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Sustained Community Theater Participation as Civil Society Involvement

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Abstract

Community theaters proliferate in every state in the nation, yet they are rarely considered in civil society research. Participation in civil society is capable of producing individual (psychological empowerment) and community-level outcomes, yet less is known about how community theaters might be capable of producing the same. Guided by the empirically tested dimensions of intra-organizational empowerment, this qualitative study interrogates four internal processes of voluntary membership in a community theater (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). Directed content analysis of 14 in-depth interviews support and extend our understanding of existing theory for this less examined population. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords

organizational empowerment, associational membership, civil society, community theater

Introduction

Background

Community theaters are structured similar to other voluntary organizations in the civic sphere. Yet, they are rarely explored in the pantheon of civil society literature. In general, we know that people volunteer for myriad reasons. Clary and Snyder (1999) identify six functions (values, understanding, enhancement, career, social, and protective).

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Values-oriented volunteerism is personally meaningful to a focal individual. "Understanding" pertains to the volunteer's desire to learn, while "enhancement" cultivates personal growth and development. Career-motivated volunteerism relates to expanding one's informal network and social capital, while social motivations are rooted in a desire to strengthen personal ties. Finally, protective motivations are rooted in a desire to address problems in the volunteer's life. Handy and colleagues (2010) demonstrate that many are socialized to volunteer because of the enabling country in which they live. Like Clary and Snyder, Handy and colleagues note that many desire to leverage voluntary activities into career-oriented gain. Rotolo, Wilson, and Dietz (2015) note that some are called to volunteerism because of their identification with a given cause, a notion that is akin to Clary and Snyder's "values" motivation.

The existing civil society literature also correlates volunteerism and engagement with pro-social processes like the cultivation of personal efficacy and sense of community (Flanagan & Van Horn, 2001; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Other pro-social processes of engagement include the acquisition of self-esteem, leadership, and social responsibility (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Hooghe, 2003; Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). By utilizing an organizational empowerment framework, the aim of this study is to explore the perceived experiences of civic participation that may be inherent in a community theater. This research seeks to answer the following question:

Research Question 1: What pro-social processes are community theaters capable of facilitating for continuously involved, voluntary members?

Community Theater

Approximately 7,000 theaters nationwide are members of the American Association of Community Theatre (AACT; 2015), though more operate without representation. Each year, AACT estimates that community theaters engage more than 1 million volunteers and 7.5 million audience members through more than 45,000 productions. Developed as an alternative to professional theater, community theaters provide "local amateur volunteers" the chance to be involved in an artistic production for a local audience (Kramer, 2005, p. 161). Although scholarship has not identified the exact origins of the community theater in the United States, some indicate that it prospered as a movement during the early part of the 20th century (Lynch, 2015).

Research suggests that those who are artistically involved have higher levels of overall civic engagement than those who are not (Stern & Seifert, 2009). Overall civic engagement may take traditional forms like letter writing and protesting, but can also include expressing an opinion, or advocating an idea, through the medium of performance (Stern & Seifert, 2009). Throughout history, there have been myriad ways in which theater, dance, and music have addressed community problems and oppressive forces (Boon & Plastow, 2015). Schechner (1977) notes that some of the earliest human groups congregated at "ceremonial centers" (civic spaces) where individuals would exchange dances, songs, and dramas to address local issues (p. 110). Similarly,

within theatrical circles, Playback Theater was created expressly to advance social change (Fox, 2007). These activist-oriented pursuits in the civic sphere are predictors of psychological empowerment (Knapp, Fisher, & Levesque-Bristol, 2010; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

Psychological empowerment can be facilitated by voluntary organizations that provide an individual participant with awareness of personal control, a positive approach to life, and a contextual awareness of the larger community (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Although there are numerous definitions for the term, empowerment is best defined as a construct capable of facilitating “feelings of self-respect and self-esteem, a sense of power, control and autonomy” (Boehm & Boehm, 2003, p. 285). To date, most empowerment research is activist oriented (e.g., Forenza & Germak, 2015). However, the present study conceptualizes freestanding community theaters as capable of facilitating empowerment. For this reason, an organizational empowerment framework was adopted to help actualize the aim of this study (to explore the perceived experiences of civic participation that may be inherent in community theater) and to help answer the aforementioned research question (What pro-social processes are community theaters capable of facilitating for continuously involved, voluntary members?).

