mutual aid among these groups existed (e.g., single-parent families sharing resources for childcare and/or housing, cancer survivors' groups), but a more developed model of co-housing was not available. In other cases models do exist, such as co-housing for elderly persons, but have been implemented in only a limited capacity (Prosper, Sherman & Howe, 2004). Findings from this study suggest that policies which promote such housing arrangements should not assume that likeness indicates a more cohesive group environment. Diverse perspectives on a shared experience may in fact increase the level of group connection in supportive group settings.

The construct of PSOC is a useful tool in understanding co-housing operations. A major success of the Oxford House model may be attributed to the positive psychological sense of community experienced by residents. The present study provided support for the shared experience of living together under a common vision superseding individual differences among communal living residents. Further PSOC research on co-housing has the potential to assist not only persons in recovery, but other co-housing populations organized around a shared purpose.

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Table 1

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting PSOC-Harmony Scores

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Age Heterogeneity	.0413	.017	.275*
Income Heterogeneity	.0003	.000	.283*

(n=70 facilities)

*
p < .05