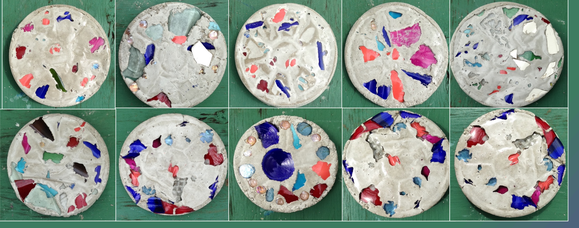

“I didn’t know that I could do that”: Creating Art and Organizational Change in a Psychosocial Rehabilitation Clubhouse

Sabrina M. Gonzales, M.A. & Catherine H. Stein, Ph.D.
Bowling Green State University

Abstract

In this case study, I describe my experiences as a community advocate at a psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouse for adults coping with psychiatric disabilities. I focus on the development of arts-based initiative called “clay group” which occurred over a one year period. Clay Group was intentionally structured to counter the roles, structure of services, and social expectations of clubhouse members and staff. I present lessons learned about how the structure and process of clay group served to alter power dynamics between members and staff. Implications of my lessons learned in clay group to inform existing literature on psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouses are discussed.

Introduction

- A major goal of psychosocial clubhouses in the United States is to help create structures that facilitate meaningful activities and employment skills for adults with serious mental illness.
- Members of psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouses who participate in the structure of the “work ordered day” have been found to have increased confidence in their abilities.
- Relatively little is known about “work ordered day” activities for clubhouse members who are older, live in rural settings with less access to community resources, or who are not interested or unable to seek employment.
- Leisure activities, such as art, can provide individuals coping with serious mental illness opportunities to engage in social interactions, form friendships, and develop a sense of identity and social inclusion.
- Incorporating arts-based programming in psychosocial clubhouses can be a creative way to empower members by providing them with opportunities to engage in different roles, learn skills, and engage in new meaningful experiences in their relationships.

My Role as a Community Advocate

- During my one year community-clinical practicum, I spent 20 hours a week as a “community advocate” at a psychosocial clubhouse that I will refer to as the Together Center (pseudonym).
- My responsibilities included applying community psychology concepts and theories into my work at the Center, developing an understanding of the Together Center as a system, building relationships with members, and finding and developing opportunities to empower members for systems level change.
- Members and I created Clay Group to allow members opportunities to work with clay and make art together.
- Over the course of the year, I made notes about the group, participants and their experiences, and staff reactions to the Clay Group.
- I reviewed these notes to construct a first person account of the course of Clay Group to identify lessons I learned about creating programs to empower members.

The Together Center

- Located in the downtown area of a small Midwestern town in the United States
- Although the center is not ICCD accredited, the structure of services is based on the clubhouse model.
- Center is operated by local community mental health center. Five staff and five peer support workers run center. Programming is provided six days a week.
- The Center is open to all individuals with SMI in the local area. About 160 individuals have access to services and the Center services an average of 30 members a day.
- The Center offers a space for members to socialize and interact with each other, access to computers, programming based on member interests and recovery, a transitional employment program, and case management services.

The Clay Group

- Began in October of 2015 and ended in May of 2016
- Met at the same time every week across a 21-week period. Groups were scheduled for an hour but lasted as long as four hours.
- Total of 29 clubhouse members and 5 staff participated in Clay Group at least once.
- Members also worked with the clay or on their projects at least 21 days outside of Clay Group.
- On average, members participated in 4 group sessions (SD = 3.89; Range = 0 – 13 days) and worked on projects about one and a half days (1.4) outside of group (SD = 1.74; Range = 0 – 7 days). See Table 1 for a brief description of each clay group activity and the number of participants in each group.
- The Clay Group was intentionally different from other programming at the Center in terms of the roles available to members, the structure of the group, and the general cultural expectations of participants

Structure

The Together Center	Clay Group
✸ Groups or activities are time limited and members are not encouraged to continue activities outside of allotted time without the assistance of staff.	✸ Although Clay Group was scheduled at the same time every week, members were encouraged to work on projects for as long and as often as they wanted outside of the scheduled group.
✸ Groups are conducted in a separate room and nonparticipating members are asked to leave.	✸ All staff members were encouraged to participate in Clay Group.
✸ Generally one staff member is involved in activities with members where they act as facilitators or supervisors.	✸ Members were not required to ask permission to access materials.
✸ Members must ask staff for permission before accessing art supplies and resources at the Center.	✸ Clay Group was held in common seating area of Center and members were encouraged to remain in the area even if they had not participated.
✸ Staff members have designated space (i.e. Staff Office and Staff Lunch Table) that is not for members.	

Social Roles

The Together Center	Clay Group
✸ Staff acts as experts who have authority for running of the Together Center and take responsibility for members.	✸ Clay Group had no expert roles. We all had limited exposure to working with clay and relied on online tutorials and active problem solving and communal support from members in order to complete projects.
✸ Staff develops and facilitates programs, activities and outings based on interests of members and available resources. Staff provides training or education to members.	✸ Members were encouraged to take on leadership roles and consulted consistently about all aspects of group, including planning, execution, and evaluation of group projects
✸ The primary role of members is to be a recipient or consumer of services provided by staff, the Center, and the larger community mental health center.	✸ Success of the Clay Group relied on active involvement of members.