Theoretical Framework

Organizational empowerment refers to “organizational efforts that generate psychological empowerment among members” (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 130). It is a viable framework to help guide and organize pro-social, process-oriented research. In their seminal article, Maton and Salem (1995) identify four internal dimensions of organizational empowerment: Shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership. Each of the dimensions is described more below.

Shared beliefs. This dimension refers to group-based belief systems that should support individual members in achieving personal goals (Maton & Salem, 1995). Community theaters enrich neighborhoods and afford community members a creative outlet (Voss, Cable, & Voss, 2000). Volunteers express that they are more likely to get involved in something if it is of interest to them than if they had no interest at all (McAllum, 2014). Community theater provides opportunities for individuals to connect and interact with others pursuing creative goals (Kramer, 2005). Community theater members value artistic engagement and the creative process. To the extent that members are active, they willfully demonstrate a propensity to act in pursuit of their shared values—production after production, theatrical season after theatrical season—in the communities in which their theaters are housed. To this end, community theater members also experience a contextual awareness about the communities they are working in (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004). This contextual awareness may pertain to the town, county, or region of which a focal theater is part. Contextual awareness is correlated with culturally sensitive beliefs and attitudes at the individual level (Puddifoot, 2003). Studies have shown that the arts can create a

“public realm” that presents opportunities for direct social contact (Lowe, 2000). By fostering cooperation between diverse social groups, the arts can facilitate the promotion of tolerance and the appreciation of different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups (Wali, Severson, & Longoni, 2002). In other words, shared beliefs among community theater members may extend beyond the creative process and into other civic realms.

Opportunity role structure. Opportunity role structure refers to the “availability and configuration of roles within a setting, which provide meaningful opportunities for individuals to develop, grow, and participate” (Maton & Salem, 1995, p. 643). These opportunities aid in the facilitation of empowerment by assisting members in the achievement of personal goals through their participation. Opportunity role structure is often comprehensive in that there can be a plethora of available roles for members at various levels of an organization (e.g., actor, director, stage crew member, ticket sales person, house manager, etc.). These roles are easily accessible to members as they incorporate multiple skill levels, degrees of responsibility, and self-assurance. Members are generally encouraged to participate in new roles and take on more responsibilities as their abilities and interests are enhanced (Maton & Salem, 1995). Such a learning process produces the skills, trust, and further motivation to engage more in civil society and voluntary endeavors (Desjardins & Schuller, 2007).

Social support. The social support dimension of organizational empowerment is allied with social capital (see Putnam, 2000). It refers to cultivating intra-network solidarity. Research suggests that the most common benefit of community theater participation is meeting new people and making new friends (Brodie et al., 2011; Kramer, 2005). Positive peer interactions and acceptance is an important factor in determining one’s commitment to a given production or a given theater (Kramer, 2005). Feeling needed and valued by others is a significant reason for both joining and remaining a member of any organization (Brodie et al., 2011). People receive pleasure and emotional fulfillment from their volunteerism (McCarthy et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, associational members report an almost familial rapport with other members (Maton & Salem, 1995). This is illustrative of Putnam’s (2000) assertion that informal networks of social support—often acquired through the civic sphere—have inherent value.

Leadership. Maton and Salem (1995) note that the leadership dimensions of organizational empowerment may facilitate psychological empowerment through (a) the direct action of a leader, or (b) a leader’s indirect effect on organizational members. The leadership structure for a typical community theater reflects a hierarchy of influence with the director at the helm of a production. However, a director must “cooperate with, coordinate, and delegate to secondary leaders” like stage managers, musical directors, and others (Kramer, 2006, p. 157). In a freestanding community theater, production-specific leaders must also work with organizational governance (President, etc.), which sets a broader vision for the group. At the production-specific or governance level, when coordination between leaders is effective, productivity can be easily attained (Kramer, 2005). Civic leaders need to be capable of negotiating between

stakeholders with varying interests. Stakeholders are “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by an organization’s achievements” (Freeman, 2010, p. 46). In community theater, internal stakeholders will include the cast or crew of a given show and/or lay members who are uninvolved in a specific production. External stakeholders will include audience members and/or other municipal officials that the theater must engage with.

Maton and Salem’s (1995) framework explicates four dimensions of organizational empowerment (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). The present study utilizes these dimensions to explore the perceived experiences of civic participation that may be encountered through community theater. In this way, the study seeks to answer the question, “What pro-social processes are community theaters capable of facilitating for continuously involved, voluntary members?”

Method

Research Setting

After securing institutional review board (IRB) approval, this research initially utilized a convenience sample of 12 participants from a single community theater in the northeast. This freestanding, volunteer-run theater was chosen because of its continuous operation in a single location of a single town (1932 to present), regional rapport (multiple commendations from the state legislature), robust membership (seven main-stage shows a year; 250+ active members), and accessibility to the author. A year after initial data collection—per encouragement from manuscript reviewers—the author purposively recruited two additional individuals into the study ($N = 14$). These individuals were recruited from a second community theater that also demonstrated regional rapport and robust membership.

Research Sample

To recruit the most representative initial sample, an email was sent to all 250+ active members of the first theater, inviting those who met eligibility criteria to join the study. Per IRB approval, participants had to be at least 18 years old. In an effort to recruit an experientially homogeneous sample of participants who were truly invested in community theater and could speak to its myriad facets, the author also requested that all participants have been involved in community theater “since youth.” Drawing on the classification of “high-stakes volunteerism” as defined by McNamee and Peterson (2016), the author believed that recruiting continuously involved members would yield community theater experiences that were long-term, consistent, and intense, and—by proxy—part of one’s life-course development. This type of sustained volunteerism is correlated with both pro-social implicit and pro-social explicit motivations for volunteering (Aydinli et al., 2016).

Sixteen prospective participants met initial sampling criteria and indicated a desire to participate. Of the initial 16 respondents, four subsequently withdrew from the

study due to time constraints. In total, 12 initial participants—eight women, four men—completed the interview process. One year later, two additional men were purposely recruited into the sample from a second community theater ($N = 14$). All participants were Caucasian, with diversity in ethnic and religious expression, as well as occupation and educational attainment. The average age of participants was 55.6 years at time of interview (the median was 55.5). The average age at which participants initially joined community theater was 18.4 (the median was 18.0). The average years of continuous involvement was 33.1 (the median was 39.0). Participants had belonged to an average of 7.6 community theater organizations throughout their years of continuous involvement (the median was 6.0).

Procedure

Participants were interviewed in-person, at a single point in time (cross sectional research). The author and two qualitatively trained graduate research assistants conducted each independent interview. Per IRB agreement, no recording devices were used. Instead, interviewers took notes on laptop computers. The research assistants had classroom and experiential training in qualitative interviewing techniques, and received additional training from the author. Prior to data collection, both research assistants “rehearsed” the interview and note-taking processes by mock-interviewing each other, using the focal questionnaire. The research assistants conducted four interviews; the author conducted 10 (for a total of 14 interviews). Each individual interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 min. Each participant received \$20 remuneration.