Setting Expectations

The Together Center	Clay Group
✸ The Together Center is a safe, warm, and welcoming space for individuals with serious mental illness to receive support from each other and staff.	✸ Clay group recognized that member obligations and responsibilities outside of the Center were meaningful. Efforts were made accommodate the schedules of members so they could participate in clay group.
✸ Staff and members share common belief that members are unable to be accountable or reliable, incapable of coping with frustration, and are unable to act independently without explicit support and approval from staff.	✸ Underlying assumption was that members were capable of creating art, contributing to the group, and helping each other. Members knew that if they did not attend group their presence would be missed and they went out of their way to inform people when they would be absent.
✸ Staff has many important responsibilities, including paperwork, case management, and meeting with staff from the community mental health center. As a result, programming must be scheduled around the needs of staff.	

Figure 1. Pieces made by members in Clay Group. From left to right: a figurine of a member’s sister, a pinch pot, and an ornament.

Lessons Learned: The Work-Ordered Day

Although the structure of the Clay group differed slightly from the traditional work-ordered day, the processes and outcomes were aligned with the foundational values and goals of the Clubhouse model.

- The structure of Clay Group provided members with many opportunities to observe the completion of projects and work on projects when they were available.
- Having the opportunity to observe the group appeared to increase the likelihood that members would participate in Clay Group.
  - 25 of the 29 participants observed some part of the clay group process before they participated
  - Members did not need to work with the clay to participate in the group. For example, five members only participated in one or two groups but socialized with Clay Group members during almost all of the groups.
  - Members worked on projects outside of regularly scheduled group.
- The success of the group relied on active involvement from members, who supported each other by giving suggestions, modeling how to complete projects, and encouraging each other when projects were frustrating.

Lessons Learned: Art Based Initiatives

The opportunity to engage in a creative, arts-based set of activities in the Clay Group allowed adults coping with psychiatric disability the chance to occupy a social role of “artist.”

- Many of the members attributed their hesitance to participate in Clay Group to fears that they were not “artistic” and capable of working with clay.
- Some members believed that their artistic abilities were limited to a specific medium or form of art, like coloring or writing. However, as members were encouraged to work with the clay they were delighted to discover that they could be artistic in different ways.
- Members regularly expressed how much they enjoyed working with the clay and the projects we completed.

Lessons Learned: Relationships and Power

Although staff at the Center share a group-based belief that values the experiences and recovery of individuals with mental illness, the structure of services and unequal distribution of power between staff and members severely limits members from reaching these goals.

- Members at the Together Center were not given opportunities to take initiative or make contributions to the Center without the permission and supervision of staff.
- Members who feel that their involvement is not necessary to successfully run a clubhouse may be less likely to develop a sense of ownership over their responsibilities as a member.
- Members were treated as valuable consultants for Clay Group. As a result, the group was involved member-driven activities and projects.
- Staff members repeatedly tried to change the structure of Clay Group so that it was similar to the structure of other groups at the Center.
- Mental health providers, including staff at clubhouses, must be able to relinquish some of the power that they hold in order for adults with mental illness to take on roles as experts, mentors, or act with authority.

Figure 3. A member’s clay beads.

Figure 2. A member’s dream home made in the botanical garden class.

Figure 4. A member’s pet rock.

Table 1
Description of Clay Group Projects and Participants

Group Project	Project Design	Participants	
		In Group	Outside Group
1. Salt Dough Figurines	Made handmade salt dough and made figurines out of it.	4 Members 2 Staff	
2. Paint Figurines	Painted salt dough figurines.	1 Member 1 Staff	
3. Pinch Pots	Used polymer clay to make small pots.	10 Members	4 Members
4. Paint Pinch Pots	Painted pots.	7 Members	1 Member
5. Animal Figurines	Used polymer clay to make animal figurines.	3 Members	7 Members
6. Unstructured Group	Group members decided to work on and finish various projects.	4 Members 2 Staff	4 Members 1 Staff
7. Ornaments	Made holiday ornaments using polymer clay.	8 Members	8 Members
8. Painting Ornaments	Painted ornaments.	3 Members	6 Members
9. Hand Dishes	Used air-dry clay to make hand shaped dishes.	8 Members	3 Members
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14. Beads	Used colored polymer clay to make beads.	4 Members	
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16. Pet Rocks	Used rocks, decorations, and hot glue guns to make pet rocks.	6 Members	
17. Recycling Center	Visited recycling center to collect colored glass for stepping stones.	1 Member 1 Staff	
18. Picture Frames	Used air-dry clay to make picture frames.	4 Members	1 Member
19. Paint Picture Frames	Painted picture frames.	2 Members	
20. Botanical Gardens	Attended class taught by professional at local arts village. Members made small houses out of clay.	9 Members 1 Staff	
21. Stepping Stones	Used quick dry concrete, pieces of glass, and pie tins to make garden stepping stones.	11 Members 5 Staff	

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