Interview Schedule

The 10-item, semi-structured interview questionnaire was created by the author. It was developed after a review of extant literature pertaining to organizational empowerment theory, as it relates to participation in civil society. Specifically, the questionnaire probed the four empirically tested dimensions of organizational empowerment (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). Participants were asked to describe why they stayed involved with community theater (shared beliefs), how they contributed to community theater (opportunity role structure), the contour of community theater friendships (social support), and what leadership experiences a participant might have assumed throughout her or his sustained involvement (leadership). The full questionnaire is available in the appendix.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview notes were analyzed by the author and graduate research assistants using directed content analysis. Directed content analysis is a technique that allows existing theory to guide the coding process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, interview notes were organized into meaningful units of analysis. Specifically, interview notes were de-identified, cleaned for syntax, and copy/pasted into Microsoft Excel. Once in

Excel, responses were organized by case (row) and question (column). Then, all three team members immersed themselves in the newly organized data to generate a priori codes that reflected the study aims (to explore the perceived experiences of civic participation that may be inherent in sustained community theater involvement). Third, team members further analyzed the data—by case (row) and by question (column)—as they refined initial codes and identified additional codes that were ultimately “chunked” or grouped into themes. Fourth, team members met to discuss and debate their independent analyses until agreement was reached on a final set of results. Results (emergent themes) support and extend our understanding of organizational empowerment as it relates to sustained community theater participation. Finally, a preliminary manuscript was written and shared with all research participants for their review and input. This is a process referred to as “member check,” which enhances credibility and validity regarding the interpretation of subjective experiences (Koelsch, 2013).

Theory Saturation

Patton (2001) states that there are no steadfast rules for sample size in qualitative research. Instead, “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected” (Patton, 2001, p. 245). To this end, qualitative research has adopted saturation as a benchmark for qualitative sampling. Saturation happens when “the addition of more units does not result in new information” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 183). A year after the initial interviews were conducted ($n = 12$), two longtime members of a second community theater were purposively recruited into the study ($N = 14$). The addition of these two, new respondents failed to yield any new codes or themes. Saturation was reached at 12 units.

Findings

Emergent themes are explored below, and are organized according to the empirically tested dimensions of organizational empowerment (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership).

Shared Beliefs

Two themes are indicative of shared beliefs: (1) *values-oriented motivation* and (2) *social motivation*. Maton and Salem (1995) state that group-based belief systems must be inspiring of growth, strengths-based, and located beyond the self. Individuals in this study felt supported by community theater members in their individual desires “to perform,” “to create,” and to work with likeminded folk. To this end, there were common themes connecting what motivated participants to engage and sustain in community theater involvement.

With respect to how participants first joined a community theater group, the majority ($n = 10$) graduated into community theater after having acted in school shows. As

one participant said, "I was never going to pursue performing professionally, because that doesn't suit my personality . . . I hadn't done a show since college, but community theater gave me the opportunity to continue performing in a nonprofessional way." Conversely, an additional participant did try professional acting before joining his local troupe. Clary and Snyder (1999) would say these 11 individuals were motivated by a *values-oriented* function to pursue engagement that was important to them (acting).

The remaining participants ($n = 3$) were recruited into community theater by an existing member to fill a production-specific role:

My friend needed me to help backstage on a show she was choreographing, so I worked lights and helped with costumes . . . I wound up meeting my husband there, and I never left.

The first time I went to [theater name] all those years ago, I was scared to death—and shy, and so afraid—and I got a phone call from a friend to do props. My first reaction was to say "no," but I said "yes," and that "yes" opened a door that I truly think changed my life.

Both speakers were recruited into community theaters by friends, who were already members themselves. Per Clary and Snyder (1999), these individuals may have been *socially motivated* to volunteer (a second emergent theme).

Opportunity Role Structure

Four themes are indicative of opportunity role structure: (a) competition among members, (b) filling organizational niches beyond performing, (c) perceived inclusiveness, and (d) mentorship.

Opportunity role structures provide niches in an organization, which members are intended to fill. These niches allow members to develop, grow, and participate. Interestingly, most participants ($n = 11$) joined community theater because they valued performing. Yet several ($n = 8$) described the woes of auditioning for roles in a community-based environment. As one said, "It's strange to have long-standing friendships with people who are similar to me, only to wind up competing with them for parts in shows." The uncomfortable notion of *completion among members* (specifically for parts) constitutes a third emergent theme.

Community theater productions are characterized by an important division of labor, and require collaboration with multiple individuals. At the show-specific level, divisions of labor may refer to the inter-dependence among actors, directors, stage managers, choreographers, and musical directors to manage specific production-related functions. As one participant noted, "The person most responsible for any given show is the director. The director assembles a team of people who essentially hold hands together as they mount the actual show." Even though most joined community theater to act ($n = 11$), all participants ($N = 14$) indicated the importance of *filling organizational niches beyond performing*. These niches included not only show-specific roles like the ones previously mentioned (director, etc.) but also continuous creative roles

(e.g., resident costume designer or set decorator) and continuous management roles (e.g., president or other executive board position). For two participants, offstage engagement consumed the totality of their community theater involvement.

All but one participant ($n = 13$) implied that there was room for anyone who wanted to get involved in a local community theater group. In referring to this *perceived inclusiveness*, one participant stated,

There are people who just come down to help, to work. These are people who are interested in theater, but don't want to perform. They do other things. Sweep the floors, organize refreshments for intermission . . . They were never interested in being onstage, but there is a place for them.

A majority of participants ($n = 8$) explicitly or implicitly discussed the *mentorship* that happens the longer one involves her or himself in offstage capacities. As one participant said, "I'm always taking young people under my wing." As another illustrated, it was possible to have been mentored by a leader, before becoming a mentor/leader oneself:

I definitely was mentored here . . . Through (my own) mentoring (of others), I hopefully made others feel comfortable as they came into the fold. I enjoy working with new people who are truly willing to learn.

For the eight participants who discussed it, mentorship helped to facilitate (a) intergenerational relationships, and (b) exposure to myriad organizational niches. As an interpersonal exchange, however, mentorship is also illustrative of the unique social support that is inherent in sustained community theater participation.

Social Support

Six themes are indicative of social support: (a) community theater as a primary social network, (b) community theater as a therapeutic space, (c) community theater relationships as separate from other friendships, (d) shared experiences and worldviews among theater artists, (e) conscious unsupportiveness among nonmembers, and (f) collective identity.

Social support is a dimension of organizational empowerment that may contribute to a community theater members' overall quality of life. People need systems of support to combat or counterbalance other, disempowering realms of life (potentially work, family, or financial realms). Participants in this sample unanimously described community theater as a form of social support ($N = 14$). Twelve participants described community theater as their *primary social network*. One of them described why this might be so:

When you become an adult, whatever friends you don't take with you, you're going to acquire through your life experiences. If you work or if you exercise, you meet people from that. The same is true with community theater. In a way, (other members) become

colleagues. You have to have friendly banter to work together, just like in a professional setting . . . You generally rehearse for three-to-four nights per week for six-to-eight weeks on any given show. That heightens the relationships.

Four participants offered insight into the ways in which community theater—vis-à-vis the relationships it facilitates—served as a *therapeutic space* to help them work through the death of a parent ($n = 2$) or other personal circumstances ($n = 2$), as described below:

I am a cancer survivor . . . My last week of treatment, I got a call for an audition. After going through chemo I was unsure if I would be able to go through (with the audition). But I did, and working with those people was the most amazing thing I could have done for my healing process.

I was in a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* when my sister had a traumatic car accident . . . and a couple of my friendships—truly strong friendships from that show—got me through that experience. I didn't quit the show. It gave me an outlet to distract me from my sister's accident. I went to visit her every night after rehearsals. It was kind of like life imitating art. I am the oldest of three girls in real life. In the show, I was the oldest of five girls, and every time we did "Matchmaker," I couldn't help but think of my sister . . . Community theater got me through that experience.

Through community theater, the individuals quoted above found supports to help them cope with, and overcome, adversity. Such supports were encompassing, peer-based, and capable of providing a sense of community. To varying degrees, all participants ($N = 14$) perceived *community theater relationships as separate from other friendships*.

In two instances, the uniqueness or "separateness" of community theater relationships was attributed to the *shared experiences and worldviews among theater artists*:

There are two kinds of people. There are theater people and there is everyone else. When I'm talking with non-theater people, I have to use a different vocabulary. Sometimes I don't even bring the theatrical world to non-theatrical friends. People who are not in theater aren't challenging themselves in the same way that we are. There is a lot of risk in what we do. We're constantly learning new things and throwing ourselves into uncomfortable places. Not everyone wants to do that.

I tend to foster more friendships within the community theater circuit because of a mutual understanding of connection rather than disconnect. Artists are more understanding than those who are not in the arts at all. They get it. They know the dedication and time and effort and ups and downs that go along with (participating in community theater). Those who are not involved in community theater find it strange.

To further illustrate the uniqueness of community theater relationships in comparison with other friendships, three participants expressly mentioned the confusion that outsiders feel when they learn that community theater actors are not paid. Although

four participants indicated finding long-term romantic relationships through their community theater involvement, two participants attributed romantic relationship failures to the same. Furthermore, six participants indicated that some nonmembers in their lives were apt to be *consciously unsupportive* of one's community theater endeavors:

I had some friends who could care less (about my theatrical involvement). They'd never ask me how this went or that went. Maybe they'd say "I saw your photo in the paper." . . . Then I had family, and the time involved in being in shows would piss some of them off. I have sisters who would get pissed-off at me because I couldn't make one event or another because of a show. This is something that they realize now is in my blood; it's in my soul; I have to do it.

The compulsion to engage and sustain in community theater (e.g., "It's in my blood; it's in my soul; I have to do it") is illustrative of an additional emergent theme, *collective identity*. Although collective identity is allied with the community activism literature (see Melucci, 1995), its processes—sustained commitment and cohesion over time (Fominaya, 2010)—were described by all participants in this sample ($N = 14$). All of the sample ($N = 14$) expressed not only how time-consuming and/or emotionally/physically demanding community theater can be but also how gratifying the experiences are. As one participant noted,

When I'm in rehearsals as an actor or a director, it's like being inside a volcano. The process is intense and sometimes it's volatile and sometimes I can't wait for it to be over. And then the volcano explodes and I can't wait to jump inside again.

For all participants ($N = 14$), being involved with community theater was an active part of one's identity. As one participant said, "Honestly, at this point, I can't not do it." The bonds formed through community theater were consistently described as "intimate," "heightened," and "like family." Although all participants recognized the stress that community theater could bring to one's life or his or her other relationships, most participants ($n = 13$) viewed community theater as integral to their social worlds. As one stated, "If community theaters ceased to exist, part of me would cease to exist."

Leadership

Five themes are indicative of leadership: (a) perils of leadership, (b) cultivating a macro perspective, (c) dismissiveness toward "one-and-done" actors, (d) civic mindedness, and (e) political advocacy.

At the organizational level, freestanding community theater actors, directors, and lay members rely on their elected governance to chart organizational vision. Such governance is structured the same as, or similar to, most associational memberships in civil society. Typically, a president and an executive board are elected by the lay membership for a specified period of time. Eleven participants in this study self-identified as having sought an elected position at some point during their community theater

involvement. Eight of those individuals went on to discuss the *perils of leadership*, which could cause long-established relationships to falter, as illustrated by the quote below:

I was recruited into leadership. I started as [group name's] business manager, then became Vice President and President . . . I lost friends when I was in leadership due to political reasons, but it's water under the bridge now . . . Every organization has politics and you can't keep everyone happy.

As is often the case in traditional civil society endeavors, the fast-paced nature of politics and governance can have unintended consequences for long-standing community-based relationships (see Forenza & Germak, 2015). A second participant described difficulty helping lay members see the broader governance issues at a focal theater. "My membership meetings took a very long time," she said, "because my members were not the ones getting calls from the fire department when their stuff was strewn about backstage, perpetually blocking the exits."

As Kramer (2006) notes, "Effective leaders establish an intention for the group; build the group's culture; manage the group interactions; keep the group focused; and have personality traits such as confidence, flexibility, and openness" (p. 143). Because this sample demonstrated a sustained commitment to community theater, participants often illustrated a *macro perspective* (aka a "birds-eye view") that would not likely be contextualized among a rank-and-file sample of lay members. In fact, some in this sample ($n = 3$) demonstrated a *dismissiveness toward "one-and-done" actors*. As explained by one participant, "one-and-done" refers to actors who audition for a show, reap the benefits of a performance, and then leave the group without ever having contributed to it in a meaningful way. As another explained, "I have a very hard time with people who only want to perform, when I know they are capable of contributing more than that."

Because of their macro perspective, participants in this study illustrated several ways in which community theaters contributed to the municipalities in which they were housed. As illustrated by the quotes below, 13 Participants demonstrated this *civic mindedness* when they linked their community theater involvement to relevance in the larger social structure:

Community theaters bring peoples' minds to local art. (Patrons) may drive past a theater many times and not know what's going on inside. Then—for whatever reason—they step inside to see a show and they realize that the theater contributes to the community. And after the show, they might go out to dinner in town or do some shopping.

[Theater name] is the resident theater company of [a municipality]. As a result of that, we contribute financially to the borough. We give them 20% of all ticket sales in exchange for the space. We also give quality entertainment at an affordable cost to the community. We want to tell stories that our community might not otherwise have access to.

You have to work with the town. You have to work with the fire department to make sure the theater isn't in violation of code. You have to work with the police so they can help

direct traffic after the shows. You have to work with the next-door neighbors who call the police when there's too much noise at the theater.

The quotes above suggest that sustained community theater involvement extends beyond an individual's creative process or her artistic needs. In some cases ($n = 3$), community theater involvement extended into a participant's *outright political advocacy*, through his involvement with a community theater:

The town owns the building . . . Whenever we renew our lease, it has to go through the town and they are generally very supportive of us . . . But two councils ago, they wanted to make us a competitive ratable [ask the group to buy the building and be subject to property taxes]. There was a whole platform that ran on increasing ratables and we were a target, but we still had to work with the council to resolve the issue from the inside.

Two seasons ago, we did a production of *The Vagina Monologues* and we partnered with a women's organization in [county name]. We gave them a donation of all ticket sales, but—more than that—we facilitated conversations with our actors and audience members about what it means to be a victim of domestic violence.

In the quotes above, speakers describe acting on political issues in two very different ways. In the first scenario, the speaker describes advocating on behalf of a focal theater to its municipal body. In the second scenario, the speaker describes outreach on behalf of a disenfranchised group through the use of the actual theater. Working cohesively with others—whether they are opponents or allies—is a common practice in the civic sphere. Even though community theaters are artistic in nature, the processes that they are capable of facilitating for sustained members (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership) mirror processes experienced by civic actors from other realms of community-based organizing and associational membership.

Discussion

In exploring the perceived experiences of civic participation through community theater, this research identified 17 emergent themes related to sustained community theater involvement. These themes were organized according to the empirically tested dimensions of organizational empowerment (shared beliefs, opportunity role structure, social support, and leadership). With respect to *shared beliefs*, two themes emerged from the data: (a) *values-oriented motivation* and (2) *social motivation*, which refer to why an individual in this study would initially join a community theater. With respect to organizational empowerment's dimension of *opportunity role structure*, four themes emerged: (a) *competition among members*, (b) *filling organizational niches beyond performing*, (c) *perceived inclusiveness*, and (d) *mentorship*. Each theme refers to structural issues that one may encounter in her or his community theater participation. Six themes relate to the dimension of *social support*: (a) *community theater as a primary social network*, (b) *community theater as a therapeutic space*, (c) *community theater relationships as separate from other friendships*, (d) *shared*

experiences and worldviews among theater artists, (e) conscious unsupportiveness among nonmembers, and (f) collective identity. Each theme pertains to the uniqueness of relationships derived from community theater. Finally, the five themes that contextualize *leadership* are as follows: (a) *perils of leadership*, (b) *cultivating a macro perspective*, (c) *dismissiveness toward "one-and-done" actors*, (d) *civic mindedness*, and (e) *political advocacy*. Each theme is illustrative of the unique, bird's-eye perspective that sustained involvement in community theater can yield.

To the extent that community theater can facilitate psychological empowerment for its members, it may function as a community-based intervention for "actors" in the civic sphere. Individuals subscribing to the notion that "the answer is in the community"—as well as managers of nonprofit and other voluntary/associational membership organizations—may benefit from knowing that community theaters are overwhelmingly inclusive toward new members. Similarly, while auditioning for a show is a competitive experience, there are myriad niches for one to fill in a freestanding community theater beyond acting. In addition, community theater may be capable of producing pro-social outcomes that are similar to more traditional engagement opportunities. These similar outcomes include (but are not limited to) sense of community, self-esteem, and social responsibility. Future research should conduct similar studies with larger, quantitative samples in diverse regions of the country.

Limitations

Like all qualitative inquiry, this research is context bound (Patton, 2001). The reader should not generalize beyond the experiences of the 14 participants in this study. Similarly, this sample includes sustained community theater participants, who are all members of at least one freestanding community theater. Although participants were asked to reflect on their community theater experiences in a composite/cumulative fashion, it is possible that some participants defaulted to experiences encountered exclusively through their current theater. Because the individuals in this study have been continuously involved in community theater since youth or young adulthood, the voices of newer members—presumably younger, less committed, and less empowered—are not included in this study. Finally, this research is both descriptive and exploratory in nature, and does not make claims that study participants are, in fact, empowered as a result of their community theater involvement. Instead, this research uses an empowering framework to explore the essence of sustained community theater involvement as it relates to participation in civil society.

Implications

Policy makers (in this case, municipal officials who may directly or indirectly fund and interface with community theaters, as well as their elected governances) will benefit from this in-depth study, which places community theater and its internal stakeholders squarely in a community context. Community theaters provide entertainment for audiences and patrons, which is a civic good in itself. Some theaters discussed in

this research also contribute to their communities in other ways, such as collaboration with other local agencies. Community theaters must also interface regularly with local services like police and fire, and municipal governance. To the extent that towns value community-based art and volunteerism among local artists (or the artistically inclined), policy makers are wise to work with community theater governance on a sustained basis to address issues such as rent stabilization, fire inspection, and public safety as it relates to a freestanding theater's continuous operation.

The present study attempted to discern the pro-social processes that community theaters are capable of facilitating for continuously involved, voluntary members. In so doing, the present study has expanded our understanding of civic participation and extended the utility of empowerment-oriented frameworks for inquiry. Findings suggest that individuals are motivated to join community theaters primarily because of artistic values and social needs. Throughout their sustained involvement, however, participants become actors of a different variety. They become civic actors, who are committed to a cause far greater than any one theatrical production. They become committed to each other, to the maintenance of community theaters, and to the municipal communities that those theaters serve.

Appendix

1. How did you get involved with community theater?
 - PROBES (prospective follow-ups): When and why did you join?
2. Can you tell me how community theater works?
 - PROBES: How does it run from day-to-day? What is the leadership structure like? Feel free to share any leadership experiences you've had.
3. Now tell me about the relationships you've made through community theater.
 - PROBES: Do you consider yourself friends with other members? Tell me any personal experiences you care to share.
4. Now tell me about your friendships outside of community theater.
 - PROBES: Do those other friends support you in your theatrical endeavors? Do they understand your desire to participate in community theater?
5. How are community theater friendships similar to, or different from, your other friendships?
6. Now tell me about your theater's relationship to its larger community.
 - PROBES: Does your community theater contribute anything to the town or county that it's housed in? If so, to what extent?
7. Can you tell me about your community theater's relationship with its municipal council?
 - PROBES: What is the relationship between your theater and the local governance like? Have you ever needed to resolve a theater-related problem through the municipal government?

8. Can you tell me about a time when your community theater might have collaborated with another community-based group (or agency) on a mutual project?
 - PROBES: What was the purpose of that project? What was your role?
9. Why do you stay involved with community theater? What does it do for you?
10. Has participation in community theater contributed, at all, to your development as a person?
 - PROBES: Has it contributed to the way in which you deal with people or see the world?

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